



*Salesman-cashier at the counter in a small store. The border area between Kazakhstan and China is Khorgos. photo courtesy of: shutterstock.com/Vladimir Tretyakov*

## No Great Game: Central Asia's Public Opinions on Russia, China, and the U.S.

**By Marlene Laruelle and Dylan Royce**

Great power competition has reignited between the U.S., China and, to a large extent, Russia. Central Asia emerged early on as an arena for this trilateral contest. The region has often been a hub of influence over Eurasia, or at least has been seen as one. It is indeed highly important for a rising China, which began extending its influence there in the mid-1990s through what would become the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. It is also key for Russia, as Moscow seeks to lead regional integration and reassert its status as Eurasian pivot.

But, while the region also once drew substantial U.S. attention and (mostly military) presence, the U.S.'s position there is now clearly a shadow of what it was in the early 2000s. Russia and China, meanwhile, have established a thus far well-functioning division of labor in the region. Central Asia thus appears as a microcosm of the great power triad: the Sino-Russian partnership first formed there, while the decline in U.S. influence was perhaps visible in Central Asia even before it was clear that the American position was beginning to weaken globally. Central Asia may therefore be a prototype for the post-unipolar world, demonstrating how it emerges and how it looks.

Yet Central Asian countries are not passive pawns in a Great Game between Washington, Beijing, and Moscow. Their governments have shown remarkable resilience to external pressure, and have exploited the great powers' competition to consolidate their rule, yielding what Alexander Cooley has dubbed "Great Games, Local Rules."<sup>1</sup> But while we know much about official doctrines of "crossroads," Eurasianism, Silk Roads, multivectoralism, perpetual neutrality, etc., we understand little about the beliefs of ordinary Central Asians.<sup>2</sup>

To begin filling this gap, we analyze here two sets of as-yet largely-unused data: 1) surveys conducted by the Central Asia Barometer in all five Central Asian countries between June 2017 and November 2019, and 2) the 2017 Integration Barometer survey of the Eurasian Development Bank (conducted in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan).<sup>3</sup> They paint a relatively clear picture of three great but unequal powers: Russia enjoys evident dominance in public opinion, China is in a relatively well-regarded second place, and the U.S. comes in decidedly last.

## Central Asian Public Opinion of the Great Powers

In Kazakhstan, Russia holds a large lead, with China far behind, and the U.S. slightly further still. In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, the order remains the same, but the gaps are substantially smaller. Kyrgyzstan differs in that its opinion of China is worse than anywhere else, and thus no better than its opinion of the U.S.

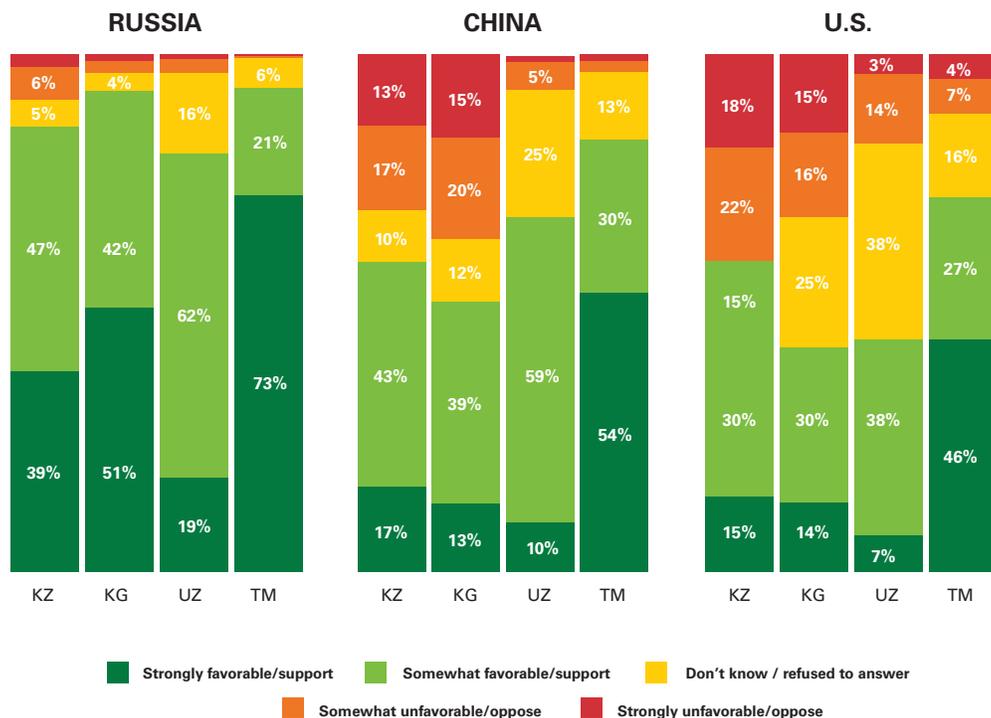
## Average Opinion in Each Central Asian Country of Each Great Power

	average opinion of...		
	Russia	China	U.S.
KZ	79	58	51
KG	85	54	53
UZ	74	68	58
TM	92	84	76

Displaying respondents' average answer (0-100 scale), with "very unfavorable," "somewhat unfavorable," don't know / refused to answer, "somewhat favorable," and "very favorable" assigned values of 0, 25, 50, 75, and 100, respectively.

