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DEPENDENCY, HIERARCHY AND INSTITUTIONAL PERSISTENCE: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY FOUNDATIONS OF DUAL DEPENDENCE IN CENTRAL ASIA

* Seitkozha Y.Y.[1]
*[1] Kazakh Ablai khan University of International
Relations and World Languages, Almaty, Kazakhstan

Abstract. Why do repeated shocks fail to generate diversification in Central Asia? Existing theories of dependency, hierarchy, and regional institutionalism generally assume that vulnerability triggers exit, partner substitution, or strategic hedging. Drawing on comparative evidence from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, this article shows that these expectations do not hold. Instead, Central Asian states exhibit a stable pattern of dual dependence, in which Russian-led institutional and infrastructural hierarchies and Chinese-centered market and financial ties operate in parallel and reinforce one another. Using qualitative process tracing, trade and debt data, institutional membership records, and shock-based diagnostics, including Russia-related sanctions, China's overseas lending contraction, and the COVID-19 supply-chain crisis, the article demonstrates that efforts to reduce dependence on one external actor systematically intensify reliance on the other. Rather than enabling diversification, shocks redistribute exposure within the dual structure. The findings challenge unidirectional models of dependence, hedging frameworks, and regime complexity theories, and advance a political economy account of how functionally differentiated external hierarchies can generate persistent, non-substitutable forms of dependence under multipolar conditions.

Keywords: dual dependence, Central Asia, political economy, hierarchy and institutions, external shocks

Introduction

In early 2022, as sanctions against Russia disrupted pipelines, financial flows, and trade networks across Eurasia, Central Asian governments publicly renewed long-standing commitments to "diversification." Yet their economic behavior moved in the opposite direction. Kazakhstan routed more trade through Chinese corridors even as it remained tied to Russian-controlled pipelines; Kyrgyzstan's re-export economy grew more dependent on Chinese goods while sustaining access to Eurasian Economic Union markets; and Uzbekistan's industrial modernization continued to rely on Chinese machinery while its labor market dependence on Russia remained unchanged. These outcomes echo a broader pattern: across three decades of crises, policy shocks, and rhetorical commitments to autonomy, the region has reproduced, not reduced, its reliance on both Russia and China.

The central research question is therefore straightforward: why does Central Asia maintain simultaneous dependence on two external powers whose roles are non-substitutable, and why do major shocks fail to generate meaningful diversification? This puzzle matters because it challenges core expectations in international political economy. The dominant theories hold that vulnerability produces escape strategies; that states exit underperforming institutions when alternatives exist; and that overlapping external patrons generate competition rather than reinforcement. The persistence of Russian institutional lock-in alongside deepening Chinese market and financial dependence violates these assumptions. It reveals a configuration that neither dependency theory, nor hierarchy theory, nor institutionalist work on regime complexity predicts.

Behind this specific puzzle lies a more general question in the discipline: how do external economic and institutional structures shape the strategic options of smaller states? Classical answers assume a single dominant center of authority or a competitive environment in which states hedge among partially substitutable patrons. The Central Asian case forces us to reconsider these foundations. Russia and China do not compete for the same domain of influence; rather, they occupy complementary structural niches. Attempts to reduce dependence on one actor heighten exposure to the other. The result is not miscalculation or incoherent policy but a durable configuration of constraints produced by the interaction of two distinct hierarchies.

Addressing this gap is theoretically and empirically important. Scholars of dependency and hierarchy increasingly acknowledge complex forms of external influence, yet the field lacks a clear framework for understanding how multiple external powers can become jointly indispensable, not through coordination, but through functional differentiation. Likewise, debates on institutional persistence in Eurasia often emphasize legacies or authoritarian coalitions but do not explain why institutional exit remains so costly even for states that publicly signal dissatisfaction. By theorizing dual dependence as an equilibrium sustained by infrastructural lock-in, functional complementarity, and double adjustment costs, this article explains why diversification repeatedly stalls and why institutional redundancy remains stable.

The empirical sections apply this framework to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, showing how Russian-led institutional architectures and Chinese-centered market structures interact to constrain alternative pathways. The analysis demonstrates that the persistence of dual dependence is not a transitional phase but a structural feature of the regional order, one that requires rethinking how hierarchy, interdependence, and institutional persistence operate in multipolar environments.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative comparative design focused on Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. These cases are selected for three reasons. First, together they represent the core variation within Central Asia in terms of economic size, institutional embedding, and development strategies. Kazakhstan is the region's largest economy and a central node in energy transit; Kyrgyzstan is a smaller, remittance- and re-export-dependent economy with deep institutional integration; and Uzbekistan combines partial institutional disengagement with ambitious industrial modernization. Second, all three states are deeply exposed to both Russian- and Chinese-centered economic and institutional structures, making them suitable for examining simultaneous dependence. Third, despite differences in regime type, reform trajectories, and foreign policy rhetoric, all three exhibit persistent reliance on Russia and China, allowing for controlled comparison of mechanisms rather than outcomes.

