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## **Chapter 3: The Pandemic as a Litmus Test for (Dis)Engagement of External Powers in Central Asia**

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### **Abstract**

This study provides an empirical overview of pandemic-related external assistance to the Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan by partner countries and international organisations between March and September 2020. This state-of-the-art review of Central Asia official development assistance extends to pledged funds beyond this period. The systemic comparison of donors suggests that there is no single actor that stands out as a champion of economic recovery; these are mostly small, token contributions. By contrast, targeted medical assistance has been far more significant, albeit focused on short-term crisis management of the pandemic. There has been only a handful of assistance projects that reflect a long-term stake in Central Asia's economic recovery and the pandemic showed little evidence of the Great Game competition for regional geopolitical influence. Thus, the relations between big powers and Central Asia need to be reconsidered and given a new meaning that would better reflect the interests and interaction between the two parties. The pandemic showed that these relations were mainly pragmatic during the global health crisis with no external partner showing interest in projecting and expanding strategic influence on the region. The region needs to build its internal resilience against new crises and avoid excessive reliance on external assistance in the long term.

## Highlights

- External partners – including China, Russia, the US – focus on humanitarian and emergency assistance to Central Asia.
- Only the EU stands out for providing various long-term financial packages aimed at economic recovery; however, even these remain limited in scope.
- The EU has pledged €124 million to Central Asia; in contrast, it will allocate €800 million to the ASEAN region.
- International organisations could direct their efforts towards long-term economic recovery in Central Asia.
- The region needs to harmonise external development assistance with domestic reforms to maximise impact.

## Introduction

The pandemic hit the economy of both developed and developing nations badly, with Central Asia receiving a double blow as they suffered domestically and from the disruption of remittances. As a result, the importance of official development assistance in dealing with the immediate crisis triggered by the pandemic has risen significantly.

Four countries of the region – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – have faced severe social and economic consequences of the pandemic and received financial and humanitarian assistance from a variety of partners. Assuming “aid diplomacy” has become a lever of influence in Central Asia, in our study, we analyse *who* assisted these Central Asian countries to deal with the pandemic, and *how*, addressing two research questions:

- Have external partners used the pandemic as an opportunity to strengthen their partnership with Central Asia and expand their influence in the region?
- What are the consequences of external powers’ engagement or the lack thereof with Central Asia?

For centuries, Central Asia was the theatre of competition and collision between great powers. The famous Great Game and more recently the New Great Game are concepts informed by the geopolitics of Central Asia.<sup>19</sup> Our assumption is that the pandemic should have been an opportunity for those external powers who wish to strengthen their presence and influence in the region.

Among relevant senior stakeholders, the EU has a singularly articulated strategic narrative called "The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership". Adopted in 2019, the EU strategic blueprint outlines major cooperation areas focusing mainly on connectivity, complemented by EU member state strategies towards the region that often pursue their own objectives in parallel or independently from the overall framework. In 2020, the US published its own equivalent narrative entitled "United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity". The American blueprint envisages strengthening sovereignty and connectivity of Central Asian states, including Afghanistan. That does not appear to be linked or integrated with the European roadmap.

China's strategic narrative is articulated through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that includes a range of infrastructure projects. That vision explores synergies but is not necessarily aligned with the Russian vision for the region, as Moscow pursues the advancement of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) project, maintains military presence and draws on historical ties with the region. Other countries such as Iran, Turkey and others have their own interests, positioning themselves to gain regional advantages by exploiting greater geopolitical narratives to pursue their own objectives.

Central Asia's external stakeholders – China, the EU, Russia and the US – struggle to cope with the impact of the pandemic, prioritising their domestic agenda of economic recovery rather than international assistance. Be that as it may, it is interesting to compare their attitude towards the region in this time of crisis. Our study reviews the

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<sup>19</sup> Cooley, A. (2012). *Great Games, Local Rules*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Kim, Y. and Indeo, F. (2013). The New Great Game in Central Asia Post 2014: The US "New Silk Road" Strategy and Sino-Russian Rivalry. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 46 (2): 275–286.

flow of humanitarian and financial assistance from these external stakeholders to the region, inclusive of multilateral agencies. It's assumed that if external partners consider Central Asia, or individual countries therein, of strategic significance, they would see the pandemic as an opportunity to expand their foothold in Central Asia by increasing financial investment. It thus holds an economic opportunity to stretch their might to advance their agenda amid vulnerable local economies and societies. That investment would be certain to yield diplomatic, economic and geopolitical benefits.

