

Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article

# An Analysis of Central Asian States' Political Affinity to Global Powers: Case of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan\*

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## Abstract

The Central Asian states, which remained under the Soviet regime for a long time, started to arouse curiosity in world politics about global and regional policy preferences after they gained their independence, and this situation led to an increase in the importance of Central Asia in global power competition. In this study, which is theorized around the concept of Small State, it is aimed to reveal the degree of political affinity towards the three global powers, China, Russia, and the USA, by analyzing the United Nations (UN) General Assembly voting data of the Central Asian States, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan between 1992-2021. The reason why the study is limited to three states from the Central Asian States is that only these states are suitable for the definition of small states. According to the quantitative analysis results obtained based on the UN voting data; the three Central Asian States are closer to Russia and China than the USA from their establishment to the present in terms of political affinity; the political affinity with the USA has become increasingly different especially after the years 1995-96; and, it is understood that the political affinity with China has increased especially after the 2000s.

## Keywords

Central Asia, political affinity, United Nations, small state, global powers.

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## Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, small states emerged in many regions (Baltic, Eastern Europe and South Caucasus), and in Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan entered the world politics as three (3) small states. The importance of the three Central Asian states in world politics has been the result of their geopolitical position, rich energy and natural resources and geo-economic potential (Qodirov 4). Therefore, after the end of the Cold War, Central Asia,<sup>1</sup> which has turned into a new sharing area due to its rich natural resources and geopolitical location, has become a region where the US, China and Russia are struggling for influence. The importance of Central Asia for the three global powers has been shaped according to the strategic interests of each country. For the US, Central Asia has been an important area in the fight against terrorism, for Russia it has been at the vital center of its critical domestic political interests (Blank 73), and for China, one of the most economically important actors of today, it has become a region where it has started to expand its influence through the Belt and Road project.

The foreign policies of the Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan), which gained their independence in the 1990s, have become important in world politics. In this process, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, which are small states with their quantitative and qualitative characteristics, have tried to ensure their security by joining international organizations, balancing the interests of global powers, or acting together, pursuing strict neutrality policies or forming alliances (Bukovskis et al. 114). Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, which were established under difficult geopolitical conditions in the post-Soviet period, first became members of the United Nations in order to assert the “de jure” character of their independence and to participate in world politics.

The United Nations is a global organization dealing with various agendas, including international security, territorial disputes, economic development, human rights and the environment. UN General Assembly voting data are important data in revealing the political affinity of states as a reflection of their foreign policy preferences (Kurşun and Parlar Dal 92). Political affinity is defined as the similarity of states' national interests with other states in their

global relations in line with their voting data in the UN General Assembly (Bertrand et al. 2016). For this purpose, Gartzke has developed a political affinity index based on the similarity of states' voting data in the UN General Assembly (Gartzke 12). In this study, the political affinity of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan to global powers is quantitatively assessed by using their UN General Assembly voting data, which is a reflection of their foreign policy preferences. Although there are comprehensive studies explaining Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, with various methods and theories in the literature, the aim of this article is to contribute to the literature with the quantitative data presented. With the quantitative data provided, a comprehensive analysis of the normative stances of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan in their foreign policies is possible. In addition to this, examining the political affinities of post-independence Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan with global powers around the concept of small state offers a different perspective to understand the nature of their relations. For this purpose, the article is organized in four sections. In the first part, the concept of small state and the foreign policy behavior of small states are discussed. The second section questions whether Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan are small states within the framework of small state theory. In the third section, the importance of the votes cast in the UN General Assembly in reflecting the foreign policy preferences of states is emphasized and the methodology used in the analysis is elaborated. In the last section, the voting data of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan in the UN General Assembly resolutions are evaluated to reveal their political affinity to global powers.

