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FRANCE IN CENTRAL ASIA: BETWEEN DIPLOMACY, INVESTMENTS, AND CULTURAL INFLUENCE

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Abstract. France considers Central Asia a strategically significant region, employing economic, diplomatic, and cultural instruments to strengthen its influence. In recent years, Paris has intensified its presence in the region, aiming to diversify foreign policy ties, promote European values, and enhance economic cooperation.

This article examines the key dimensions of France's engagement with Central Asian states, including economic partnerships in the energy sector, infrastructure projects, educational initiatives, and cultural diplomacy. Particular attention is given to the role of French companies, such as TotalEnergies and Orano, in energy cooperation, as well as France's efforts to expand Francophone education and cultural connections in the region.

Furthermore, the study explores the primary challenges France faces in Central Asia, including competition from Russia and China, geographical remoteness, and limited diplomatic and economic resources. The article outlines potential scenarios for the future development of France's strategy in the region, including the expansion of environmentally sustainable projects, the deepening of economic cooperation, and the strengthening of cultural engagement.

The findings indicate that despite existing constraints, France remains an important yet secondary actor in Central Asia. The long-term prospects of its influence will depend on its ability to adapt to evolving geopolitical dynamics and offer competitive forms of engagement to the region's states.

Key words: France, Central Asia, foreign policy, economic cooperation, energy sector, cultural diplomacy, soft power, geopolitical competition, international relations

Introduction

France has traditionally regarded Central Asia as a strategically significant region for implementing its concept of "soft power." This interest is driven by a combination of economic opportunities, geopolitical considerations, and cultural ties. Central Asian states, endowed with abundant natural resources, rapidly developing infrastructure, and an increasing role in international affairs, represent a region of substantial importance for Paris—not only in terms of economic partnerships but also as a means of expanding its diplomatic influence [1].

In recent years, France's presence in the region has significantly increased, a development influenced by shifts in the global balance of power, intensifying competition among major international actors, and the necessity of diversifying strategic partnerships. France seeks to strengthen its influence through economic cooperation, cultural initiatives, educational programs, and political dialogue. At the same time, Paris must navigate the complexities of bilateral relations with individual Central Asian nations while balancing the interests of other key international players, including Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union.

This article examines the key dimensions of France's engagement with Central Asia, analyzing Paris's economic and diplomatic initiatives while assessing the prospects for further cooperation in light of evolving geopolitical dynamics.

Materials and Methods

This study employs an interdisciplinary approach to analyzing France's engagement with Central Asian countries, integrating economic, political, and cultural dimensions of cooperation. The research is based on the following methodological framework:

Content Analysis of Media and Expert Publications – A systematic review of articles from international and regional media outlets, analytical reports from research institutions, and expert opinions in the fields of international relations and economics.

Comparative Analysis – An assessment of France's strategies in Central Asia in comparison with similar initiatives undertaken by other international actors, including the European Union, China, Russia, and the United States.

Historical and Logical Method – Applied to trace the evolution of France's relations with Central Asian countries and to identify key factors that have influenced the transformation of French policy in the region.

This comprehensive methodological approach allows for a holistic analysis of France's interactions with Central Asia, facilitating the identification of key trends and assessing prospects for future cooperation.

Results and Discussion

France has been actively developing cultural and educational cooperation with Central Asia, utilizing soft power tools to strengthen its presence in the region. In recent years, this topic has attracted the attention of researchers analyzing diplomatic strategies, economic cooperation, and France's cultural influence on Central Asian republics.

France views cultural diplomacy as a key instrument of influence in Central Asia, seeking to promote the French language, educational programs, and cultural initiatives. According to the study by Sarybayev and Dikanbayeva (2022), France's soft power is evident in its support for Francophone educational programs, the organization of French-language film festivals and literary events, and the activities of French cultural institutes in the region [2]. However,

researchers note that France's influence is constrained by competition from Russia, China, and English-speaking countries.

Garbuzarova (2023) highlights that France places significant emphasis on educational cooperation, particularly in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, where joint university programs are being developed, and the number of students studying in France is increasing [3]. However, the study shows that Francophone influence in the region remains limited due to the dominance of English and Russian in education.

Klinova, Kondratyev, and Kharitonova (2024) argue that France's educational initiatives are aimed at shaping a new generation of elites aligned with European values. Specifically, French grant programs and academic exchanges contribute to strengthening humanitarian ties between France and Central Asia [4].

