

Russia Losing to China in Central Asia

By Ray Finch
OE Watch Commentary

The ripple effects of the Kremlin's decision to invade Ukraine in early 2022 continue to reverberate around the world, particularly among China and Russia's other neighbors. As the excerpted article from the semi-independent Russia-based *Nezavisimoye Voennoye Obezreniye*¹ indicates, given the demands of fighting in Ukraine, "it is increasingly difficult for Russia to ensure the security of Central Asia." Furthermore, after its poor military performance in Ukraine, regional leaders see that the Russian armed forces are not nearly as formidable as they were once believed to be. And yet, Russia's unprovoked attack has led certain Central Asian countries to worry about being met with the same fate as Ukraine.

Given Russia's growing absence from Central Asia, the author, military journalist Alexander Khramchikhin, asserts that "with all these circumstances, China can dominate the region almost automatically."² He continues to say that a Chinese military presence in Central Asia is steadily developing, since over the last several years, the People's Liberation Army of China and the People's Armed Police have already conducted numerous joint exercises with the

armies, border police, and internal troops of various Central Asian countries. The author then concludes that "China can successfully form the image of a guarantor of the security of the countries of the region...replacing Russia in this capacity."

China can successfully form the image of a guarantor of the security of the countries of the region, replacing Russia in this capacity.

The author reviews Chinese involvement in all five Central Asian countries, reminding readers of the recently constructed Chinese base in Tajikistan, claiming that "the place of Moscow as a guarantor of the security of Dushanbe is confidently taken by Beijing." To ensure that China's economic interests are well protected, he maintains that it is only a matter of time before further Chinese bases materialize in other Central Asian countries. Khramchikhin concludes that "Beijing will act on the principle of 'crossing the river, groping for stones,'" suggesting that this transformation of China's growing military presence in Central Asia will be gradual.



Map of Central Asia.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Central_Asia_-_political_map_2008.svg Attribution: CCA-SA 3.0

Continued: Russia Losing to China in Central Asia

Source Continued: Alexander Khranchikhin, “Пекин прибирает к рукам страны Центральной Азии (Beijing takes over the countries of Central Asia),” *Nezavisimoye Voennoye Obezreniye* (semi-independent Russian news source focused on military topics), 26 January 2023. https://nvo.ng.ru/realty/2023-01-26/5_1222_asia.html

...Central Asia is now in the deep shadow of the Ukrainian events. But this does not mean at all that the struggle for it has ceased. In addition to geographic proximity, Russia has powerful historical, linguistic, cultural, economic, political, and military ties with the countries of Central Asia. To a large extent, the labor markets of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are oriented towards Russia. This explains the very significant influence of Moscow in the region....

...However, these ties are also gradually beginning to blur and weaken. In particular, Ukrainian events contribute to this. Because of them, it is increasingly difficult for Russia to ensure the security of Central Asia: too large forces are deployed by Moscow in Ukraine. In addition, the countries of the region see that the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation are by no means as strong as previously thought. On the other hand, some of these countries are beginning to fear sharing the fate of Ukraine.... In connection with all these circumstances, China can dominate the region almost automatically. In fact, competitors themselves give him this dominance....

The growth of China's economic influence in the countries of Central Asia automatically leads to an increase in political influence.... If the growth of China's economic influence in Central Asia is automatically followed by the growth of its political influence, then, obviously, the growth of political influence will be followed by the growth of military influence, which is already happening. In addition, most of China's economic projects in the countries of Central Asia are part of the global One Belt, One Road project. Accordingly, Beijing wants to ensure the safety of these projects.

In the 21st century, the People's Liberation Army of China (PLA) and the People's Armed Police (PAP) have already conducted dozens of joint exercises with the armies, border and internal troops of the Central Asian countries.... Accordingly, China can successfully form the image of a guarantor of the security of the countries of the region from the well-known “three evils” (terrorism, separatism, extremism), replacing Russia in this capacity.

...The highest form of military cooperation between China and the countries of Central Asia is the deployment of Chinese military bases in the region.... Quite expectedly, it began with Tajikistan - the weakest country in Central Asia militarily and economically, the most remote from Russia, while having the longest border with Afghanistan... Dushanbe is experiencing a serious security deficit and is not sure that Moscow is able to solve this problem (especially now, in the context of the Ukrainian campaign). Therefore, the place of Moscow as a guarantor of the security of Dushanbe is confidently taken by Beijing....

The deployment of Chinese military bases in other countries of the region is apparently a matter of time. The pace and order of deployment of Chinese military facilities in the countries of Central Asia will be determined both by the general geopolitical situation and the degree of economic dependence of each specific country on China. ...Most likely Tajikistan will be followed by Kyrgyzstan, then Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The last one, apparently, will give consent to the deployment of PLA facilities in the country Kazakhstan.... Chinese military bases in Central Asia will ensure the smooth functioning of the Belt and Road Initiative and the stability of local regimes.

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Source: Alexander Khramchikhin, “Пекин прибирает к рукам страны Центральной Азии (Beijing takes over the countries of Central Asia),” *Nezavisimoye Voennoye Obezreniye* (semi-independent Russian news source focused on military topics), 26 January 2023. https://nvo.ng.ru/realty/2023-01-26/5_1222_asia.html

At first, Chinese facilities in the countries of the region are unlikely to be too large, but gradually the presence of the PLA and the PAP in these states will expand. As in all other areas, Beijing will act on the principle of ‘crossing the river, groping for stones.’ Almost always, the implementation of this principle leads China to success.

Notes:

[1] *Nezavisimoye Voennoye Obezreniye* (Independent Military Review).

[2] Alexander Khramchikhin was one of the few Russian military analysts who warned against an invasion of Ukraine, arguing that such an attack could have catastrophic consequences for Russia. See: Alexander Khramchikhin, “Полураспад Украины (Half-life of Ukraine),” *Nezavisimoye Voennoye Obezreniye*, 11 March 2021. https://nvo.ng.ru/gpolit/2021-03-11/8_1132_ukraine.html