Furthermore, we review cooperation between countries in the region, systematically collecting data on intra-regional pandemic-related assistance, largely drawn from publicly accessible secondary sources: reports of international organisations, local and international media sources, and official statistics. We covered the period March to September 2020. However, we acknowledge that this data may not be exhaustive due to limited data availability in some countries or delays in communicating official policy. This review may also miss other forms of indirect assistance such as debt write-offs, debt restructuring, investment in government bonds, and other financial interventions. For instance, many countries engaged in China's BRI have called for a review of credits and loans for BRI projects as the crisis unfolds. Although China has been so far reluctant to discuss BRI-related debt restructuring, this discussion is likely to be renewed.

#### [Assistance from Partner Countries](#)

China, the EU, Russia and the US have been the powers providing the most substantial medical and humanitarian aid packages throughout the region (see Table 1). In addition, the UAE has stepped in with a generous programme covering the whole Central Asian region. Other countries employed a more selective approach, focusing on specific countries.

Chinese "mask diplomacy" was evenly dispersed across the region, with medical missions that included experienced doctors, supplies and equipment. Russia focused its assistance for EEU states, such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, sending medical

missions with qualified professionals and supplies. US assistance was greater in Kazakhstan, while support to Tajikistan has been rather limited.

The EU's approach to the region was more strategic, addressing socio-economic priorities and countering the long-term impact of the pandemic on local economies, particularly in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The German COVID-19-related assistance stands out as the most significant among EU member states, with €3.55 million disbursed to Kyrgyzstan alone as part of the "Team Europe" programme. Other non-EU countries with a sizeable contribution are Turkey, the Republic of Korea and Japan.

India is often claimed to be a regional player in Central Asia. However, India has regarded the region as a destination for health tourism and quality education services and it did not seize the opportunity of the COVID-19 pandemic to advance its influence in Central Asia.

Therefore, by September 2020, the pandemic did not catalyse a redistribution of geopolitical influence. Although much-needed humanitarian and medical assistance was made available to the region, financial assistance packages have been moderate rather than "game-changing" in their significance.

Regionally, out of the four Central Asian countries, Uzbekistan took the lead in assistance initiatives, providing support to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and even Afghanistan. This provides promising prospects for regional cooperation beyond the current crisis.<sup>20</sup> To a lesser extent, the trend has been followed by Kazakhstan that emerged as a donor for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In addition, on 19 August 2020, the Kazakh Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced its plans to establish an aid agency – KazAID – to systematise official development assistance from Kazakhstan to Central Asian countries.<sup>21</sup> If implemented, this should lead to increased

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<sup>20</sup> Irnazarov, F. and Vakulchuk, R. (2020), "Discovering Opportunities in the Pandemic: Four Economic Response Scenarios for Central Asia", *The Silk Road Paper*, July issue.

<sup>21</sup> Kazakh Foreign Ministry to Create Agency to Systematize KazAID. *Astana Times*. 20 August 2020. <https://astanatimes.com/2020/08/kazakh-foreign-ministry-to-create-agency-to-systematize-kazaid/>

development aid from Kazakhstan to its neighbours. In general, these moves by Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan may set a new foreign policy trend within the region.

A less discussed aspect of regional and more broadly international aid are public opinion attitudes. One would assume that aid is accepted unconditionally. However, on Uzbek social media accounts, the idea that foreign aid funds motivated a second lockdown (July-August 2020) has been trending. The perennial issue of international aid misappropriation has also been discussed. Although there is a lot to be desired in that respect, overall, the management of international aid in the region during the pandemic has set a positive precedent, demonstrating that the region can manage international funds with an increased sense of accountability and transparency.

