



Central Asian Countries Amid Global Militarization

Kanat MAKHANOV

Eurasian Research Institute, Kazakhstan

According to data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), global military expenditure reached unprecedented levels between 2022 and 2024, consistently exceeding \$2.4 trillion per year, representing approximately 2.3% of global GDP. In 2024, this share rose to 2.5%, marking the highest level since the end of the Cold War. Military spending accounted for 7.1% of total government expenditure in 2024, while per capita military expenditure reached \$334 - the highest figure recorded since 1990 (SIPRI, 2025). This upward trend is evident across nearly all regions, with particularly sharp increases in Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East.

Although ongoing conflicts, such as the Russia-Ukraine war and recurrent escalations in the Middle East, appear to be the principal drivers of these dynamics, the conditions for such an increase had been established well before these crises erupted. The global trend toward militarization has been reinforced by multiple factors: enduring instability in the Middle East, intensifying U.S.-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific, the emergence of new regional defense alignments, insecurity linked to climate change and weak governance, as well as recurrent cycles of arms modernization.

This broader process of global militarization is often interpreted within international relations theory through the lens of the “security dilemma.” The concept describes a chain reaction whereby states, motivated by concerns for their own security, expand military capacities or strengthen alliances. While these measures are usually intended for defense, other states, unable to ascertain intentions with certainty, tend to interpret them as offensive. Their response, typically an expansion of their own military capabilities, is again perceived as

threatening by the original actor. This recursive dynamic produces a spiral of mistrust and reciprocal armament, escalating tensions and heightening the risk of conflict, even in the absence of deliberate aggressive intent.

Central Asia is situated in a highly militarized geopolitical environment, bordering Russia, China, and indirectly NATO through Türkiye, as well as Afghanistan, where political authority is sustained largely through paramilitary structures. In 2024, the region’s combined military expenditure amounted to approximately \$1.9 billion, representing a 5.5% decline compared to 2023 and a 25% decrease over the past nine years (uz.kursiv.media, 2025). This relative contraction places Central Asia at a structural disadvantage within the framework of the “security dilemma,” as nearly all surrounding powers allocate a larger share of their GDP to defense and have maintained a steady trajectory of militarization. In 2024, Russia devoted an estimated 7.1% of GDP to military spending, while China allocated 1.7%, Iran nearly 2.0%, India 2.3%, and Pakistan about 2.7% (SIPRI, 2025).

By contrast, Central Asia’s aggregate military spending in 2024 reached \$6.57 billion, equivalent to just 1.32% of the region’s GDP. Significant intraregional variations are visible: Tajikistan recorded the highest share of GDP devoted to the military at 3.14% (around \$446 million), followed by Uzbekistan at 2.44% (\$2.8 billion), Turkmenistan at 1.71% (\$1.1 billion), and Kyrgyzstan at 1.27% (\$222 million). Kazakhstan reported the lowest ratio, with military spending equal to 0.69% of GDP (\$2.0 billion) (Uz.kursiv.media, 2025; World Bank, 2025). Although military budgets in Central Asia have generally increased in recent years, reflecting the global trend, the scale and pace

of this growth remain limited in comparison to the heavily militarized powers on the region's periphery. Consequently, Central Asian states remain in a weaker position in the evolving security landscape.

Another persistent limitation of the armed forces in Central Asia lies in their outdated structure and the absence of substantial modernization since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. All five states inherited extensive but aging arsenals in 1991, largely composed of Soviet-era aircraft, armored vehicles, artillery, and air defense systems that remain in service today. Much of this equipment is now between 30 and 50 years old, characterized by minimal upgrades, shortages of spare parts, and weak interoperability with contemporary platforms. Limited diversification has begun, primarily through acquisitions from Türkiye (notably drones and electronic systems) and China (vehicles and UAVs). Yet, the overall scale of procurement remains modest. Collectively, the Central Asian states account for well below 1% of global arms imports (SIPRI, 2024), and these volumes increased only slightly after 2022. Consequently, military modernization has not been treated as a strategic priority in the region and continues to occupy a secondary position within national defense agendas.

Local defense industries across Central Asia remain confined to light arms production, basic assembly, and repair, with no state possessing the capacity to design or manufacture modern tanks, aircraft, or missile systems. Kazakhstan represents the most advanced case, primarily through joint ventures with Türkiye and South Africa, yet even there, technological sovereignty remains marginal. The region's aggregate military-industrial output is modest, amounting to only a few hundred million USD annually, and is largely concentrated in low-complexity manufacturing and licensed assembly. None of the Central Asian states produces advanced defense systems, and their industries remain structurally dependent on external technological inputs. This dependency reinforces the region's overall military vulnerability, leaving it comparatively weaker and more exposed in a security environment increasingly defined by militarization among neighboring powers.

Referring to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan collectively in a military-cooperation context is highly complex. There is no unified Central Asian defense framework or multilateral military alliance encompassing all five states. Instead, security cooperation remains fragmented and structured through selective bilateral arrangements or external alignments such as the CSTO with Russia, the SCO with China, and the OTS with Türkiye. This diversity reflects not only differing threat perceptions but also divergent foreign-policy orientations across the region. Although relations among the Central Asian states are generally cooperative, they can at times be marked by latent tensions. As seen in the recent border clashes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, such tensions may occasionally escalate into open confrontations. Outstanding issues in the border delimitation process, particularly in the densely populated southern areas, where enclaves, interwoven settlements, and competition over scarce resources such as water and pastures persist - continue to generate periodic disputes. Consequently, the likelihood of intra-regional conflict rooted in unresolved territorial and resource-related issues may, at times, be higher than the risk of external aggression from surrounding great powers.

Given the position of the Central Asian states, which are still equipped with outdated armament, possessing only limited domestic production, and facing constrained access to advanced technologies, one of the urgent needs is comprehensive military modernization. Raising military spending to a level that allows them to keep pace with neighboring powers, while prioritizing diversification, the adoption of modern technologies, and, where possible, the localization of production, is becoming a strategic necessity. In this context, expanding cooperation with Türkiye in the security sphere through the existing institutional framework of the OTS emerges as the most practical and efficient path for a number of reasons. Türkiye is a safe partner within the Russia-China power balance, a position that aligns well with the balanced diplomatic paradigm of the Central Asian governments. The OTS, strengthened by three decades of steady cooperation between

Türkiye and the region, already provides an institutional setting that can support such engagement. Moreover, Türkiye has been actively expanding its defense-industrial capacity and is seeking to consolidate its place in the global market for reliable, high-quality military equipment. Turkish defense exports, for example, have more than tripled in four years from \$2.3 billion in 2020 to over \$7.1 billion in 2024 (Dincel, 2025). Within this framework, the intensification of cooperation can take diverse forms, ranging from officer education and the exchange of operational experience to the localized production of selected types of military equipment.

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