Source: Average result of all six CAB waves (June 2017 – November 2019), or of the last three CAB waves (November 2018 – November 2019) in the case of Turkmenistan.

## Opinions of each great power, by Central Asian country



Source: Average result of all six CAB waves (June 2017 – November 2019), or of the last three CAB waves (November 2018 – November 2019) in the case of Turkmenistan.

Preferences for economic relationships follow almost exactly the same pattern. The only difference is that Uzbek opinion of closer economic relations with China is almost as (overwhelmingly) positive as

its opinion of closer economic relations with Russia, as a result of which China's position is much closer to Russia's than to the U.S.'s.

## Average support in each Central Asian for closer economic relations with each great power

average support for closer economic relations with...

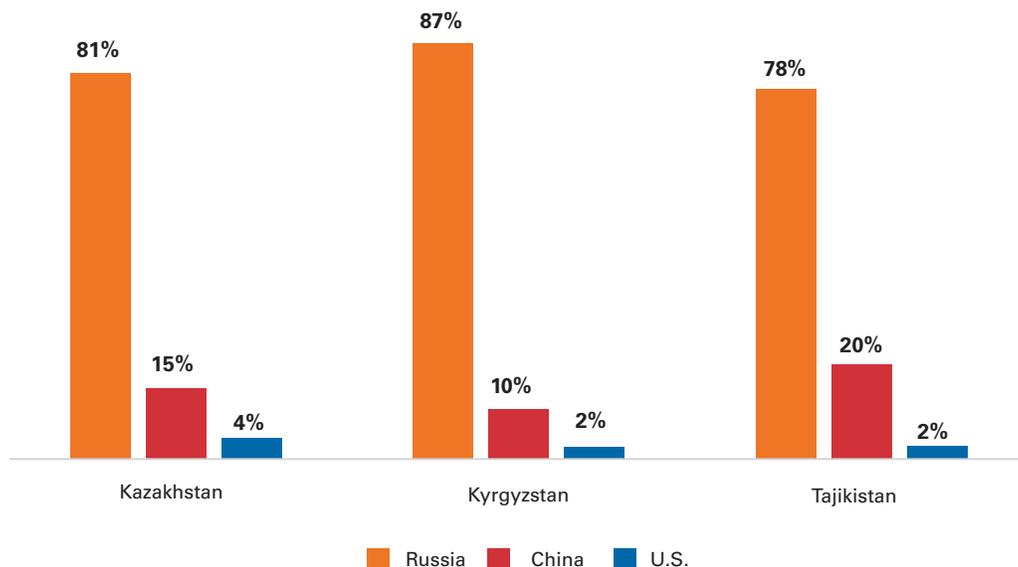
	Russia	China	U.S.
KZ	81	56	52
KG	87	48	48
UZ	89	83	68

Displaying respondents' average answer (0-100 scale), with "strongly oppose," "somewhat oppose," don't know / refused to answer, "somewhat support," and "strongly support" assigned values of 0, 25, 50, 75, and 100, respectively.

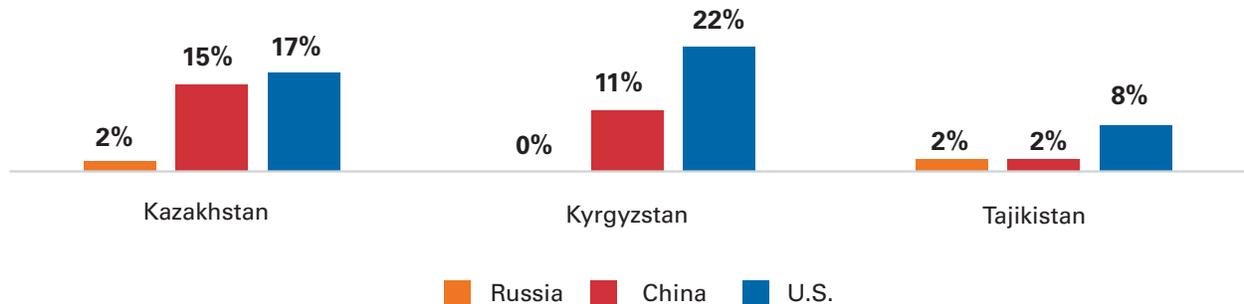
Source: Average result of CAB waves 4-5 (November-December 2018, April-May 2019). (Question not asked in waves 1, 2, 3, or 6.)