**Table 1. COVID-19 related assistance to Central Asia**

Donors	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Uzbekistan
<b>China</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A group of 10 Chinese doctors was sent to train local doctors in the fight against coronavirus.<sup>1</sup></li> <li>- 50,000 PCR test systems.</li> <li>- 30,000 sets of protective clothing.</li> <li>- 70,000 goggles.</li> <li>- 150,000 medical gloves.</li> <li>- 600,000 masks.</li> <li>- 1,000 thermal imagers.<sup>2</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A group of 10 Chinese doctors was sent to train local doctors in the fight against coronavirus.<sup>3</sup></li> <li>- 10,000 respiratory masks.</li> <li>- 100,000 disposable masks.</li> <li>- 1,000 personal protective equipment.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A group of 14 Chinese doctors was sent to train local doctors in the fight against coronavirus.</li> <li>- 15 ventilators, medicines, protective equipment for \$750,000.<sup>4</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A group of 15 Chinese doctors was sent to train local doctors in the fight against coronavirus.<sup>5</sup></li> <li>- Humanitarian aid in the form of medical masks and gloves, goggles and thermal imagers - 20 tons in total.<sup>6</sup></li> </ul>
<b>Russia</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Medicine.</li> <li>- Personal protective equipment.</li> <li>- Medical products.<sup>7</sup></li> </ul> <p>In total, humanitarian aid worth around \$2 million.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- PCR tests for 110,000 studies,</li> <li>- Reagents in the amount of 1.9 thousand pieces.</li> <li>- Visit of doctors and specialists of <i>Rospotrebnadzor</i> and the Ministry of Health of Russia.</li> <li>- A group of military doctors of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, who brought artificial ventilation devices, oxygen concentrators, pulse oximeters and other equipment.</li> <li>- A team of medical personnel from Bashkortostan of the Russian Federation to work in medical</li> </ul>	<p>Exact scope of assistance is unclear. There is only data that the Russian Federation sent 20,000 tests.<sup>10</sup></p>	<p>Russia sent doctors to share their expertise.<sup>11</sup></p>

		<p>institutions and provide advice.<sup>8</sup></p> <p>In total, 69 doctors came from Russia, who also brought:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 31 ventilators.</li> <li>- 125,000 masks.</li> <li>- 24,100 protective overalls, etc.</li> </ul> <p>In total, Russia provided material assistance worth around \$2.8 million.<sup>9</sup></p>		
<b>USA</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Laboratory materials and equipment worth \$300,000 through USAID.</li> <li>- Personal protective equipment and medical masks.<sup>12</sup></li> <li>- Organisation of trainings for doctors.</li> <li>- Implementation of clinical protocols.</li> </ul> <p>Total assistance worth \$6.8 million provided.<sup>13</sup></p>	<p>\$913,000 through USAID</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 10,000 masks,</li> <li>- 10,000 gloves,</li> <li>- 1,400 surgical gowns,</li> <li>- 200 goggles.<sup>16</sup></li> </ul>	<p>USAID and WHO provided medical equipment and PPE.<sup>14</sup></p>	<p>- 131.3 tons of food aid for almost \$400,000.<sup>15</sup></p>
<b>EU</b>	<p>At the end of July, the EU presented the project "Covid-19 in Central Asia: Response to the Crisis" (CACCR) worth €3 million; its main recipient will be Kazakhstan.<sup>17</sup></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- As part of the "Team Europe"* approach, a support package for Kyrgyzstan was prepared for a total amount of over €36 million. It includes a grant of €30.8 million for direct budget support.</li> <li>- The remaining €5.2 million are funds reoriented to ongoing projects and EU programmes in the Kyrgyz Republic.<sup>18</sup></li> </ul> <p>*Team Europe is designed to fight COVID-19 globally and was announced on 8 April, 2020. The EU, its member states, the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) are jointly committing more than €20 billion to the programme budget to support the efforts of countries around the world in their fight against the pandemic.</p>	<p>The EU planned to allocate up to €48 million.<sup>19</sup></p>	<p>The EU will provide €2.2 million for the health care system.</p> <p>In addition, the EU will also reorient a €5 million contribution to the Multi-Partner Trust Fund for the Aral Sea region. The EU will also support the country's economic recovery by accelerating payments of €21 million in the framework of budget support for the development of the agricultural sector. Also, up to €4 million will be spent on the socio-economic consequences of the crisis in the agricultural sector.<sup>20</sup></p> <p>EU provided for Uzbek border guards:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 830 protective suits,</li> <li>- 1,000 antiseptics,</li> <li>- 15,000 masks.<sup>21</sup></li> </ul>