### **The Concept of Small State and Foreign Policy Behavior of Small States**

With the evolution of the structure of the international system from bipolarity to multipolarity in the post-Cold War period, the roles of not only great powers but also of medium and small states have changed. In a globalized and increasingly interdependent world, the potential of small states has gradually increased, and accordingly, their place in the international relations literature has reflected this increase (Jargalsaikhan 407). In this new order, as Neumann and Gstöhl put it, “small states have simply become too numerous and - sometimes individually, but certainly collectively - too important to simply ignore” (Neumann and Gstöhl 3). In

particular, with the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, new small states emerged as new actors in world politics, becoming members of international organizations and gaining a numerical majority in the UN General Assembly despite being at the bottom of the international power hierarchy (Neumann and Gstöhl 3).

Small states and their foreign policy preferences have begun to be given importance in the context of state power/capacity, which is one of the focal points of the IR discipline. The concept of power, which has always been at the center of international relations literature (Barnet and Duvall 39), has been conceptualized extensively by international relations theories. In defining power, IR theories have generally focused on “capacity” (Morgenthau 153) and the “influence” of one actor on the behavior of other countries (Weber 152, Dahl 203). For the realist theory, which sees international politics as a struggle for power, the concept of power has been at the center of the theory and especially military power capacity has been considered as an important element for a state to realize its national interests. In contrast to realism, liberal theory emphasized the importance of cooperation by focusing on the importance of economic power. The constructivist theory, which does not place the concept of power at the center of the theory, considers power as a concept created primarily by ideas and cultural contexts instead of basing it on material foundations (Wendt 97).

Although the classification of states according to their capacities has become an important part of international politics, there is still uncertainty about the criteria used to determine the size of states. However, the concept of size has remained an important factor affecting the foreign policies of states in the international system (Maurice 556). In the discipline of International Relations and world politics, the size of states has generally been associated with their capacity and influence (Browning 669). In this context, the definition of the concept of small state, which has been developed in relation to the size of states, has been handled within four basic categories: quantitative, perceptual, behavioral and relational (Adhikari 45). At the center of most definitions of the small state concept are the quantitative values of states in the variables of population, area (territory), economy and military capacity, which constitute the components of power (Thorhallsson and Sverrir 3). Countries with populations of up to 30 million are

considered small states, although most academic definitions consider states with populations of less than 10 or 15 million to be small states (Handel 3). According to David Vital's definition based on economy and population, a small state is defined as a state with less than 10-15 million inhabitants if it is economically developed or less than 20-30 million inhabitants if it is economically underdeveloped (Vital 8). Jean-Luc Vellut took population and GNP values into consideration when classifying states. According to this classification, small states are: States with a population between 10-50 million and a GNP between 2-10 billion dollars (Vellut 254). In contrast to quantitative definitions, perceptual, behavioral and relational approaches are qualitative definitions that emphasize the power relations and dependence of states on larger states. In terms of the perceptual approach, small state is explained by states defining themselves as small states and being defined as such by other states (Hey 3). According to Keohane, who takes a perceptual approach to the concept of small state, a small state is defined as a state that cannot exert a significant influence within the system (Keohane 296). The behavioral approach defines small states according to their actual behavior in foreign policy. According to this approach, small states are characterized by the limited capacity of their political, economic and administrative systems (Murray 246-247), limited involvement in global affairs, adherence to international law and essentially no military power (Evans and Newnham 500-501). In terms of the relational approach, the small state is considered as "part of an asymmetric relationship that cannot change the nature or functioning of the relationship on its own" (Archer et al. 9). In general, from a qualitative perspective, a small state can be defined as a state in a significant asymmetric or hierarchical power relationship with another state (Knudsen 184-185). Small states, which are vulnerable to security threats, economic and environmental influences in their domestic politics, have to take power asymmetry into account in their external relations (Armstrong and Read 107-108). For the realist theory, which sees international relations as a struggle for power, the measure of a state's smallness is the power it possesses. In this context, small states that are insufficient in terms of power are considered weak states in a sense (Browning 670).