The analysis does not aim to generalize statistically across all post-Soviet states. Instead, it uses most-different systems logic within a shared regional and historical context to identify common structural constraints shaping state behavior.

The study relies on multiple data sources to capture institutional, trade, financial, and infrastructural dimensions of external dependence.

First, trade and economic data are drawn from UN Comtrade, national statistical agencies, and WTO datasets to track import composition, export destinations, and shifts in trade patterns over time. These data are used descriptively to identify concentration and persistence rather than to estimate causal effects.

Second, institutional data cover formal membership, participation, and withdrawal patterns in regional organizations, including the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Membership histories, treaty texts, and organizational reports are used to assess institutional embeddedness and the absence of formal exit.

Third, infrastructure and finance data include publicly available information on pipelines, transport corridors, logistics hubs, and major development projects, as well as data on external lending from Chinese policy banks and multilateral development institutions. These sources allow identification of long-term infrastructural and financial commitments that constrain policy adjustment.

Fourth, the analysis draws on secondary literature, policy reports, and prior empirical studies to contextualize patterns of dependence and to trace changes following major shocks, including the 2014 and 2022 Russia-related sanctions, fluctuations in Chinese overseas lending, and the COVID-19 supply-chain disruption.

Finally, where available, qualitative evidence from official statements, policy documents, and existing interview-based studies is used to corroborate observed patterns and to distinguish rhetorical diversification from behavioral continuity.

The analysis employs comparative process tracing to examine how Russian-led institutional and infrastructural structures and Chinese-centered market and financial ties interact over time. Rather than treating dependence as a single variable, the study disaggregates external influence into distinct functional domains: institutions, infrastructure, markets, and finance.

The empirical sections proceed in three steps. First, they document the persistence of Russian-centered institutional and infrastructural arrangements across cases. Second, they establish the growing centrality of Chinese trade, imports, and development finance. Third, they assess interaction effects by examining whether efforts to reduce reliance on one external actor increase reliance on the other, particularly during periods of shock.

Shocks are used as diagnostic events rather than exogenous treatments. If diversification or exit were feasible, major disruptions would be expected to weaken existing dependencies. Instead, the analysis evaluates whether shocks redistribute exposure within the dual structure. Consistent patterns across cases and shocks are treated as evidence of a stable equilibrium rather than idiosyncratic policy choices.

The study does not seek to test formal hypotheses or estimate causal magnitudes. Its objective is to identify and explain a recurring structural pattern by integrating comparative evidence across countries, sectors, and time.

The core puzzle in Central Asia is not the existence of external influence but the durability of simultaneous dependence on two different external powers. Despite major shocks, Russian sanctions, contractions in Chinese overseas lending, and pandemic-era supply disruptions, Central Asian governments do not exit Russian-led institutions, nor do they meaningfully reduce their exposure to Chinese markets and finance. Instead, they remain anchored to both external pillars. Existing theories offer no clear explanation for this outcome. Dependency theory assumes that rising vulnerability creates incentives for diversification; hierarchy theory anticipates that one center of authority ultimately dominates; and regime complexity frameworks expect that overlapping institutions will be pruned when they cease to provide value. None of these literatures predicts a stable equilibrium in which two external powers occupy complementary structural niches that smaller states cannot abandon.

I argue that Central Asia is best understood as a dual dependency equilibrium: a condition in which two distinct but interlocking hierarchies generate a mutually reinforcing structure of constraints. Russian-centered institutions and infrastructures continue to define regulatory standards, mobility channels, energy transit, and regional security arrangements. Chinese-centered markets, imports, and development finance supply the primary material inputs for industrial production, consumer supply, and long-term development strategies. Crucially, these hierarchies do not compete for the same domain of influence. They are functionally complementary: Russia cannot substitute for China's role in manufacturing and finance, and China cannot replace Russia's infrastructural, administrative, or security ecosystem.

Because these domains are non-substitutable, attempts to reduce reliance on one actor inevitably heighten exposure to the other. Exiting Russian institutional frameworks would disrupt the very infrastructures through which Chinese goods, credit, and investment circulate, raising the cost of participation in Sino-centric markets. Conversely, reducing dependence on Chinese imports or financing would require restructuring production systems, supply chains, and development models that are embedded within Russian-regulated logistical and administrative networks. As a result, each hierarchy reinforces the value of the other: Russian institutional lock-in stabilizes the environment through which Chinese economic activity expands, while China's central role in trade and finance increases the practical importance of Russian infrastructures, even when those institutions underperform.

The causal logic underpinning this equilibrium is one of constraint interaction. Russian institutions produce a form of path dependence that anchors states within inherited post-Soviet frameworks. China's rise, rather than displacing these frameworks, attaches itself to them. Once both dependencies are established, policymakers confront double adjustment costs: reducing one dependency requires simultaneous, and prohibitively costly, adjustment in the other. Because no state can feasibly undertake both transformations at once, maintaining the dual structure becomes the least risky and most stable strategy. Public commitments to diversification therefore coexist with behavioral continuity, as the institutional and economic foundations of the dual system remain effectively intact.