The same general pattern is also observable in the Eurasian Development Bank's 2017 Integration Barometer survey:

## Proportion of respondents in each Central Asian naming each great power as friendly and reliably helpful



## Proportion of respondents in each Central Asian naming each great power as unfriendly and threatening



In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (the survey was not conducted in Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan), Russia is overwhelmingly seen as a friendly/reliable/helpful country, opinion on China is mostly neutral and about evenly split, and opinion of the U.S. is modestly net-negative. The same patterns hold in Tajikistan (for which we have no CAB data), with the exception that the positions of the U.S. and China are, respectively, slightly and significantly improved. Indeed, a pattern is observable here and elsewhere, according to which public opinion of China is more positive in Tajikistan than in Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan.

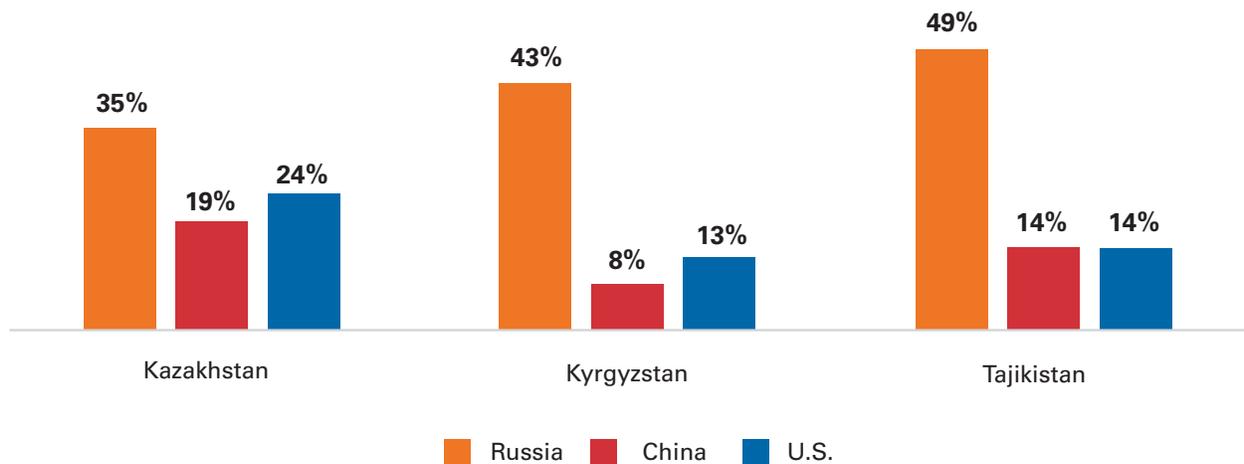
### Evaluating Soft Power Influence

There are some specific areas, however, in which the Russia-China-U.S. order partly breaks down. This demonstrates, among other things, that general perceptions and various specific preferences are not reliably linked.

For instance, Russia is the most popular educational destination amongst Kazakhstani, but China and the U.S. are close behind. That said, Kazakhstan's ideal preferences diverge greatly from their actual behavior, probably at least in part because an education in Russia is in practice far more accessible: of the 89,000 Kazakhstani students studying abroad in 2018, 69,000 (78 percent) were in Russia.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, of Kazakhstani who identified at least one country as a place where they would like to study or they would like their children to study, only 35 percent mentioned Russia either alone or alongside other destinations.

Additionally, as a destination for study or work, the U.S. is either tied with or ahead of China in all three countries. This may reflect the English language's enduring (or at least perceived) global predominance.