<b>Germany</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Grant for €550,000 (through the GIZ).<sup>22</sup></li> <li>- Financial assistance for €3 million for the opening of an emergency clinic in Jalal-Abad (through KfW). Both projects are within the "Team Europe" programme, i.e. €3.55 million is included in the €36 million from the EU.<sup>23</sup></li> </ul>	<p>Germany purchased for €1 million:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Individual protection means.</li> <li>- Artificial lung ventilation devices.</li> <li>- Spare parts for ventilators and consumables.<sup>24</sup></li> </ul>	<p>Humanitarian aid in the form of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Oxygen cylinders.</li> <li>- Medical masks,</li> <li>- Wheelchairs and overalls.<sup>25</sup></li> </ul>
<b>Switzerland</b>		<p>Financial assistance in the amount of \$80,000 for the purchase of products through the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).<sup>26</sup></p>	<p>The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) provided extensive assistance in the form of medical equipment, masks and PPE.<sup>27</sup></p>	
<b>Belgium</b>		<p>Belgium sent aid in the form of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 1,000 pieces of X-ray films + 10 packs of reagents,</li> <li>- 10,000 sterile gloves,</li> <li>- antiviral drugs - 389 packages.</li> </ul> <p>For a total of about \$5,000.<sup>28</sup></p>		
<b>Poland</b>	<p>Humanitarian aid in the form of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 100,000 masks,</li> <li>- laptops for distance learning of school children.<sup>29</sup></li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A group of 16 Polish doctors was sent to train local doctors in the fight against coronavirus.<sup>30</sup></li> </ul>	
<b>Turkey</b>	<p>Humanitarian aid in the form of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 150,000 medical masks.</li> <li>- 50 face shields.</li> <li>- 100 goggles.</li> <li>- 300 overalls and disinfectants.<sup>31</sup></li> </ul>	<p>Humanitarian aid in the form of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 20 ventilators.</li> <li>- 50 oxygen concentrators.</li> <li>- 20,000 PCR test kits.</li> <li>- 20,000 reagent kits for detecting the virus.</li> <li>- 50,000 N95 protective masks.</li> <li>- 100,000 surgical masks.</li> <li>- 35,000 protective suits.</li> <li>- 2,000 protective visors and 10,000 packages of hydroxychloroquine.<sup>32</sup></li> </ul>		
<b>Iran</b>		<p>Iran sent 2 consignments of humanitarian aid with</p>	<p>Iran sent several consignments of humanitarian aid</p>	

		medical equipment in the form of: - Mechanical ventilation. - Tests. Pulse oximeters. <sup>33</sup>	to the Republic of Tajikistan.	
<b>Republic of Korea</b>	ROK transmitted: - 1,000 PPE in the amount of \$25,000. <sup>34</sup>	ROK sent: 3 units of anti-virus room cleaning equipment for \$8,400. These are 2 sets of positive and negative air pressure equipment for infectious diseases hospital and 1 multifunctional automatic room air control apparatus, - 20 devices for disinfection of premises, - 22,500 masks. <sup>35</sup>		ROK plans to allocate \$5 million.  - ROK dispatched 2 humanitarian aid supplies: for \$100,000 + \$66,000, mainly medical equipment. <sup>36</sup> - 206,000 + 144,000 medical masks were sent (2 flights). <sup>37</sup>
<b>Kazakhstan</b>		5,000 tons of flour were sent from Kazakhstan. <sup>38</sup>	5,000 tons of flour were sent from Kazakhstan. <sup>39</sup>	
<b>Japan</b>	Japan sent medicines to Kazakhstan. <sup>40</sup>	Japan will provide \$4.6 mln. in medical equipment assistance. <sup>41</sup>		\$1.9 million to expand UNDP's work to address the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. <sup>42</sup> Medical equipment worth \$4.6 million <sup>43</sup>
<b>Qatar</b>	PPE in the form of masks and suits. <sup>44</sup>	420 oxygen concentrators worth \$250,000. <sup>45</sup>		
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	Aid in the form of: - 2 million, masks, - 2 million gloves. <sup>46</sup>	Uzbekistan provided assistance in the form of: - 1,000 tons of flour. - 7,000 sets of medical protective suits. - 200 respirators N9., - 20,000 pairs of gloves. - 500 goggles. - 200 medical pyrometers. - 2,000 test systems.	- sent a group of Uzbek doctors (8 people) to assist Tajik doctors, - Delivered masks, PPE and equipment. <sup>47</sup> - Delivered 144 medical containers for the temporary hospital. <sup>48</sup>	
<b>UAE</b>	Humanitarian aid in the form of PPE and medical equipment, total of 17.7 tons. <sup>49</sup>	Humanitarian aid in the form of PPE and medical equipment. <sup>50</sup>	Humanitarian aid in the form of medicines. <sup>51</sup>	UAE sent 2 humanitarian aid supplies with food and medical equipment. <sup>52</sup>
<b>India</b>	Humanitarian aid in the form of medicines and equipment. <sup>53</sup>		Humanitarian aid in the form of medicines. <sup>54</sup>	