In addition to the definition of small states in the international system, their foreign policy strategies have also been important. For this reason, the quantitative and qualitative characteristics of small states have been analyzed

to determine how their foreign policy strategies and preferences will be shaped. According to East, the foreign policy strategy of small states has six main characteristics. The six main features include; 1) limited interaction with other states, 2) active participation in international organizations, 3) support for the rules of international law, 4) refraining from the use of force, 5) staying away from the conflicts of interest of more powerful states in the international system, and 6) generally focusing on regional problems in their foreign policies (East 557). Thus, while global powers generally have strategic interests in their foreign policies within the international system, small states have more specific, national and regional interests (Labs 394). In pursuing their foreign policy strategies, small states can form alliances, pursue policies of balancing, bandwagoning and neutrality. While the balancing strategy is the choice to join the weaker side in a conflict, the bandwagoning strategy is considered as the choice to ally with the stronger side, and thus it is defined as the opposite of the balancing strategy (Waltz 126). Small states prefer to pursue a policy of pursuit rather than a policy of balancing against a large state (Elman 176). Wright, who refers to the pursuit policy as the “underdog policy” because it is a strategy preferred by small states, defines this strategy as siding with the powerful (Wright 136). A policy of neutrality is when a state declares that it is not involved in a conflict or war and prefers to refrain from supporting or assisting any side. It is therefore often used by small states as a tool to avoid the politics of great powers (Simpson).

The general characteristics of small states are being weak, fragile, and dependent. First of all, since small states are seen as weak states potentially under the threat of extinction within the international system, their foreign and security policies have been guided by these needs (Goetschel 9). According to Rotstein, small states are states that cannot ensure their own security and have to rely on the assistance of other states. In this context, small states need foreign aid for their security, have limited room for maneuver in foreign and domestic policy, and have weak political leadership (Rothstein 29). The second characteristic of small states is their vulnerability to external and internal threats. Vulnerability stems from the fact that the economic, political and military structures of small states are vulnerable to internal and external threats. With little influence on the outside world, small states cannot prevent the international system or global powers from influencing

their policies (Goetschel 14-15). Finally, when they share common borders with large states, they are likely to act cautiously, as they are sensitive to the element of power and will generally not pursue independent foreign policies (Cooper and Momani 114, Nedelea 338). However, economic dependence on the hegemonic power also makes it difficult for them to pursue an independent foreign policy.

In conclusion, the adoption of an inclusive perspective that combines quantitative and qualitative approaches in defining small states facilitates the identification of small states in the world and the analysis of their foreign policies. In the next section of the study, the evaluation of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan through the concept of small state is made by taking this inclusive structure into consideration.

### **Evaluation of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan within the Framework of Small State Concept**

Although Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan share a common historical heritage with their closed geopolitical location (Figure 1) and centrally planned economic structures based on 70 years of communist rule, after independence they have become states with different levels of political and economic development, cultural and ethnic structures, and significant differences in relations with the outside world (Batsaikhan and Dabrowski 297).



**Figure 1.** *Central Asia Region* (Batsaikhan and Dabrowski 299)

The three states in the heart of Central Asia are considered to be small and weak states due to structural factors such as low population density and geographical closeness, as well as failure to provide adequate public services to their citizens and economic dependence (Boyer 91). There are many sources in the literature where Central Asian states are analyzed under the concept of small states. Gleason et al. (40-51) analyzed Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy within the framework of the realist theory. Hansen (294-310) categorized the Central Asian states as small states by treating them as the weak side of an asymmetric relationship and revealed their foreign policy preferences between two global powers, China and Russia, in the post-Soviet era. Garrison and Abdurahmonov (381-405) categorized the Central Asian States as energy-rich "small states" and concluded that the Central Asian States diversified their foreign policies by pursuing a policy of balance between the great powers despite the power asymmetry in their energy dependence relations with Russia and China. In Mushelenga and Van Wyk's (118-145) article on the diplomacy of small states in the international political system, the Central Asian states, with the exception of Kazakhstan, are considered as small states in the classification of small states. Kelkitli (145-166) evaluated the post-independence foreign policies of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, which he analyzed as small states. Within the framework of the small state concept, Table 1 below presents the population, gross domestic product (GDP), area and military expenditure data of the Central Asian States, which indicate the power index.