Fawn, Kluczewska, and Korneev [5] provide a broader perspective on EU–Central Asian interactions, analyzing the perceptions, interests, and practices that shape engagement strategies. They argue that while the EU—and by extension, France—advocates for governance reforms, rule of law, and human rights promotion, regional actors often perceive European initiatives as secondary to the more immediate economic and security benefits provided by Russia and China. The study highlights that European cultural diplomacy efforts, including those led by France, face structural limitations due to competing influences and local preferences for pragmatic partnerships.

An analysis of contemporary research indicates that France continues to develop cultural and educational cooperation with Central Asia but faces several limitations. The main challenges include competition from other global powers, the low level of French language proficiency in the region, and limited diplomatic resources. At the same time, experts note that expanding educational programs and cultural initiatives could serve as an effective tool for strengthening France's long-term position in the region.

Economic cooperation between France and Central Asia

France has been steadily increasing its economic engagement with Central Asian countries, particularly Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which are key economic players in the region. The French strategy in the region focuses on trade, investment and resource diversification, aimed at reducing dependence on traditional suppliers and strengthening France's role as an alternative partner [3].

Key economic sectors of cooperation:

Energy sector

France plays a crucial role in the energy sector of Central Asia, with a particular focus on oil, gas and uranium production. TotalEnergies is involved in the development of oil and gas fields in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Orano (formerly Areva) has invested heavily in Kazakhstan's uranium industry, leveraging the country's status as the world's largest uranium producer [4]. French investments are particularly relevant as France seeks to offset its declining influence in the African energy sector.

In October 2023, French President Emmanuel Macron visited Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, an important step in France's strategy to strengthen its influence in Central Asia. The visit highlighted France's efforts to strengthen economic cooperation, secure energy supplies, and assert its geopolitical presence in a region traditionally dominated by Russia and China.

The main objective of Macron's visit was to diversify France's uranium sources, as the country seeks to reduce its dependence on Niger after a military coup disrupted supplies. Kazakhstan, the world's largest uranium producer, has become a key partner in ensuring France's nuclear energy security [6].

During the visit, Macron signed agreements aimed at expanding cooperation between French energy companies such as Orano and Kazakh uranium suppliers.

Macron's visit to Central Asia in 2023 underscored France's commitment to securing energy resources, expanding economic ties and establishing itself as a strategic partner in a region where global powers are competing for influence. The visit is therefore expected to deepen France's long-term engagement with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, positioning the country as a key European player in Central Asia's changing geopolitical landscape.

Infrastructure and Transport

France is expanding its presence in Central Asia's transport and infrastructure sectors, with a focus on railway modernization and logistics.

Alstom has invested in Kazakhstan's railway infrastructure and locomotive production, strengthening connectivity within the region [3].

The European Union, alongside France, is supporting the development of alternative transport corridors to bypass Russian routes, particularly in light of recent geopolitical tensions [4].

Renewable Energy and Sustainability

France is increasingly focusing on renewable energy projects, particularly solar and wind farms.

TotalEnergies has launched green energy initiatives in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, aligning with regional governments' sustainability goals [4].

French companies are exploring opportunities in nuclear energy cooperation, particularly in Kazakhstan, where local authorities seek access to French nuclear technology for future power plant projects.

Agro-Industrial Cooperation

France supplies agricultural machinery, technologies, and food products to Central Asian markets.

Despite these efforts, agricultural trade remains limited due to competition from Russia, China, and Turkey [2].

Challenges to Economic Cooperation

Geographical Distance: France's logistical constraints make trade with Central Asia less competitive compared to regional players like China and Russia.

Dominance of Alternative Actors: Russia and China maintain strong economic ties with Central Asia, often overshadowing France's influence [3].

Limited Business Awareness: Many French companies are unaware of investment opportunities in Central Asia, leading to underdeveloped economic engagement.

To enhance its economic influence in Central Asia, France can:

Expand green energy and sustainability projects to align with regional economic priorities.

Increase investment in digital technologies and innovation to diversify trade beyond traditional sectors.

Strengthen bilateral and EU-led economic partnerships to offer an alternative to Russian and Chinese dominance.