Mechanism 1: Infrastructural lock-in

Russian-led institutions, EAEU, CSTO, CIS regimes, pipeline consortia, transit corridors, and migration systems, constitute the inherited backbone of Central Asian economic life. These infrastructures impose regulatory standards, route dependencies, and administrative routines that are costly to reconfigure. Even when institutions perform poorly, they persist because they are embedded in the everyday functioning of mobility, energy, and trade. Institutional exit would require simultaneous reengineering of transport systems, standards regimes, and labor channels that underpin basic economic activity.

Mechanism 2: Functional complementarity

Chinese economic influence attaches itself to these inherited systems rather than replacing them. Chinese goods flow through transport routes governed by Russian standards; Chinese industrial inputs depend on Soviet-legacy technical norms; Chinese credit finances projects built within existing Russian-linked infrastructures. The two hierarchies thus operate in distinct domains, infrastructural/institutional versus market/financial, making them structurally non-substitutable. Each external power provides functions the other does not, generating a complementary division of labor in regional political economy.

Mechanism 3: Double adjustment costs

Because the two hierarchies are complementary, efforts to reduce reliance on one actor intensify dependence on the other. Exiting Russian institutions would sever or complicate the logistical and administrative foundations on which Chinese trade and investment rely. Reducing Chinese imports or financing would require reconfiguring industrial and commercial systems that are embedded in Russian-led infrastructural and regulatory frameworks. No state can adjust both dependencies simultaneously. Maintaining the dual structure therefore becomes the lowest-cost equilibrium.

Together, these mechanisms generate a stable equilibrium that reproduces dual dependence even when governments articulate diversification goals. The equilibrium is resilient under shock conditions. Events that undermine one external pillar do not create opportunities for escape; they push states more deeply into the other hierarchy. Sanctions on Russia, for example, increase the attractiveness of Chinese markets and logistics, while slowdowns in Chinese lending re-elevate the importance of Russian institutions, labor channels, and security guarantees. Apparent oscillation between the two partners is therefore not evidence of strategic reorientation but a stabilizing redistribution of constraints that preserves the underlying configuration.

This theoretical framework reframes external influence in Central Asia not as a competition between Russia and China but as a complementary structure of constraints, in which each power occupies a strategic niche that the other does not fill. Persistent dual dependence arises not from miscalculation or limited state capacity but from the interaction of these distinct hierarchies and the cumulative adjustment costs that make meaningful reorientation extraordinarily difficult.

Results

The empirical patterns across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan closely track the mechanisms set out in the theory. Russian-led institutions continue to structure the administrative, regulatory, and infrastructural foundations of regional economic life, while Chinese markets, imports, and financing shape the material conditions of growth. Testing the dual-dependency equilibrium therefore requires assessing whether the empirical record exhibits:

(1) institutional lock-in centered on Russia;

(2) market and financial dependence centered on China; and

(3) interaction effects in which efforts to reduce exposure to one actor increase exposure to the other.

Russian institutional lock-in

Russian-centered arrangements remain deeply entrenched across all three states despite recurring dissatisfaction with organizational performance. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan remain full members of both the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Uzbekistan, although outside the EAEU, continues to rely heavily on CIS-based regulatory and administrative frameworks. Process-tracing of Uzbekistan's earlier withdrawals from the CSTO and GUAM shows that these exits did not reduce underlying dependence on Russian-managed labor migration, energy exchanges, and transit corridors. A similar pattern emerges from ROCO-based analyses: no state materially embedded in the post-Soviet institutional layer has exited it, regardless of organizational performance or elite discontent.

Table 1. Institutional embeddedness in Russian-led frameworks

Country	EAEU	CSTO	CIS	Dependence channels
Kazakhstan	Member	Member	Member	Energy transit; technical standards; labor mobility; customs harmonization
Kyrgyzstan	Member	Member	Member	Migration dependence; bazaar re-export structures tied to Russian and Kazakh markets; customs harmonization
Uzbekistan	Non-member	Former member	Member	Labor migration to Russia; CIS-based regulatory dependence; energy swaps; transit constraints

These patterns underline a durable institutional lock-in. Even when governments articulate reformist ambitions or consider alternative partnerships, the foundational regulatory and infrastructural systems remain anchored in Russian-led frameworks.

Chinese market and financial centrality

China's economic position is equally decisive. WTO and UN COMTRADE data show that China has become either the largest or second-largest import source for all three states. Uzbekistan sources roughly 29 percent of its imports from China; Kazakhstan imported US$15.15 billion in Chinese goods in 2024; and Kyrgyzstan imported more than US$5.4 billion, making China its top trading partner. Across the region, manufactured goods, machinery, and intermediate inputs overwhelmingly originate from China, while exports to China remain concentrated in raw materials.