**Table 1**

Power index

State	Population (Million)	GDP (Billion \$)	Surface area (Km <sup>2</sup> )	Military Spending (Million \$)
Kazakhstan	18,5	181,6	2,525	1733
Uzbekistan	33	57,9	448,978	1440
Tajikistan	9,3	8,1	143,100	80
Turkmenistan	5,9	40,7	491,210	81
Kyrgyzstan	6,4	8,4	199,9	127

Source: The World Bank 2021.



A quantitative assessment of the power index based on Table 1 reveals that Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have relatively better population and economic data than other Central Asian states. Therefore, in the light of quantitative data, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan do not fit the definition of small states. Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, on the other hand, have low population densities and are surrounded by global powers (Russia and China) and relatively larger states (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan) and regional powers (Iran and India). They are weaker compared to the economic, demographic and military structures of their neighbors (Kurecic et al. 8).

In terms of qualitative definitions as well as quantitative data, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan bear the structural characteristics of small states. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, which gained their independence in the post-Soviet period, faced major problems such as uncertainties in the transition to a democratic political system, a dependent and unstable economic structure and insufficient institutionalization. Although post-independence elections were held in states that were governed by a single party during the Soviet era, they remained on paper. In Turkmenistan, Soviet-era officials became president to ensure internal stability during the transition, in Tajikistan, conservatives who rejected change led the country to civil war (1992-97), and in Kyrgyzstan, a relatively pluralistic political system was preferred. All three states adopted the presidential system and established authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes that concentrated power in one hand. Although Soviet ideology has been replaced by nationalism and centralized political control, political institutions are weak and democratic structures have not taken root (Badan 101 and 113). In the political system, all three states have retained some features of past political cultures.

Economically, the Central Asian states, which transitioned from centrally planned economies to market economies in the post-Soviet period, experienced many of the challenges of economic transition, such as skyrocketing inflation, partial deindustrialization, and the collapse of Soviet-type welfare systems (Batsaikhan and Dabrowski 297). However, the dependence on Russia brought about by the Moscow-centered economic system has restricted the Central Asian states' opening to the world (Purtaş 11). For instance, given the over-dependence of both Kyrgyzstan and

Tajikistan on remittances from the Russian labor market, restrictions on migrant workers by the Russian authorities could easily cause an economic crisis in these two countries (Hansen 307). Corruption, poverty and irregularities in state administration, which are also related to the incomplete politicization process, cause economic developments not to be reflected at the grassroots level. According to World Bank data, Turkmenistan is in the upper middle income group (4000-12000 dollars), while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are in the lower-middle income category (1000-4000 dollars) (World Bank Country and Lending Groups).

In the post-Soviet period, they have faced regional security challenges linked to Islamic radicalism, drug trafficking, labor migration and other problems that require regional intervention and cooperation (Kainazarov 70). However, since their capacity to solve their national and regional problems on their own was not sufficiently developed (Birdiqli 124), it was not possible for them to solve these problems on their own. Therefore, the three states have the qualitative characteristics of small states due to the internal threats they face. Territorial integrity problems arising from separatist regions, energy and water resources problems, the influence of the Russian population in the demographic structure, ethnic and administrative disputes and popular uprisings weaken the three states in terms of both power and internal stability. For Turkmenistan, which has the status of permanent neutrality, which is one of the structural features of the small state concept, permanent neutrality has not been effective enough to reduce its dependence on global powers while providing relative domestic stability and protection from global problems and regional disputes.