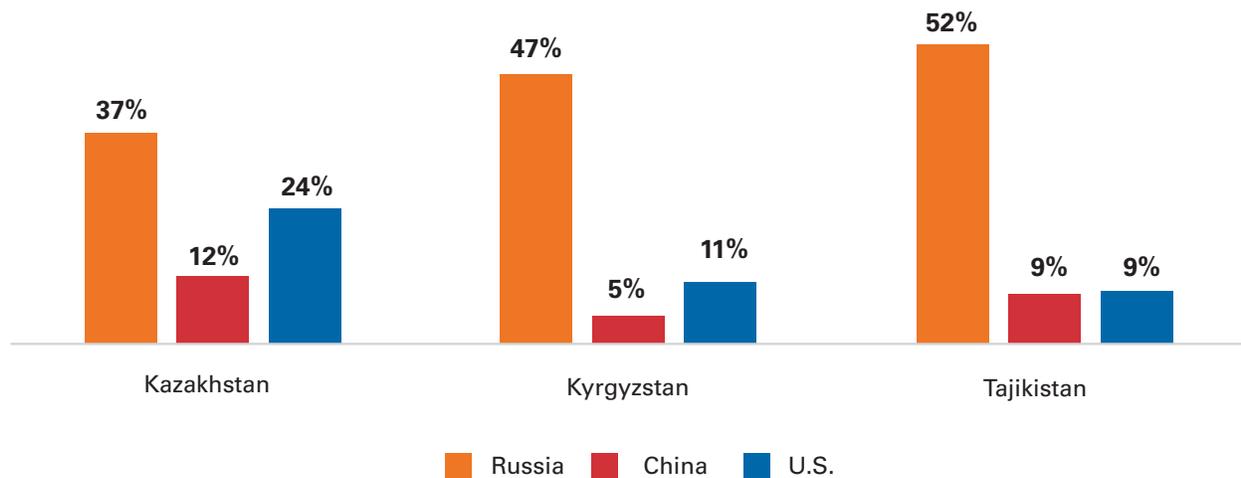
## Proportion of respondents in each Central Asian naming each great power as a country where they would like to study or send children for study, out of respondents who named any destination



The same pattern holds for labor migration. The strength of the U.S. dollar, as well as the greater (actual or perceived) wealth of the U.S. economy, may be partly responsible for the U.S.'s relative popularity as a labor market. And the prevalence of

actual labor migration to Russia from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan may be the reason for Russia's popularity in this category.

## Proportion of respondents in each Central Asian country naming each great power as a country where they would like to work, out of respondents who named any destination

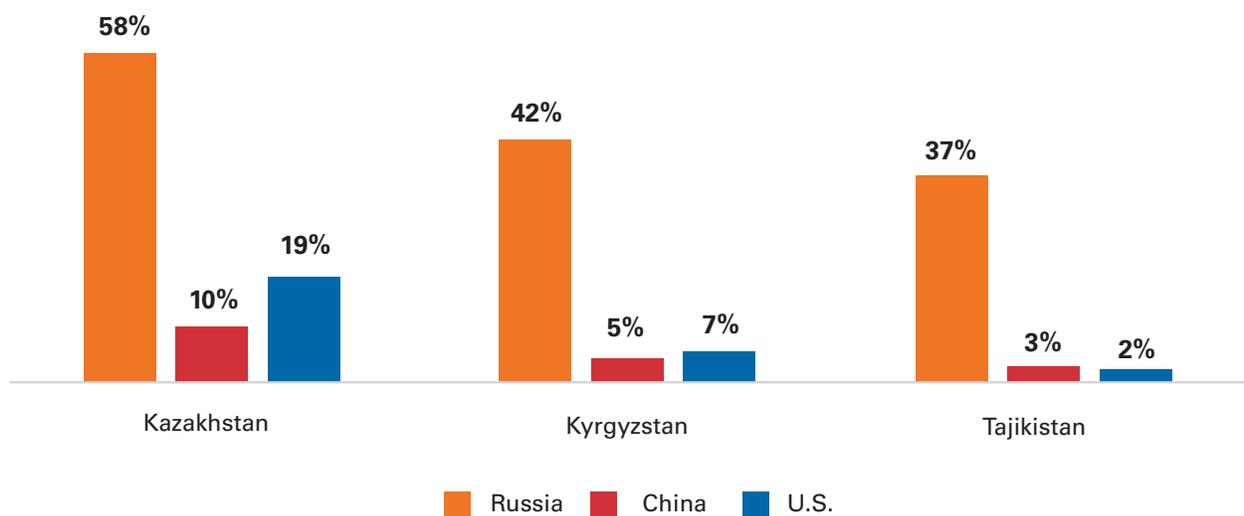


(Note that, while these questions explicitly ask respondents where they would *like* to work *if they had the opportunity*, it is not clear to what extent responses are affected by respondents' judgement regarding which options are actually realistic for them.)

The U.S.'s lead over China, or at least equivalence to it, also extends to the popularity of the great powers' cultural presence. Neither, however, come close to the influence of Russian culture, which holds a large lead not only in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan but also in Kazakhstan. Russia remains a central cultural yardstick for Central Asians, even if competition is growing from Turkish, South Korean, Indian, and Japanese cultural products that are especially attractive to younger generations.<sup>5</sup> China's soft power, on the other hand, is quite weak across Central Asia.<sup>6</sup> Surveys of Confucius Institute students, as well as anecdotal evidence, suggest

that Kazakhstanis and Kyrgyzstanis seek to learn the Chinese language but not to learn about China itself, with very few attending classes on Chinese culture and history.<sup>7</sup> Whether the Institutes can create a positive image of China thus remains to be seen. As for U.S. soft power, its effects are highly contradictory: U.S. films, music, and other cultural products are relatively widespread in Central Asia, but also draw a great deal of criticism across the region for conveying foreign, liberal values.<sup>8</sup>