France's economic engagement with Central Asia is expanding, particularly in energy, infrastructure, and renewable resources. However, the success of its strategy depends on overcoming logistical challenges, increasing investment efforts, and positioning itself as a viable alternative to dominant regional players.

France's Geopolitical Influence in Central Asia

France views Central Asia as a strategically important region where it can exert influence through diplomatic, economic and cultural initiatives. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, France has consistently engaged with the Central Asian countries, recognizing their independence early on and strengthening political and economic ties. However, with the rise of geopolitical competition, France has found it difficult to maintain and expand its presence [3].

France actively supports the EU-Central Asia cooperation framework by participating in regional summits and promoting European values.

France was one of the first European countries to recognize the independence of the Central Asian republics, establishing diplomatic missions and strengthening bilateral relations [3].

The 2023 Joint Roadmap for Deepening EU-Central Asia Ties reflects France's growing interest in countering Russian and Chinese dominance in the region [4].

France has limited direct military involvement in Central Asia, but participates in regional security dialogues, particularly on counterterrorism and Afghan security.

France promotes non-military security initiatives, including border management programs and law enforcement training [3].

France seeks to reduce Central Asia's dependence on Russian and Chinese influence by expanding economic and diplomatic partnerships.

The EU and France use trade agreements and investment incentives as geopolitical tools to provide Central Asia with alternatives to Russian and Chinese initiatives [4].

However, France's ability to act as a counterweight is limited by its economic limitations and the overwhelming influence of Russia on security issues and China on economic issues [2].

Unlike Russia and China, France does not have historical or geographical advantages in the region.

Although France has been increasing its investments in the region, its trade volume remains much lower than that of Russia or China. France has no military bases or significant defense cooperation agreements in Central Asia, relying instead on EU-led initiatives.

To enhance its geopolitical influence, France could:

Deepen diplomatic engagement by expanding its role in regional governance and mediation efforts.

Use EU partnerships to create long-term investment programs aligned with Central Asia's development priorities.

Strengthen cultural and educational cooperation to build regional elites that are aligned with European values.

During his visit in 2023, Macron reaffirmed France's support for Kazakhstan's independent foreign policy, emphasizing the country's role in balancing relations between Russia, China, and Western countries [6].

Discussions with Uzbekistan's leadership focused on expanding economic cooperation and cultural exchanges, reinforcing France's long-term commitment to the region [6].

Competition for Regional Influence

Macron's visit underscores France's ambitions to counter the growing influence of China, Russia, and Turkey in Central Asia. By developing closer ties with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, France aims to strengthen its geopolitical position in the region.

The visit was also in line with the EU's broader strategy of increasing engagement with Central Asia as a means of reducing dependence on Russian energy and trade routes [6].

Despite its efforts, France remains a minor geopolitical player in Central Asia, primarily relying on soft power and economic diplomacy. However, its potential as a countervailing force against Russian and Chinese dominance depends on its ability to expand its diplomatic presence and economic engagement.

Cultural and Educational Cooperation between France and Central Asia

France actively uses cultural diplomacy as a means of strengthening its presence in Central Asia, using various soft power instruments such as educational programs, language promotion, and cultural initiatives. This engagement is in line with France's broader strategy to strengthen its influence in the region and position itself as a key European partner for Central Asian countries.

One of the main instruments of French cultural influence in Central Asia is education. France has established partnerships with universities in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, offering French-language programs and scholarships to students pursuing higher education in France. These efforts aim to develop long-term intellectual and professional ties between France and the region [2].

Furthermore, France has expanded the availability of French language courses through collaborations with local universities and the Alliance Française network. The French government provides scholarships and exchange programs, such as the Eiffel Excellence Scholarship Program, to encourage Central Asian students to study in France.

Joint research initiatives and academic partnerships with institutions in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are expanding, particularly in the fields of energy, environmental sciences, and humanities [3].

Despite these efforts, challenges remain as English and Russian remain the dominant languages of higher education in Central Asia, limiting the expansion of French-language instruction.

Cultural Initiatives and the Impact of Francophonie

France promotes its cultural heritage and values in Central Asia through various initiatives.

France operates cultural centers in major cities such as Almaty, Tashkent, and Bishkek, hosting exhibitions, film festivals, and literary events.