The three small Central Asian states, which found themselves in a challenging geopolitical position after gaining their independence, were geopolitically surrounded between the two global powers of Eurasia and also found themselves in the sphere of attraction of another global power, the United States. Therefore, the foreign policy of the countries of the region has been shaped under the influence of the three global powers. Due to political and economic inadequacies, the Central Asian states have become vulnerable to the influence of regional and foreign powers, especially Russia. Throughout history, Central Asia has been a security ring for Russia in terms of both controlling China and making its presence felt in the region (Nogayeva

134). Russia continues to see the Central Asian states, with which it has historical, economic, political and security ties, as Moscow's sphere of influence. Russia's desire to maintain its influence in Central Asia and the fact that it still sees the region as its "backyard" (Kanapiyanova 56) deeply affects the foreign policies of the Central Asian states, especially Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Since their independence, Russia has sought to keep the countries of the region under its economic and security umbrella through various regional organizations such as the Eurasian Economic Union, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization. The US, on the other hand, has sought to dominate the region by establishing cooperative and stable relations with the regional states on the basis of energy, security and democracy (Nogayeva 175). Under the rhetoric of democratization, the US has tried to intervene in the internal politics of the countries of the region through color revolutions and aimed to limit the sphere of influence of Russia and China in the foreign policy of the Central Asian states. China, on the other hand, is trying to play a leading role in developing and supporting energy industries in Central Asia in order to meet its growing energy needs (Melnikovova 244) and is developing economic ties in its bilateral relations with the Central Asian states. The development of China's economic ties with the Central Asian states has had a significant impact on the economies of the regional states, as well as political influence on them. For the Central Asian states, which have fragile and vulnerable economies, economic ties with China can be an obstacle to pursuing independent policies in their foreign policies. The different strategies of the three global powers on Central Asia make it difficult for the three Central Asian states to pursue independent foreign policies.

As a result, small states are structurally "the weaker part in an asymmetric relationship, unable to change the nature or functioning of the relationship on their own" (Archer et al. 9). The three new states, which are mostly corrupt and poorly governed, weak authoritarian structures with fragile economies and threatened by religious extremism and drug trafficking, appear to be small states with weak, fragile and dependent foreign and domestic political characteristics (Ziegler 597). These structural and characteristic reasons of the three Central Asian states have led to an increase in the influence of

global powers in the region on the one hand, while the three Central Asian states have become more dependent on foreign powers on the other.

### **The Importance of the Votes Cast in the UN General Assembly in Reflecting the Political Affinities of States**

The UN General Assembly is a universal body where member states with equal status (193 countries) come together to articulate their preferences/stances on a wide range of issues, from humanitarian to economic development issues. Therefore, UNGA voting data is a rich source for observing and comparing states' foreign policy preferences. While UNGA voting data is not a comprehensive reflection of all states' foreign policy preferences, voting preferences are a very good indicator of states' positions on the broadest global issues. As Erik Voeten notes about UNGA voting records, "there is no other clear source of data that reveals the policy preferences of so many states on such a wide range of issues over such a long period of time" (Voeten 62). Another important aspect of the UN General Assembly vote is that the analysis of the voting data also reflects the extent to which they align with global powers, their allies and neighbors, or other members of international organizations or groups to which they are institutionally affiliated. In addition to serving to assess commonalities and differences in the voting patterns of states through their voting data, it is the most important method for analyzing convergences and divergences in the foreign policy orientations of states at the global level (Kurşun and Dal 192). Voting data from the UN General Assembly have become "the standard source of data for constructing measures of state preferences, as they provide comparable and observable data on decisions taken by many countries at specific times and on specific issues" (Bailey et al. 430). Keohane (5-6) has argued that the use of UN data to measure foreign policy influence emphasizes the political influence of the General Assembly as the ability of a state or group of states to achieve its objectives by changing the behavior of other states without the use of physical force.