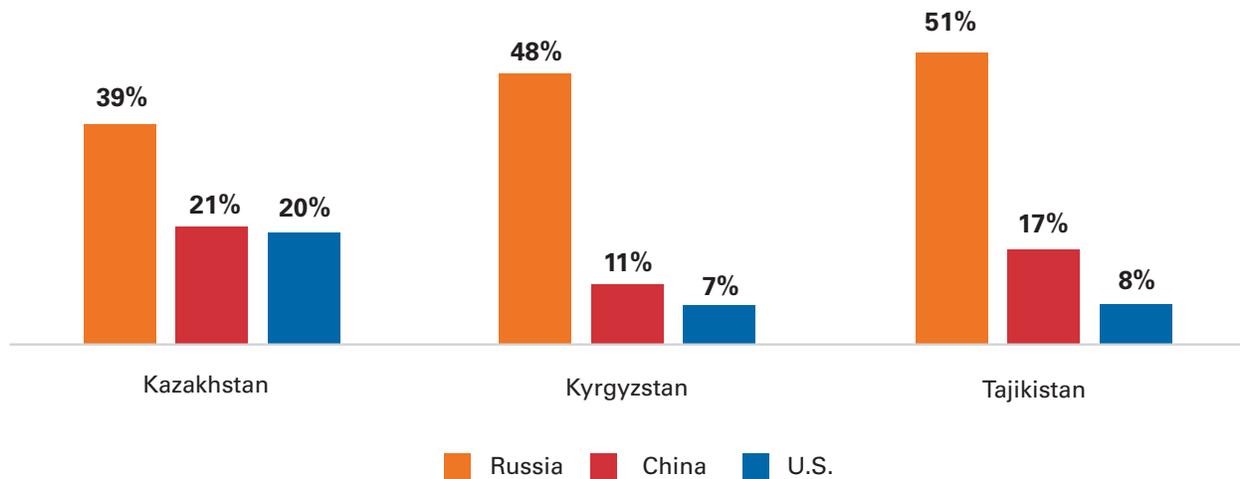
**Proportion of respondents in each Central Asian country naming each great power as a country from which their own should “invite more musical artists, writers, and artists, and import and translate more books, films, music, and other cultural productions”**



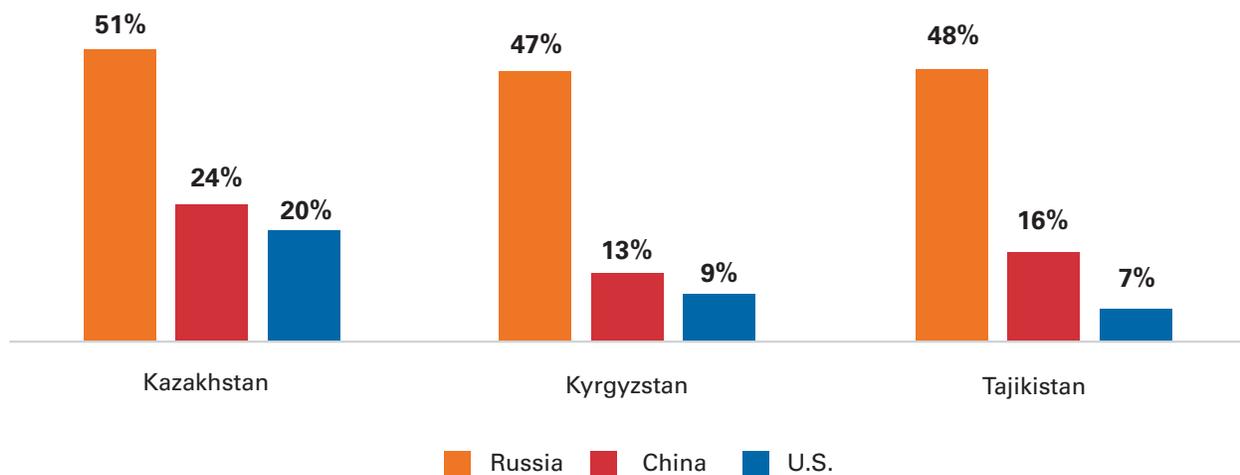
In matters of business and science, the overall Russia-China-U.S. pattern returns with China regaining its second-place position while Russia retains a fairly large lead (albeit one that is

somewhat smaller in Kazakhstan on the question of investment and business).