Table 2. Imports from China

Country	Import Value (latest)	China's Rank	Notes
Kazakhstan	$15.15 billion (2024)	Top 2	Dominance in machinery, electronics, intermediate goods
Kyrgyzstan	$5.45 billion (2024)	#1	Core supplier for the bazaar re-export economy (Dordoi, Kara-Suu)
Uzbekistan	$10.33 billion (2024)	#1 (29.1%)	China 29.1%; Russia 22.4% of imports

Chinese lending further reinforces this position. Fieldwork conducted in Kyrgyzstan documents that by 2013 the Export-Import Bank of China held US$527.5 million, 17.4 percent, of Kyrgyzstan's public external debt. Interviews with officials revealed explicit anxiety about repayment capacity. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan face lower levels of sovereign debt exposure but rely heavily on Chinese credit, contractors, and bundled financing for infrastructure projects including pipelines, special economic zones, industrial facilities, and transport corridors. These arrangements create substantial substitution costs and tie national development strategies to Chinese financial and industrial networks.

Table 3. Exposure to Chinese lending and infrastructure finance

Country	Debt exposure	Sectoral exposure	Evidence
Kyrgyzstan	$527.5 million (17.4% of public external debt, 2013)	Transport corridors, energy, highways	Ministry of Finance data; interviews reflecting repayment concerns
Kazakhstan	Medium exposure	Oil/gas pipelines; Khorgos; Western Europe-Western China corridor	Integration of Nurly Zhol with BRI initiatives
Uzbekistan	Moderate exposure	Energy upgrades; industrial zones; machinery imports	Industrialization and trade data

Taken together, these patterns confirm that Russian-led institutions supply the structural scaffolding of the regional economy, while Chinese markets and financing provide the material flows and developmental inputs.

Interaction mechanisms

The critical assessment of the theory lies in identifying whether efforts to reduce dependence on one actor intensify dependence on the other. Kazakhstan's experience after the 2022 sanctions on Russia illustrates this dynamic most clearly. Although officials publicly committed to diversifying export routes and reducing exposure to Russian chokepoints, the immediate effect of the sanctions was a sharp increase in reliance on Chinese imports, logistics, and investment. Trade volumes with China rose significantly in 2023-2024, while Western firms withdrew and Russian supply chains faltered. Existing transit alternatives such as Middle Corridor, Iran-Caspian routes, and Caspian shipping proved viable only insofar as they remained connected to Chinese demand and infrastructure.

Kyrgyzstan displays a similar form of constraint. The re-export economy depends on Chinese consumer goods entering the EAEU through Kyrgyz bazaars and preferential access to Russian and Kazakh markets. EAEU membership increases compliance costs but enables re-export; exiting the union would eliminate access to the very markets that sustain the model. Meanwhile, reducing reliance on Chinese imports would undermine domestic commerce and the re-export sector itself. Interviews with traders and policymakers emphasize that attempts to adjust one side of this dependency threaten the viability of the other.

Uzbekistan's industrial reforms reveal the same mechanism through different channels. Efforts to expand partnerships with Turkey and Europe run up against compatibility issues with Chinese-made production lines and machinery. At the same time, dependence on Russian migration corridors, remittances, and CIS-based energy coordination persists. Structural reliance on both actors remains intact even as official rhetoric emphasizes diversification.

Across all three states, adjustment costs on one side of the dual structure intensify dependence on the other, producing a stable equilibrium rather than enabling meaningful shifts toward alternative partners.

Shock tests and cross-case synthesis

Geopolitical and economic shocks provide a valuable window into adjustment dynamics. If the dual-dependency equilibrium holds, shocks that weaken one external pillar should deepen reliance on the other rather than permit diversification. Three major disruptions, the 2022 Russia sanctions shock, China's 2017-2020 lending contraction, and the COVID-19 supply-chain crisis, consistently follow this pattern.

Russia sanctions (2022)

The sanctions imposed after Russia's invasion of Ukraine created the most significant regional disruption since the Soviet collapse. Kazakhstan experienced immediate interruptions in oil transit via the Caspian Pipeline Consortium, financial transactions, and trade logistics. Rather than diversifying away from Russia, the short-term effect was heightened reliance on Chinese imports and transit solutions. UN Comtrade data show substantial increases in Kazakhstan-China trade in 2023-2024. Russian institutional dominance, particularly in pipeline control and regulatory frameworks, remained intact, while China's material role expanded.

Kyrgyzstan's adjustments followed a similar logic. As Russian markets experienced shortages and inflation, Kyrgyz re-exports surged, fueled by continuous inflows of Chinese goods. Simultaneously, Russia tightened migration and financial controls, reinforcing dependence on remittances and CIS frameworks. Reducing reliance on either actor remained infeasible.

Uzbekistan adopted more explicit diversification rhetoric but faced structural barriers. Chinese machinery and inputs remained embedded in industrial production, while remittances from Russia continued to stabilize household incomes. Despite new partnerships with Turkey, South Korea, and Europe, neither the Russian nor Chinese pillar of dependency diminished.

Additional shock tests

China's temporary overseas lending contraction (2017-2020) did not reduce overall dependency. Instead, as Chinese financing slowed, reliance on Russian migration, energy coordination, and CIS institutions increased. Once Chinese lending resumed, exposure rebalanced rather than decreased.