The analysis of UNGA voting data has not been ignored by the main theories of international relations such as realism, liberalism and constructionism. For realism, which deals with the anarchic nature of the international system, states will pursue a policy of following powerful actors or form alliances in order to survive in a system that lacks a hierarchical political order (Walt

17: Schroeder 117). From this perspective, identical votes on UN General Assembly resolutions would be indicative of similar preferences. For liberals who emphasize international organizations to promote cooperation among states, the UN General Assembly voting data is an indicator of conflict and cooperation (Walt, 1998 32; Mowle 561). In terms of constructionist theory, the fact that states that make foreign policy choices in line with common ideas and identity vote similarly in the UN General Assembly voting data is the result of a common development (Copeland 1).

Even if UNGA voting data is not the most comprehensive tool to explain the full dynamics of states' policy choices, it helps us to broadly capture and make sense of where states stand, with whom they stand, and for what purpose. Therefore, UNGA voting data is used to provide quantitative indicators of states' long-term foreign policy behavior and orientation (Ferdinand 376). There are many studies in the literature that use UNGA voting data to reveal political affinity or foreign policy preferences. Mamedova (2022) analyzed the voting data of the US and the UK in the United Nations General Assembly between 2001 and 2019 and examined the coherence between the two countries. The voting similarity between these two countries was found to be high on issues such as non-proliferation and human rights, but low on issues such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Hwang, Sanford, and Lee (2015) investigated the effect of a state's membership in the UN Security Council on its voting behavior in the UN General Assembly and found that states elected to the UN Security Council tend to vote similarly to the permanent members, especially the United States. Dreher et al. (2008) examined the impact of US economic aid on votes in the UN General Assembly and found strong evidence that US aid encourages voting alignment in the General Assembly. Ferdinand (2014), on the other hand, analyzed the foreign policy similarity of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa by examining their long-term trends based on UNGA voting data to determine the similarity of their positions on world affairs. The results of the analysis suggest a high and increasing degree of coherence. Dreher and Jensen (2013), in their empirical study on the voting outcome of leader changes in the UN General Assembly over the period 1985-2008, provide important evidence that governments with new leaders are more supportive of the United States. Mosler and Potrafke examined the voting behavior of Western allied countries with the

US between 1949 and 2019 and found that the voting data under Donald Trump was 7.2 percentage points lower on average than under previous US Presidents. Using UN General Assembly voting data, Kuşun and Dal assessed the extent to which Turkey shares common foreign policy interests with BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa). Khan (1-12) analyzed Bangladesh's foreign policy tendencies using UNGA voting data, while Das (1-16) analyzed India's foreign policy preferences using voting data. Existing studies in the literature reveal that UNGA voting data is an important indicator in reflecting the foreign policy preferences of states.

In this study, the foreign policy preferences of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan were systematically revealed and their political affinity to global powers was calculated with the UN General Assembly voting data. Analyzing the foreign policy preferences of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan with UNGA voting data has contributed to fill a gap in the literature by providing quantitative data to assess the influence of global powers on the region.

#### Calculating Political Affinity from UN General Assembly Resolutions

The S-score method proposed by Signorino and Ritter (1999) is used to calculate foreign policy similarity from the voting data used in the UN General Assembly. The closer the preferences between two states, the closer the foreign policy similarity, and the further apart, the more different the resulting preferences (Signorino and Ritter 126). According to this calculation, the more similar the votes of two states are, the closer the S-score value approaches 1, and the more different the S-score value approaches -1. The S-score is calculated as indicated in formula 1 below.

$$S - Score_{A,B} = 1 - 2 \sum_{n=1}^N \left( \frac{|A - B|}{d} \right) \quad (1)$$

In this equation,  $N$  is the total number of data,  $A$  is the data for one country,  $B$  is the data for another country, and  $d$  is the maximum difference between  $A$  and  $B$ . This calculation yields annual values for voting similarity ranging from -1 to 1 for each member of the General Assembly relative to each other.

A score of 1 indicates complete voting similarity between two countries. A score of -1 indicates a complete dissimilarity. States have the right to choose to vote “yes”, “no” or “abstain” on each of the resolutions. States can also choose not to participate in the vote. However, only “yes”, “no” and “abstain” votes are included in the S-score calculation.