Source: Data compiled from various sources

### *Multilateral Assistance*

Beyond individual state actors, international organisations played a prominent role in extending assistance to Central Asia during the pandemic. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan received just over one billion dollars in multilateral assistance, whereas over \$500 million has been earmarked for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (Table 2). Soft loans have been provided by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank are the largest loan and grant providers in the region. Uzbekistan has been the only applicant to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), perhaps in an attempt to balance Russian and Chinese assistance.

Whether governments should obtain the credit lines they can access is explicitly questioned across the region. The deployment of a sporadic collection of loans not tied to a specific development blueprint has been criticised. In other words, these appear as largely “emotional loans” that did not abide by any quality benchmark of economic expediency and rationale. But taking what is on offer might be understandable. The rapid spread of coronavirus caught the entire world off guard, mounting pressure on health systems and domestic economies, thereby creating extraordinary expenditure. At the same time, the diffusion of COVID-19 accelerated the significance of pre-existing challenges faced by governments across the region: low public trust in government, under-digitalised economies, and the prevalence of the informal sector. While these challenges exacerbated the impact of the crisis, one may also see the pandemic as an opportunity to regain and advance public policy and public trust. Digitalisation is catching up, chronically underfinanced health systems are being supported, and this should positively affect public confidence in the long run.

Multilateral aid could be expanded to address long-term recovery needs in Central Asia. Until September 2020, most multilateral aid had a short-term crisis management scope. International organisations will now need to recognise the need for more broadly scoped assistance aimed at supporting necessary reforms, restarting

economies, thereby boosting the strength and resilience of economic recovery. Yet, overall assistance appears to be more weighed and targeted than that of major external powers.

Table 2. COVID-19 related loans and grants to Central Asia

<i>Loan</i>	Countries			
<i>Grant</i>				
	<b>Kazakhstan</b>	<b>Kyrgyzstan<sup>55</sup></b>	<b>Tajikistan</b>	<b>Uzbekistan</b>
<b>International Monetary Fund (IMF)</b>		About \$242 million in 2 tranches.	\$189.5 million in the form of a soft loan for a period of 10 years. <sup>56</sup>	\$375 million to reduce the negative impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the economy. <sup>57</sup>
	Kazakhstan plans to borrow \$1.087 billion. <sup>58</sup>	\$25 million received + \$69 million expected.		\$500 million for 15 years. <sup>59</sup> Out of these, Uzbekistan requested \$100 million for the modernisation and equipping of the health care system and SES. <sup>60</sup>
<b>Asian Development Bank (ADB)</b>		\$25 million + \$10.7 million expected.	Medical goods for a total amount of about \$100,000 in the form of a grant. <sup>61</sup> \$50 million grant from the COVID-19 Proactive Cost Response and Support Programme. <sup>62</sup>	
	\$10 million for the purchase of 236 ventilators. \$17 million for the purchase of 123 ventilators and other medical equipment.	\$21 million for the procurement of necessary medical and laboratory equipment, ambulances, mobile equipment and PPE.	\$11.3 million for emergency assistance to the population.	\$95 million to improve the national health care system, as well as support to the poor. \$200 million to provide the budget with additional funds. \$17 million improvement of the emergency medical care system.
<b>World Bank (WB)<sup>63</sup></b>		\$15 million in the form of a loan.		