During the COVID-19 supply-chain crisis, all three states intensified reliance on Chinese suppliers, especially for medical goods, machinery, and industrial components, while Russian institutional frameworks provided crisis stabilization in migration and energy.

Table 4. Shock responses and observed patterns

Shock	**Expected under hedging**	**Expected under one-pillar dependence**	**Observed effect**	**Interpretation**
Russia sanctions (2022)	Diversify away from Russia	Collapse in Russian ties	Heightened reliance on Chinese imports, logistics, investment	Dual dependency: weakening Russia increases exposure to China
China lending slowdown (2017-20)	Diversify away from China	Decline in Chinese influence	Russian institutional roles deepened; Chinese influence recovered afterward	Redistributed dependence, not reduced dependence
COVID-19 supply-chain shock	Broader supply-chain diversification	Severe disruption	Reinforced reliance on Chinese suppliers; Russian institutions stabilized mobility and energy	Complementary dependencies activated during crisis

Across all shocks, the same outcome emerges: the system redistributes exposure rather than enabling escape from either pillar.

Cross-case synthesis

Comparing the three cases demonstrates consistent patterns of mutually reinforcing dependence. Russian-led institutions continue to shape the region's regulatory and infrastructural environment, while Chinese markets and financing underpin industrial production, consumer supply, and development strategies. The key interaction mechanism, the tightening of one constraint when governments attempt to loosen the other, appears in each case.

Kazakhstan's adjustment costs stem from pipeline dependence and industrial upgrading. Movement away from Russia pushes the country deeper into China's economic sphere, but Russian institutional frameworks remain unavoidable.

Kyrgyzstan faces sharper constraints: the re-export economy rests simultaneously on Chinese imports and market access to Russia and Kazakhstan. Altering either side risks destabilizing the entire economic model.

Uzbekistan's modernization strategy depends on Chinese industrial inputs and continued labor migration to Russia. Efforts to diversify partnerships proceed incrementally but do not alter these structural foundations.

Table 5. Mechanisms of dual dependency across cases

Mechanism	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Uzbekistan
Russian institutional lock-in	High (pipeline dependence; EAEU standards)	High (EAEU + CIS migration)	Medium (migration; CIS regulatory backbone)
Chinese market/ finance dependence	High (imports; industrial inputs; logistics)	Very high (imports sustain re-export economy)	High (machinery; industrial zones; inputs)
Interaction mechanism	Strong (sanctions shock → deeper shift toward China)	Very strong (reducing one dependence collapses the other)	Strong (industrial compatibility + migration constraints)
Adjustment outcomes	Redistribution, not diversification	Constrained equilibrium	Incremental reform without structural change

The cross-case comparison shows that none of the states can reduce exposure to one external actor without increasing exposure to the other, and none can exit the dual structure without incurring prohibitive adjustment costs. The empirical record therefore provides strong support for the dual-dependency equilibrium and challenges interpretations that assume hedging, balancing, or great-power competition as primary drivers of Central Asian foreign economic behavior.

Discussion

Dual dependence as a structural configuration

The findings of this article require rethinking how dependence operates in contemporary political economy. Classic dependency theory conceptualizes dependence as a unidirectional relationship between core and periphery, in which peripheral economies are structurally subordinated through unequal exchange, specialization in low-value production, and external control over key sectors [1-4]. While these approaches emphasize persistence and structural constraint, they also assume that vulnerability generates pressures for diversification or transformation, whether through import-substitution, state-led industrialization, or strategic realignment.

Central Asia does not conform to this expectation. Despite repeated and highly visible shocks, ranging from Russian financial crises and sanctions to fluctuations in Chinese growth and lending, states in the region have not moved toward meaningful diversification. Instead, dependence has been reproduced through a dual structure in which reliance on Russia and China is simultaneously necessary and mutually reinforcing. This article conceptualizes this outcome as dual dependence: a stable configuration in which two external powers dominate distinct, non-substitutable domains of political economy.

As the empirical analysis demonstrates across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, Russian-led institutions continue to structure regulatory, infrastructural, and administrative foundations, while Chinese markets, imports, and finance supply the material inputs of growth. Crucially, no case exhibits sustained movement away from one pillar without compensatory deepening of reliance on the other.

Russia and China do not function as alternative patrons within the same sphere. Russian influence is embedded in inherited infrastructures, institutional memberships, regulatory standards, and labor mobility regimes rooted in the Soviet and post-Soviet order [5-9]. Chinese influence, by contrast, is concentrated in trade, manufacturing inputs, logistics, and development finance associated with global value chains and large-scale infrastructure projects [10-12]. These domains are analytically distinct but practically intertwined. Attempts to reduce dependence on one external actor systematically increase reliance on the other.