On average, between 70-90 resolutions are adopted in the UN General Assembly during a term. In this study, political affinity is calculated based on 2664 resolutions adopted in the 29-year period 1992-2021. The voting information used by all states in the UN General Assembly is taken from the dataset (v29) created by Voten (2009). This dataset contains voting data for sessions 1-76. With the help of the relevant dataset, the voting data of the global powers and the three Central Asian states in 2664 resolutions between 1992 and 2021 were obtained and the voting data in these resolutions were analyzed with the S-Score method and quantitative findings were obtained regarding the political affinity of the three Central Asian countries to the global powers.

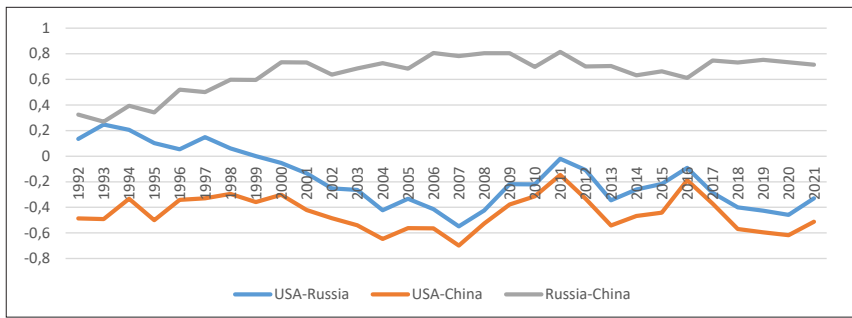
### **Evaluation of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan's Political Affinity to Global Powers within the Framework of Small State Concept**

On December 8, 1991, with the announcement of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the 15 states of the Union became a sovereign part of the international system. After this process, the Asian continent became “the most intensely changing region of the world” (Erol and Tunç 5) and a strategic geopolitical region for superpowers. The 19th century “Great Game” in Central Asia between Tsarist Russia and Great Britain is now being played out between three global powers. The rivalry of global powers in Central Asia is a perfect example of power play dynamics in international relations (Liedy). For Russia, Central Asia embodies the special relationship of a shared past from the 19th century until the Soviet collapse, while for the United States and China, the region represents a new geographical space waiting to be explored. While Russia has relied on its military might and traditional soft power over the countries of the region, China has sought to increase its influence in the region by demonstrating its financial power (Beşimov and Ryskeldi). The United States, on the other hand, although its strategy towards Central Asia was predominantly based on geopolitical

reasons, sought to penetrate the region through color revolutions under the guise of democratization and economic liberalization policies.

There are several factors that are important in investigating the political affinity of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan with global powers in their foreign policies. First, examining the foreign policy trends of the three Central Asian states on global issues based on UN General Assembly voting data provides a quantitative and systematic analysis of the literature. Secondly, the rich underground resources of the three Central Asian states have turned them into a center of attraction for all three global powers. Therefore, the three small Central Asian states had to set their foreign policy priorities in the context of complex geopolitical and geostrategic realities. Investigating the voting tendencies of the countries in the UN General Assembly in the face of three global powers competing to keep the three Central Asian States in their sphere of influence will help us to draw useful insights into the political affinity of the three Central Asian States to the global powers in their foreign policy. To this end, the study attempts to provide an analysis based on quantitative data on where or with whom the three Central Asian states stand in the UN General Assembly, which deals with key global issues.

First of all, the level of political closeness among the three global powers is calculated through S-score in this study and shown in Figure 2 below.