The French government supports local French-speaking associations and organizes annual events such as Francophonie Month to promote the French language and culture. French film festivals and theatre performances are regularly organized to introduce Central Asian audiences to contemporary and classic French cinema [5].

However, French cultural influence remains limited compared to Russia and China, which have a stronger media presence and deeper historical ties to the region. The growing preference for English and Chinese among Central Asian youth also poses a challenge to France's long-term cultural outreach.

Challenges and Future Prospects

Although France has made progress in expanding cultural and educational cooperation with Central Asia, its efforts are hampered by several obstacles:

- the dominance of English and Russian in education and business reduces demand for French language learning;
- unlike China's Confucius Institutes or Russia's Rossotrudnichestvo, France's network of cultural institutions in Central Asia remains relatively small;
- France's limited economic and military involvement in the region makes it a secondary partner compared to larger geopolitical players such as China, Russia, and the EU [4].

Moving forward, France can strengthen its cultural diplomacy by:

Increasing funding for French language programs and educational scholarships.

Strengthening cooperation with European and Central Asian partners to promote cultural exchange.

Expanding digital cultural outreach to attract younger audiences.

Overall, while France has established a strong presence in the cultural and educational spheres of Central Asia, its long-term influence will depend on its ability to compete with other global powers and effectively integrate into the region's evolving educational landscape.

Prospects for French Engagement in Central Asia

France is increasingly focusing on strengthening its economic and

diplomatic presence in Central Asia. As regional powers such as China and Russia dominate the geopolitical landscape, France seeks to establish itself as a strategic alternative through investments in energy, infrastructure and cultural diplomacy [3].

Expanding economic ties include key opportunities such as:

- France's investments in renewable energy and nuclear energy are growing, especially in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan [4];
- The French government is actively pursuing trade diversification, positioning itself as a key partner in the EU's Central Asia strategy [2];
- France plays a key role in the EU-Central Asia platform, promoting European policies on governance, climate change and trade;
- By strengthening relations with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, France seeks to counterbalance Russia's geopolitical dominance;
- France is expanding French-language education programs, providing scholarships and promoting academic exchanges.

The development of French cultural institutions in the region aims to strengthen soft power participation and attract younger generations to European education.

Challenges France Faces in Central Asia

- France faces strong competition from China and Russia, which have deeper historical, economic and security ties to the region.
- The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), actively supported by China, has made Chinese investment much more attractive than French alternatives [2].
- While French companies such as TotalEnergies and Orano have made inroads into energy and infrastructure, their overall investments pale in comparison to Chinese and Russian funding [4].
- Trade logistics remain a significant barrier due to the lack of direct transport routes between France and Central Asia.
- Unlike Russia, which has a military presence in the region, and China, which offers extensive economic assistance, France does not have direct security partnerships with Central Asian states [7].

Thus, France has the potential to expand its influence in Central Asia through targeted investments in energy, trade, and cultural diplomacy. However, to compete with dominant regional players such as China and Russia, France must strengthen economic incentives, improve transport connectivity, and develop stronger security partnerships. Whether France can successfully position itself as a key player in Central Asia will depend on its ability to overcome geopolitical constraints and adapt to the region's changing economic landscape.

Conclusion

France has been steadily developing its cooperation with Central Asian countries, leveraging soft power instruments, economic engagement, and diplomatic initiatives. Despite its geographical remoteness and relatively limited economic ties, Paris aims to strengthen its presence in the region while

competing with major global actors such as Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union.

France's economic partnership with Central Asia is concentrated in the energy, infrastructure, and agricultural sectors; however, the scale of French investments remains modest. Politically, France's influence is constrained, yet it participates in multilateral initiatives and engages in regional security cooperation. In cultural and educational domains, Paris has achieved some success, but the French language and educational programs remain less popular than their English, Russian, and Chinese counterparts.

The prospects for French influence in Central Asia depend on its ability to adapt its strategy to evolving geopolitical dynamics. Expanding economic projects, deepening educational initiatives, and increasing participation in regional political processes could strengthen France's position. However, achieving significant results will require overcoming structural limitations and offering more attractive cooperation frameworks for Central Asian states.

Overall, France remains an important but secondary player in Central Asia. The future success of its regional strategy will largely depend on its willingness to increase investments and enhance diplomatic engagement in response to the shifting global landscape.