This interaction produces a structural equilibrium rather than a transitional phase. Empirically, attempts to diversify away from Russian transit routes, regulatory frameworks, or migration channels, most clearly visible after the 2022 sanctions, were associated with rising dependence on Chinese imports, logistics, and investment rather than structural exit. Reducing exposure to Russian-controlled transit routes, regulatory systems, or migration channels requires economic adjustments that deepen reliance on Chinese imports, credit, and industrial inputs. Conversely, reducing reliance on Chinese goods or finance would necessitate reforms that collide directly with Russian-controlled infrastructures and institutional arrangements. Because neither external pillar can be removed without destabilizing the other, maintaining the dual structure becomes the least risky strategy available to political and economic elites.

Vulnerability without diversification

This pattern directly challenges the widespread assumption that vulnerability generates diversification. Across dependency theory, post-Soviet political economy, and institutionalist approaches, shocks are expected to trigger exit strategies, partner substitution, or structural reform [3-4,18]. Central Asia demonstrates the opposite dynamic. Shocks do not open space for escape; they tighten existing constraints.

The results show that major disruptions, including Russia-related sanctions, China's temporary lending contraction, and the COVID-19 supply-chain crisis, did not produce exit from Russian-led institutions or substitution away from Chinese markets in any of the three cases. Instead, exposure was redistributed within the dual structure.

Sanctions on Russia redirect trade toward Chinese markets and logistics rather than toward alternative partners. Contractions in Chinese overseas lending elevate the importance of Russian labor markets, remittances, and institutional coordination. The system adjusts internally by redistributing reliance within the dual structure rather than by breaking out of it. Vulnerability thus functions less as a catalyst for diversification than as a disciplining mechanism that narrows the range of feasible policy responses.

This finding qualifies classic dependency arguments by showing that non-diversification need not reflect policy failure or elite capture alone. Even where governments articulated explicit diversification strategies, as in Uzbekistan's outreach to Turkey and Europe or Kazakhstan's promotion of alternative corridors, the empirical record shows that these initiatives did not alter the underlying Russian-Chinese structure of dependence.

Imperial political economy and functional differentiation

Imperial and geoeconomic political economy further illuminate why dual dependence persists. Rather than treating markets as neutral arenas, this literature emphasizes how infrastructures, financial systems, and institutional architectures are constructed to reproduce hierarchy and power [13-15].

Central Asia reveals a configuration in which two external powers exercise influence through functionally differentiated mechanisms rather than direct competition. Russia's power rests on institutional depth and infrastructural inheritance, while China's power derives from its position within global production networks and its capacity to supply goods, finance, and connectivity [10-12].

These forms of power do not substitute for one another. Instead, they interact to stabilize dependence by making exit from either pillar prohibitively costly. The empirical sections document this differentiation clearly: Russian influence persists through pipeline control, regulatory standards, migration regimes, and CIS-based coordination, while Chinese influence expands through manufactured imports, development lending, logistics corridors, and industrial inputs. These domains show little overlap or substitutability in practice.

This perspective extends imperial political economy by showing how multiple external hierarchies can coexist without coordination and still generate durable patterns of subordination. Dual dependence is reproduced not through rivalry but through complementarity. As a result, strategies that assume competition between Russia and China mischaracterize the structural constraints facing Central Asian states.

Institutional persistence and the limits of regime complexity

The persistence of Russian-led regional institutions further challenges institutionalist expectations. Regime complexity theory predicts that overlapping institutions create opportunities for forum shopping, competition, and eventual exit from underperforming organizations [16-17]. Organizational mortality research similarly links institutional decline to functional redundancy and loss of support [18].

Empirically, however, none of the three cases exited Russian-led institutional frameworks despite repeated dissatisfaction with organizational performance and the presence of overlapping alternatives. Even Uzbekistan's earlier withdrawals did not reduce reliance on Russian-centered regulatory and infrastructural systems.

Eurasia does not follow this logic. Russian-led organizations coexist with newer frameworks without displacement, and formal exit is exceedingly rare. Membership is embedded within broader hierarchical relationships encompassing security cooperation, regulatory compatibility, and infrastructural access. Exit is therefore not a discrete institutional choice but a systemic rupture with cascading economic and political costs. Institutional survival reflects not efficiency but structural indispensability.

By situating institutional persistence within a dual dependency equilibrium, this analysis explains why layering rather than pruning characterizes Eurasian regionalism. Overlap does not generate competition because institutions are not substitutable. They are anchored in different external hierarchies that jointly constrain state behavior.

Hierarchy, small states, and constrained strategy

Finally, the Central Asian case invites a reconsideration of hierarchy and small-state strategy. Hierarchy theory highlights authority relations that coexist with sovereignty but largely assumes a single dominant hierarchy [19-20]. Both approaches presuppose some degree of substitutability among external patrons.

The empirical findings indicate that policies often labeled as hedging, such as selective engagement with third partners, remain marginal relative to the structural weight of Russian and Chinese ties, and do not alter the underlying dependency patterns documented in the results.

Across these literatures, three shared assumptions clash with the empirical reality of Central Asia. First, dependency is primarily conceptualized as unidirectional [1-2,13,19]. Central Asia, by contrast, is structurally reliant on both Russia and China, with each power dominating different but non-substitutable domains: Russia in institutions, security, and inherited infrastructure; China in trade, development finance, and new connectivity projects [10-12].