**Proportion of respondents in each Central Asian country naming each great power as a country from it is “desirable for our country to receive capital, investments, companies, and businessmen who will set up their enterprises here”**



**Proportion of respondents in each Central Asian country naming each great power as a country with which “our government and/or companies should cooperate in science and technology; conduct joint research, exchange designs, technologies, and scientific ideas”**



The question on culture explicitly asked about the desirability of *increased* ties, while the other two questions' discussion of hypotheticals may similarly have caused respondents to think about the degree to which ties *additional to those already existing* would be desirable. Insofar as this is the case, countries (namely Russia, and to a lesser extent China) could be "penalized" for having relatively large presences already.

## Inside the Numbers

On every topic, perceptions of Russia are the most positive in all five countries. The three Central Asian countries most closely linked to Russia are Kazakhstan (member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Eurasian Economic Union), Kyrgyzstan (CSTO and EAEU), and Tajikistan (CSTO). In those three, the gap is widest between Russia and China/U.S. The gap is somewhat narrower in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, but that

is largely because of better views of China and the U.S. Positive overall opinions of Russia, support for closer economic relations with it, and perceptions of it as a friendly and helpful country are all held almost unanimously in the countries polled on those matters. Substantial variation in opinion of Russia is observable only in that it appears to be culturally somewhat more attractive in Kazakhstan than in Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan, while Russian investment and business ties, and Russia as a destination for work and education, are somewhat more attractive in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan than in Kazakhstan.

One partial cause of Central Asians' positive opinions of Russia is likely the far greater level of personal connections that they have to it. Far more respondents from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan have visited Russia within the last five years than have visited either China or the U.S. in that same period.



Uzbekistan Samarkand- April 20, 2019 Architecture of main square of Samarkand, Uzbekistan. Smiling uzbek women sitting on the Registan Square.

## Proportion of respondents in each Central Asian country who named each great power as a country that they have visited within the last five years



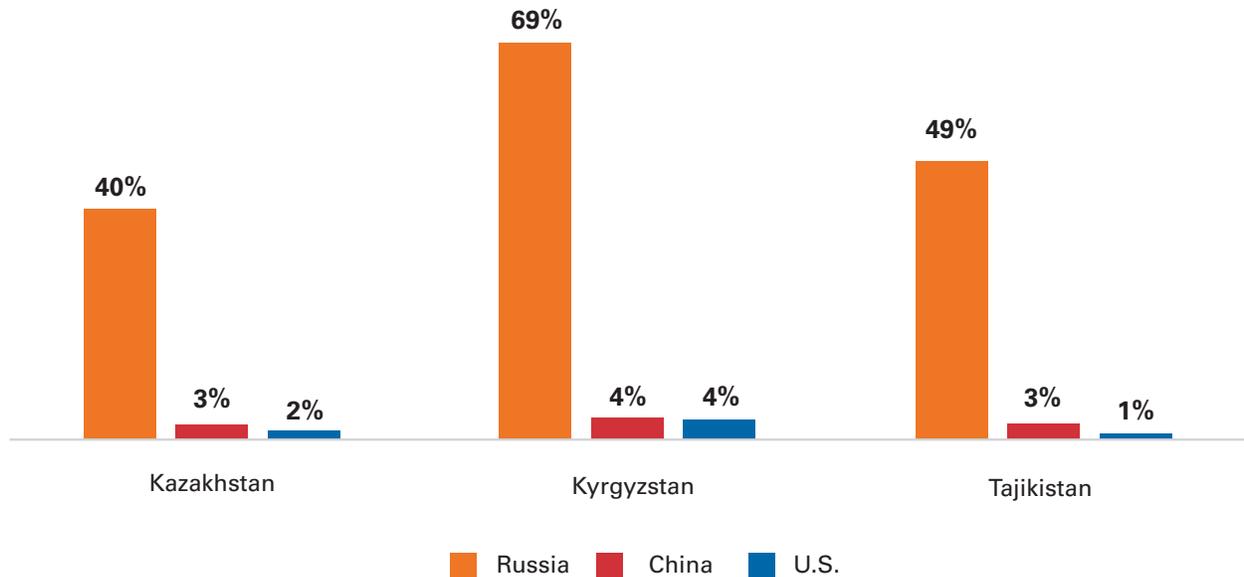
The difference is even starker with regard to the presence of relatives, friends, and colleagues living abroad in the three countries. For Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, this is surely in part a result of widespread labor migration to Russia. And for

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, it is an unsurprising result of the substantial freedom of movement that is provided by membership in the Eurasian Economic Union.



Almaty, Kazakhstan – July 15, 2016, People selling fresh seasonal fruits, apples, peaches, plums, pomegranates at Green Bazar.