<b>Islamic Development Bank (IsDB)</b>			Due to the saved funds from some investment projects being implemented in Tajikistan, \$9.4 million will be allocated to combat COVID-19. <sup>64</sup>	
				Uzbekistan requested a \$100 million loan for modernisation and equipping of the healthcare system and SES. <sup>65</sup>
<b>Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)</b>		\$100 million loan for 20 years at 1% per annum with a grace period of 10 years. <sup>66</sup>	Financial loan of \$50 million to counter the impact of the spread of COVID-19. <sup>67</sup>	
<b>Eurasian Fund for Stabilisation and Development (EADB)</b>			\$600,000 as grant money to support vulnerable groups of the population. <sup>68</sup>	
<b>United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)</b>			Humanitarian aid in the form of masks and equipment. <sup>69</sup>	
<b>Aga Khan Health Service (AKDN)</b>				

Source: Data compiled from various sources

### *Geopolitical Rivalry Tested*

The Great Game concept has driven the narrative in understanding Central Asian politics both in academic publications and mass media for a long time. However, the unfolding pandemic served as a litmus test of the commitment to the region by foreign partners.

With the Great Game lens on, it was envisaged that Russia would seek to play a dominant role, alluring Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). However, Russia's economy was stagnating before the pandemic and the global health crisis compounded these domestic challenges: in that context, Central Asia's strategic significance appears suspended until "better times."

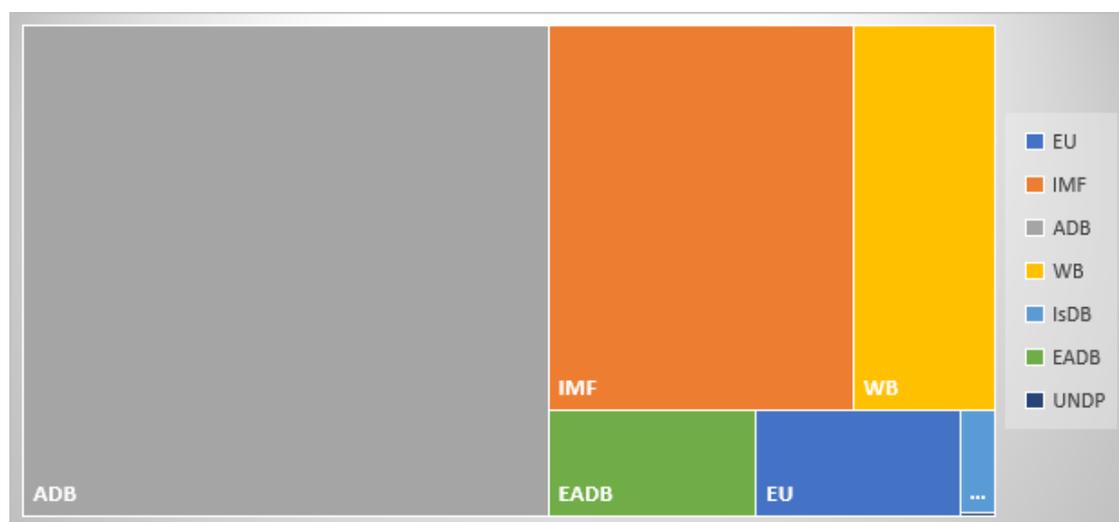
In the same vein, China was expected to be at the forefront of foreign aid in the region. Instead, Beijing largely focused on the lingering trade war with the US. Washington usually frames the region with Afghanistan and South Asia and there is little evidence to suggest that the pandemic heightened awareness of or engagement with the region.