Second, vulnerability is assumed to generate diversification [3-4,18]. In Central Asia, repeated shocks to both Russian- and Chinese-linked channels have not produced sustained structural diversification. Instead, diversification remains rhetorical, while behavioral patterns reinforce existing dependencies.

Third, institutional overlap is expected to produce competition and exit [16-18]. Yet in Eurasia, underperforming Russian-led organizations persist, new ones are layered on, and formal exit is virtually absent [6-7]. Institutional redundancy appears to be a stable feature of the regional order, not a transitional stage on the way to consolidation.

Across these bodies of scholarship, three common assumptions prevent existing theories from accounting for the Central Asian pattern. First, dependency is almost universally understood as unidirectional. Second, these literatures assume that vulnerability triggers diversification. Third, institutional overlap is expected to generate competition and organizational mortality. In Eurasia, however, institutional redundancy persists because it is embedded within broader hierarchical relationships that cannot be revised through narrow institutional adjustment alone.

These shared assumptions point to a missing theoretical lens. Central Asia does not display competition between Russia and China, nor a move toward autonomy or a decisive alignment with one or the other. Instead, the region exhibits a dual structure of dependence in which Russian-led institutional and infrastructural hierarchies and Chinese-led market and financial hierarchies operate in parallel, reinforce one another, and jointly constrain alternative pathways. Explaining this persistence requires a framework capable of theorizing how distinct external hierarchies become mutually constitutive and why diversification becomes extraordinarily costly even when leaders formally commit to it.

Dual dependence violates this assumption. Russia and China do not offer interchangeable benefits, and engagement with one does not offset reliance on the other. Strategies that resemble hedging in rhetoric do not function as hedging in practice. Instead, Central Asian states pursue a form of strategic preservation aimed at maintaining a constrained equilibrium under layered hierarchies.

The broader implication is that in regions shaped by functionally differentiated external powers, multipolarity does not necessarily expand autonomy. It can entrench dependence by multiplying, rather than alleviating, structural constraints. Understanding such outcomes requires moving beyond models of competition, substitution, and exit toward a framework that treats complementary hierarchies as a source of persistence rather than instability.

Conclusion

Central Asia's political economy reveals a durable structure of external reliance that cannot be explained by traditional accounts of dependency, hierarchy, or regime complexity. Despite repeated shocks, from Russian sanctions to fluctuations in Chinese lending and global supply-chain disruptions, the region has not shifted toward meaningful diversification. Instead, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan remain anchored to two external powers whose roles are not interchangeable. Russian-led institutions, infrastructures, and mobility channels continue to shape the regulatory and logistical foundations of economic life, while Chinese markets, imports, and development finance supply the material and industrial inputs on which growth strategies depend. The interaction of these two hierarchies generates a dual dependency equilibrium that persists even when governments publicly commit to reducing external vulnerability.

What emerges from this analysis is a clearer understanding of why diversification repeatedly stalls. Reducing exposure to Russian institutions requires economic adjustments that heighten dependence on China; limiting reliance on Chinese markets and financing demands reforms that run directly against Russian-controlled infrastructures and administrative systems. Because neither state can feasibly absorb these simultaneous adjustment costs, maintaining the dual structure becomes the least risky strategy. This equilibrium is reinforced, not undermined, by crises. Sanctions on Russia redirect trade toward China, while slowdowns in Chinese financing re-elevate the importance of Russian labor markets and transit systems. The system bends but does not break.

These findings carry important implications for both scholarship and policy. For researchers, Central Asia demonstrates that multiple external powers can become jointly indispensable not through coordination but through functional differentiation. Existing theories assume unidirectional dependence, substitution among patrons, or institutional competition leading to exit. The region shows the opposite: complementary hierarchies can lock states into a configuration where escape from one dependence intensifies the other. This requires a shift in how we conceptualize power, interdependence, and institutional persistence in regions shaped by more than one external center.

For policymakers in Central Asia and beyond, the analysis underscores the limits of diversification strategies that do not confront the structural interaction of these dependencies. Efforts to expand ties with Turkey, Europe, or the Gulf may create new openings, but they cannot substitute for the infrastructural and market foundations dominated by Russia and China. Without large-scale reengineering of transit routes, production systems, and financial sources, diversification will remain largely aspirational.

Looking ahead, the dual dependency equilibrium outlined here offers a basis for forecasting the region's trajectory. As long as Russia retains control over key infrastructures and China remains the central provider of manufactured goods and development finance, Central Asia is likely to continue oscillating within this bounded space rather than breaking out of it. Future research can build on this framework by tracing variation within specific sectors such as energy, logistics, manufacturing, and digital infrastructure, and by assessing whether emerging actors can alter the cost structure underpinning the equilibrium. Additional quantitative work on organizational persistence and case-based studies of policy experimentation could further illuminate when, and under what conditions, this dual structure might begin to shift.

What this study has answered is why dual dependence persists despite repeated incentives for change. What remains open is whether upcoming geopolitical or technological transformations could meaningfully reduce the adjustment costs that lock states into the current arrangement. Until such shifts materialize, the interplay of Russian institutions and Chinese markets will continue to shape the region's political economy, not as a temporary condition but as a defining feature of its international position.