## Proportion of respondents in each Central Asian country who named each great power as a country where there are relatives, friends, colleagues, etc. with whom the respondent keeps in contact



As for China, it is well behind Russia everywhere (except perhaps Uzbekistan), yet ahead of the U.S. However, many Central Asians remain wary: in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, equal numbers see China as a friend and as a threat or enemy. Only in Tajikistan does a positive view of China predominate. In part, this is likely because Dushanbe has fewer economic partners to rely on. Since it lacks membership in the Eurasian Economic Union and does not consider economic support from Russia to be sufficient, Tajikistan values Chinese investments more highly. Additionally, public discussions of a Chinese demographic threat are less prominent in Tajikistan than they are in the country's northern neighbors, even if tensions around border delimitation and territorial cessions to China regularly arise.<sup>9</sup>

Opinions of China and of closer economic relations with it are most positive in Turkmenistan, then Uzbekistan – the two countries which lack a border with China and whose populations express fewer concerns about China's proximity – then in Tajikistan, and finally least positive (or outright ambivalent) in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In more specific areas, China's strengths are clearly in business and technology, while the country ties with or actually lags behind the U.S. as a desired source of culture and arts and as a desired destination for work or study.

China's policies in Xinjiang are likely one cause of its problems. Its re-education camps and other measures of control over the region's Muslim Turkic population, including Uyghurs and Kazakhs,

are not well-received in Central Asia – particularly in Kazakhstan (which has a large Uyghur minority) and Kyrgyzstan. Kazakh complaints about Beijing’s policies have grown in recent years from both the public and government officials.<sup>10</sup>

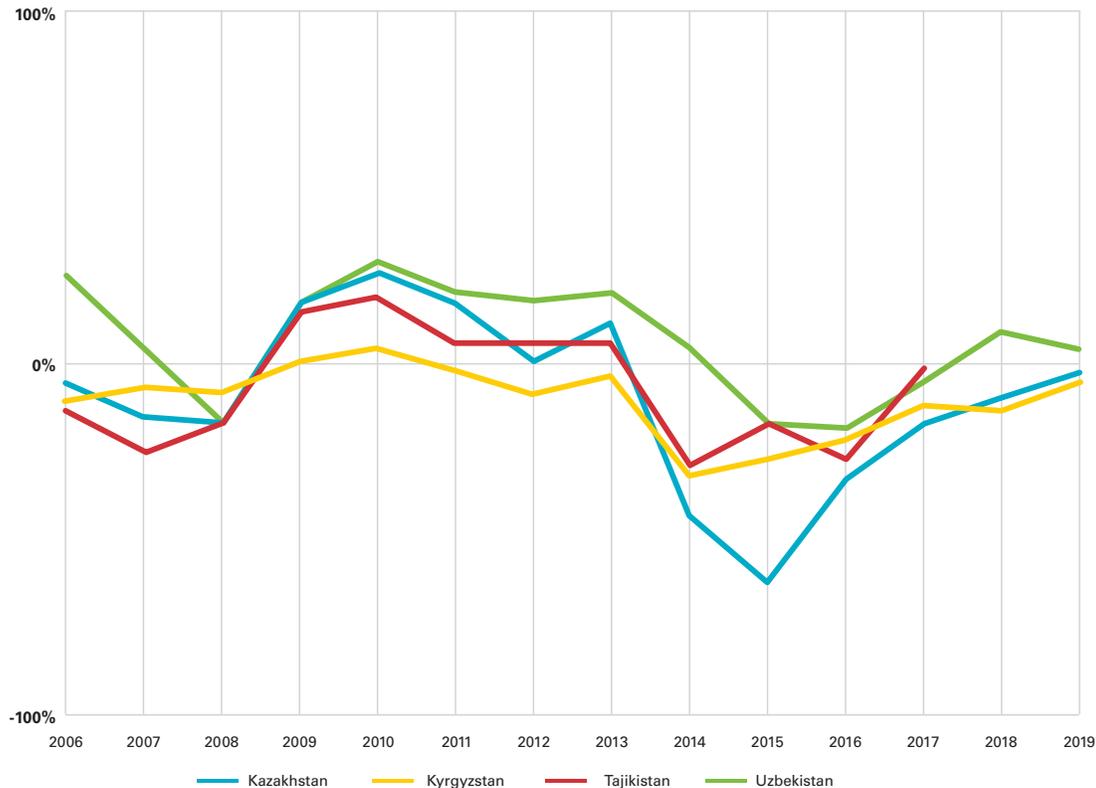
The U.S. is clearly in third place. The generally mixed opinion reflected in U.S. scores on these surveys puts it well behind Russia and even China. The gap is slightly larger still on the question of closer economic relations. More people see the U.S. as foe than as friend in all three countries polled on the question. Taking this decidedly mixed overall image into account, the U.S. is surprisingly popular in Kazakhstan, relative to Russia, as a destination for study and work, and as a source of investment, business, science, and technology. On the other hand, it performs less well relative to Russia in terms of culture: its overall image is actually worse in Kazakhstan than anywhere else polled, and Kazakhstanis are barely more supportive than

Kyrgyzstanis are of closer economic relations with the U.S. (which is to say, quite ambivalent). As with China, overall sentiment towards the U.S. is most positive in Turkmenistan, followed by Uzbekistan, then Tajikistan, and finally decidedly ambivalent in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Why the poor U.S. performance?<sup>11</sup> Three factors that might sound plausible are actually wrong.