While the EU provides recovery assistance to the region, the assistance dispersed does not appear to follow a broader strategic narrative for Central Asia. The EU's assistance package was framed and planned prior to the COVID-19 crisis and is not informed by crisis-management circumstances. Overall, financial support does not reflect high prioritisation: the EU has pledged €1.22 billion to Asia-Pacific (of which €800 million goes to the ASEAN region), €962 million to Eastern Partnership countries, and merely €124 million to Central Asia.<sup>22</sup> Thus, EU's support to Central Asia is minor compared to its support to other regions and that of other international organisations (reference Figure 1). Yet, on a per capita basis, the EU's aid to Central Asia is comparable to its aid to ASEAN. Though it is unclear how the EU's aid to Central Asia is linked to the EU's Central Asia Strategy.

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<sup>22</sup> European Union (2020), [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda\\_20\\_606](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_20_606), [https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/association-southeast-asian-nations-asean/83176/team-europe-mobilises-over-%E2%82%AC800-million-support-fight-against-coronavirus-asean-region\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/association-southeast-asian-nations-asean/83176/team-europe-mobilises-over-%E2%82%AC800-million-support-fight-against-coronavirus-asean-region_en)

Figure 1. The size of EU's and international organisations' support to Central Asia compared



Source: Authors' own compilation from various sources.

Beyond traditional stakeholders in the region, there are emerging regional powers such as India, Iran, Japan, the Republic of Korea and Turkey. Of these countries, only Japan played a significant role as a donor during the pandemic. That is not to say that one should have expected donor competition, but the argument advanced here is that development assistance cannot be viewed through the lens of a zero-sum Great Game narrative.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study has reviewed and systematically analysed the scope and volume of pandemic-related assistance provided by individual countries and international organisations in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The study covered the period from March to September 2020, although assistance pledged beyond this period is also taken into consideration.

Undeniably, the pandemic placed a heavy burden on every country, posing both domestic and international challenges. Although the socio-economic impact on individual countries has been discussed at length, there is less attention on the regional approach of big powers to different parts of the world, including Central Asia.

This study finds that there is a gap between rhetoric and practice when it comes to proclaimed strategic narratives. One should also allow for the notion that such a disruptive event means that usually unfolding strategic narratives may not apply during a crisis as individual powers focus on domestic affairs.

This study shows that most external stakeholders – multilateral institutions and countries – applied similar strategies to assist Central Asia in the fight against the pandemic. The main finding is that none of the partner countries stands out in terms of financial support and recovery measures. The volume of financial assistance remained largely symbolic. However, short-term medical and emergency assistance was targeted, decisive, and significant but dealing only with the short-term impact of the pandemic. Very few assistance projects had a long-term scope of economic recovery. Among the stakeholders under consideration, the EU stands out because it provided long-term recovery financial packages, scoping assistance with a strategic vision that looks beyond the current downturn.

As of September 2020, there is little evidence to suggest that international aid is linked to the ongoing Great Game narrative in Central Asia. This may suggest that this strategic narrative is largely detached from reality. The relations between external powers and Central Asia need to be reconsidered and given a new meaning that would better reflect the interests and interaction between the two parties. The pandemic showed that these relations were mainly pragmatic during the global health crisis with no external partner showing interest in projecting and expanding strategic influence on the region.

In the medium term it is likely that Central Asia will become more dependent on international assistance to cope with the impact of the pandemic and rebuild its economies. External partners are also likely to review their engagement in the region. However, in the aftermath of the immediate crisis, the Great Game paradigm may acquire new significance. Russia could point to its emergency assistance as part of its bid to lure Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to join the EEU; China may strengthen its

presence in the region through bilateral BRI-related projects, in a region thirsting for investment. The EU and the US strategic narratives may also be tested.

A long-term regional recovery may have been more difficult for the regional economies of the 1990s. But Central Asian states of this generation are much more capable to conceive, frame and pursue a strategic long-term recovery plan on their own. For this, the region needs to build further its internal resilience against new crises and avoid excessive reliance on external assistance in the long term.

## List of footnotes

- [1] <https://informburo.kz/novosti/kitayskie-vrachi-zavershili-svoyu-missiyu-v-kazahstane-domoy-ih-uvyoz-samolyot-vvs-rk-105569.html>
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