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ЗАВИСИМОСТЬ, ИЕРАРХИЯ И ИНСТИТУЦИОНАЛЬНАЯ УСТОЙЧИВОСТЬ: ПОЛИТИКО-ЭКОНОМИЧЕСКИЕ ОСНОВЫ ДВОЙНОЙ ЗАВИСИМОСТИ В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ

*Сейтқожа Е.Е.[1]

*[1] Казахский университет международных отношений и мировых языков имени Абылай хана, Алматы, Казахстан

Аннотация. Почему повторяющиеся внешние шоки не приводят к диверсификации в Центральной Азии? Существующие теории зависимости, иерархии и регионального институционализма, как правило, предполагают, что уязвимость стимулирует выход, замену партнеров или стратегическое хеджирование. На основе сравнительного анализа Казахстана, Кыргызстана и Узбекистана в статье показано, что эти ожидания не подтверждаются эмпирически. Вместо этого государства региона воспроизводят устойчивую модель двойной зависимости, в рамках которой российские институциональные и инфраструктурные иерархии и китайские рыночные и финансовые связи функционируют параллельно и взаимно усиливают друг друга. Используя качественное процесс-трейсинг исследование, данные по торговле и долгу, анализ институционального участия и диагностические «шок-тесты» (санкции против России, сокращение китайского внешнего кредитования, кризис цепочек поставок в период COVID-19), статья показывает, что попытки сократить зависимость от одного внешнего актора систематически усиливают зависимость от другого. Шоки не создают условий для выхода или диверсификации, а перераспределяют уязвимость внутри двойной структуры. Полученные результаты ставят под сомнение односторонние модели зависимости, концепции хеджирования и теории режимной сложности и предлагают политэкономическое объяснение устойчивости взаимодополняющих внешних иерархий в условиях многополярности.

Ключевые слова: двойная зависимость, Центральная Азия, политическая экономия, иерархия и институты, внешние шоки

ТӘУЕЛДІЛІК, ИЕРАРХИЯ ЖӘНЕ ИНСТИТУЦИОНАЛДЫҚ ТҰРАҚТЫЛЫҚ: ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯДАҒЫ ҚОСАРЛАНҒАН ТӘУЕЛДІЛІКТІҢ САЯСИ-ЭКОНОМИКАЛЫҚ НЕГІЗДЕРІ

*Сейтқожа Е.Е.[1]
*[1] Абылай хан атындағы Қазақ халықаралық қатынастар және әлем тілдері университеті, Алматы, Қазақстан

Аңдатпа. Неліктен қайталанатын сыртқы шоктар Орталық Азияның әртараптандыруна алып келмейді? Тәуелділік, иерархия және аймақтық институционализм теориялары әдетте “шағын” мемлекеттерді аймақтық ұйымдардан шығуын, серіктестер мен әріптестерді алмастыруын немесе хеджингке жүгінуін болжайды. Қазақстан, Қырғызстан және Өзбекстанды салыстырмалы талдау негізінде бұл мақала аталған болжамдардың эмпирикалық тұрғыдан расталмайтынын көрсетеді. Аймақта “қосарланған тәуелділік” деп сипаттауға болатын тұрақты құрылым қалыптасқан: Ресей аймақтық елдермен қарым-қатынаста институционалдық және инфрақұрылымдық иерархияларға сенім артса, Қытай нарықтық және қаржылық байланыстарға жүгінеді. Нәтижесінде,аталмыш мемлекеттердің біреуінің ықпалының төмендеуі екіншісінің аймақтағы ықпалының өсуіне алып келеді. Сапалық процесс-трейсинг, сауда және қарыз деректері,

аймақтық ұйымдарға мүшелік сынды мәліметтер және «шок-тесттер» (Ресейге қарсы санкциялар, Қытайдың сыртқы несиелеуінің қысқаруы, COVID-19 сауда және жеткізу тізбектерінің дағдарысы) арқылы мақала бір акторға тәуелділікті азайту әрекеттері екінші акторға тәуелділікті күшейтетінін дәлелдейді.

Тірек сөздер: қосарланған тәуелділік, Орталық Азия, саяси экономика, иерархия және институттар, сыртқы шоктар

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Information about author:

Seitkozha Y.Y. - PhD student of the EP “International Relations”, Kazakh Ablai khan University of International Relations and World Languages, Almaty, Kazakhstan, e-mail: elnur.yermek@gmail.com

Автор туралы мәлімет:

Сейтқожа Е.Е. - PhD докторанты, Абылай хан атындағы Қазақ халықаралық қатынастар және әлем тілдері университеті, Алматы, Қазақстан, e-mail: elnur.yermek@gmail.com

Сведения об авторе:

Сейтқожа Е.Е. - PhD докторант, Казахский университет международных отношений и мировых языков имени Абылай хана, Алматы, Казахстан, e-mail: elnur.yermek@gmail.com