First, although perceptions of the U.S. have worsened under President Trump throughout much of the world, Central Asia is one exception. As Gallup reported in 2018, Central Asian opinion of the U.S. leadership’s job performance actually improved when Trump entered power.<sup>12</sup> And annual Gallup World Poll surveys indicate that this opinion has continued to improve, reaching levels that rival the highest ratings in years.

## Sum Percent of Combined Approval and Disapproval of the Job Performance of United States Leadership



Second, as we argue elsewhere, Central Asian opinion – whether of the U.S. or of Russia – probably cannot be attributed to Russian-origin media’s large presence in the region. Whether Central Asians rely mainly upon Russian-origin media as their primary source of news, or mainly upon domestic-origin alternatives instead, does not make a significant difference in their opinions of the U.S. or Russia.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Central Asian opinion appears to be domestically-produced. If it is at all a product of ‘Russian influence’, then that influence is so deeply ingrained within the societies that differentiating it may be both impossible and nonsensical.

Third, opinion of the US is probably not being ‘crowded out’ by opinion of Russia in some sort of contest between mutually-exclusive alternatives. To the contrary, 2017-2019 polling data from the Central Asia Barometer suggests that views of the US and Russia are, if anything, positively correlated. We conducted 34 regression analyses correlating opinions of the US and of Russia, opinions of closer economic relations with the US and of closer economic relations with Russia, and opinions of US President Trump and of Russian President Putin. These analyses were performed on public opinion in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. (The necessary data are not

available for Tajikistan.) They featured an exhaustive list of control variables, and when possible were duplicated with the inclusion of a variable controlling for average opinion of other Central Asian countries/rulers. Opinions of the US and Russia (or of closer economic relations with the two, or of the leaders of the two) were positively correlated in all but two regressions. In those two cases, the effects were substantively small and statistically insignificant. Conversely, 26 of the 32 positive relationships were statistically significant. These results indicate, at the very least, that positive opinions of the US and Russia are not contradictory or mutually-exclusive in Central Asia.

## Conclusion

The Central Asian states' officially-proclaimed foreign policies are well-known. The countries adhere to a diplomatic officialese that celebrates the region's status as a "crossroads" between East and West. Kazakhstan has successfully associated itself with multivectoralism and Eurasianism, and all five countries to some extent endorse the Chinese-backed Silk Road project that places them at the heart of a revived continental trade network. All five states push back against U.S. pressure on human rights, rule of law, and good governance, and Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan sometimes criticize Russia's regional policies. They rarely if ever speak ill of China.

Central Asian public opinions paint a somewhat different picture. Public perceptions of Russia are quite positive, perhaps even more than the diplomatic relations and elite opinions might indicate. This is partly caused by uniquely dense people-to-people relationships, producing an exceptional breadth of positive opinion that extends

well beyond views of the Russian government to social, cultural, and economic areas. The opposite applies to the U.S.: the country is generally perceived worse than (already cool) official relations and elite opinion would suggest. In part, this is likely because the U.S. has few people-to-people contacts and is really attractive on only a narrow range of topics – namely education, science, and technology. Public and official opinions diverge the most with regard to China. While Beijing is officially celebrated by all the Central Asian governments as a welcome partner, domestic opinion, particularly in China's immediate neighbors, remains skeptical of it and largely resistant to its soft power – a situation to which Beijing has adapted with the axiom "warm politics, cold public" (*zheng re, min leng*).<sup>14</sup>

However, in the long run, public opinion is likely to significantly shape, or at least constrain, the policies of the Central Asian states towards the great powers. Thus, for those powers, a positive public image constitutes a real asset in the competition for regional influence, a struggle whose outcomes are still not yet fully determined.

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The opinions expressed in this article are those solely of the authors.

## Endnotes

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2. See, for instance, Luca Anceschi, *Analysing Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy Regime. Neo-Eurasianism in the Nazarbayev Era* (London: Routledge, 2020), and, same author, *Turkmenistan's Foreign Policy. Positive Neutrality and the Consolidation of the Turkmen Regime* (London: Routledge, 2008).
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