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ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯДАҒЫ ФРАНЦИЯ: ДИПЛОМАТИЯ, ИНВЕСТИЦИЯ ЖӘНЕ МӘДЕНИ ЫҚПАЛ АРАСЫНДА

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Аңдатпа. Франция өзінің ықпалын нығайту үшін экономикалық, дипломатиялық және мәдени құралдарды қолдана отырып, Орталық Азияны стратегиялық маңызды аймақ ретінде қарастырады. Соңғы жылдары Париж сыртқы саяси байланыстарды әртараптандыруға, еуропалық құндылықтарды ілгерілетуге және экономикалық ынтымақтастықты нығайтуға ұмтылып, аймақтағы қатысуын күшейтті.

Мақалада Францияның энергетика секторындағы экономикалық әріптестікті, инфракұрылымдық жобаларды, білім беру бастамаларын және мәдени дипломатияны қоса алғанда, Орталық Азия мемлекеттерімен өзара іс-қимылының негізгі бағыттары талданады. TotalEnergies және Orano сияқты француз компанияларының энергетикалық ынтымақтастықтағы рөліне, сондай-ақ Францияның аймақтағы франкофондық білім мен мәдени байланыстарды дамытуға бағытталған күш-жігеріне ерекше назар аударылады.

Сонымен қатар, Францияның Орталық Азияда кездесетін негізгі сынқатерлері қарастырылады: Ресей мен Қытайдың бәсекелестігі, географиялық қашықтық, дипломатиялық және экономикалық ресурстардың шектеулілігі. Мақалада экологиялық тұрақты жобаларды кеңейту, экономикалық ынтымақтастықты тереңдету және мәдени қатысуды күшейтуді қоса алғанда, аймақтағы Француз стратегиясын одан әрі дамытудың мүмкін сценарийлері ұсынылған.

Зерттеу нәтижелері көрсеткендей, қолданыстағы шектеулерге қарамастан, Франция Орталық Азиядағы маңызды, бірақ кішігірім актор болып қала береді. Оның ықпалының ұзақ мерзімді перспективалары өзгермелі геосаяси жағдайларға бейімделу және өңір елдеріне өзара ісқимылдың бәсекелестік нысандарын ұсыну қабілетіне байланысты болады.

Тірек сөздер: Франция, Орталық Азия, сыртқы саясат, экономикалық ынтымақтастық, энергетика, мәдени дипломатия, жұмсақ күш, геосаяси бәсекелестік, халықаралық қатынастар

ФРАНЦИЯ В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ: МЕЖДУ ДИПЛОМАТИЕЙ, ИНВЕСТИЦИЯМИ И КУЛЬТУРНЫМ ВЛИЯНИЕМ

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Аннотация. Франция рассматривает Центральную Азию как стратегически важный регион, используя экономические, дипломатические и культурные инструменты для укрепления своего влияния. В последние годы Париж активизировал своё присутствие в регионе, стремясь диверсифицировать внешнеполитические связи, продвигать европейские ценности и укреплять экономическое сотрудничество.

В статье анализируются ключевые направления взаимодействия Франции с государствами Центральной Азии, включая экономическое партнёрство в энергетическом секторе, инфраструктурные проекты, образовательные инициативы и культурную дипломатию. Особое внимание уделяется роли французских компаний, таких как TotalEnergies и Orano, в энергетическом сотрудничестве, а также усилиям Франции по развитию франкоязычного образования и культурных связей в регионе.

Кроме того, рассматриваются основные вызовы, с которыми сталкивается Франция в Центральной Азии: конкуренция со стороны России и Китая, географическая удалённость, ограниченность дипломатических и экономических ресурсов. В статье предлагаются возможные сценарии дальнейшего развития французской стратегии в регионе, включая расширение экологически устойчивых проектов, углубление экономического сотрудничества и усиление культурного присутствия.

Результаты исследования показывают, что, несмотря на существующие ограничения, Франция остаётся важным, хотя и второстепенным актором в Центральной Азии. Долгосрочные перспективы её влияния будут зависеть от способности адаптироваться к меняющимся геополитическим условиям и предложить странам региона конкурентные формы взаимодействия.

Ключевые слова: Франция, Центральная Азия, внешняя политика, экономическое сотрудничество, энергетический сектор, культурная дипломатия, мягкая сила, геополитическая конкуренция, международные отношения

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