**Figure 2.** *Level of political affinity among the three global powers*

Figure 2 shows that China and Russia are more politically aligned with each other than the United States. In line with the literature, despite the tensions underlying their long-term security concerns, Russia and China

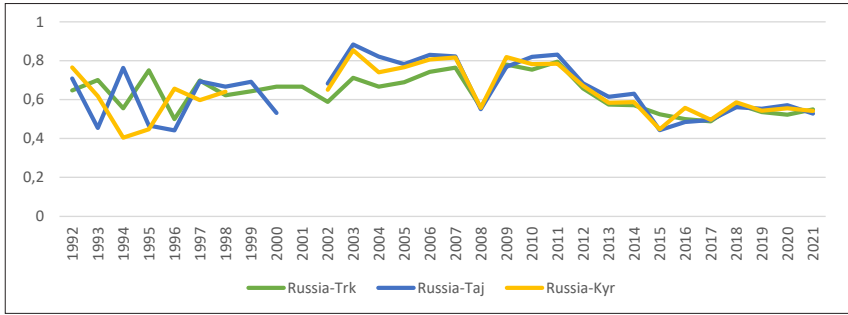


seem to be pursuing a balancing strategy against the US, based on the fear of US regional dominance and the desire to preserve the status quo, and especially on the defense of multipolarity against the unipolar system (Ziegler 590). Especially in the aftermath of the “Color” revolutions, Russia and China have reached a broad agreement on the primacy of regime security and the need to limit the long-term US military presence in Central Asia (Wishnick iii). In addition, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which was established as a regional organization, was intended to create an environment of political, economic and military cooperation among the countries of the region, as well as to prevent extra-regional powers such as the United States from gaining influence in Central Asia (Horta). On this basis, the interests of China and Russia converge, while the interests of the US-Russia and US-China diverge. As a result, although Russia has been displaced by China, especially economically, in Central Asia, the mutual relations are more cooperative than competitive. In this relationship, Russia has become the regional security hegemon, while China has increasingly become the regional economic hegemon (Kazantsev et al. 58).

#### Political Affinity Analysis of Russia and Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan

This study first assesses the political affinities between Russia and the three Central Asian states. In a complex and changing international system, Russia is the leading global power in Central Asia in terms of its high-level political relations, security cooperation agreements, and range of investment projects in the region (Oliphant 12). However, in the post-Soviet era, Russia has found it difficult to maintain this influence, although it has continued to pursue a near-periphery policy towards the Central Asian states, capitalizing on its political, economic and cultural advantages (Hansen 304). For example, Russia has now lost its number one trade partnership with the three Central Asian States to China (Oliphant 7). Nevertheless, the three Central Asian states have a strong political affinity with Russia (Kim). This strong political affinity is due to the fact that Russia is the former hegemonic power in the region, but also because it is still strongly connected economically, culturally and in terms of security policy.

Within the scope of this study, the political affinity levels of Russia and Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan were calculated and their similarity levels were visualized in Figure 3 below.



**Figure 3.** *Level of political affinity between Russia and Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan*

When the voting similarities of the three Central Asian states with Russia are analyzed in Figure 3, it is seen that the similarity rates are quite high and never fall below 0 (zero), that each state exhibited a different foreign policy tendency in the post-independence period, and that the three Central Asian states voted similarly within themselves in the post-2005 period. Based on this voting data, it is not possible to say that the three Central Asian states are cooperative, but it can be said that they imply less coordinated political action. Despite the fact that the three Central Asian states have experienced ruptures with Russia independently of each other in certain periods, it is possible to talk about vote similarities in their foreign policies. We can say that the biggest factor in determining the foreign policy priorities of the three Central Asian states after they gained their independence was the Russian power and threat. For example, the most important factor in Tajikistan's acceptance of Russia's hegemony in the post-Soviet period was that Russia was the only power that could actually end the civil war until 1994. In addition, Russia's protection of the border with Afghanistan has made Russia a major player in ensuring the country's security. Like Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, with about a tenth of its population consisting of ethnic Russian minorities, has largely accepted Russia's hegemony. Its relations with Turkmenistan, on the other hand, have been mostly based on energy lines due to geographical distance. The Russian hegemony over

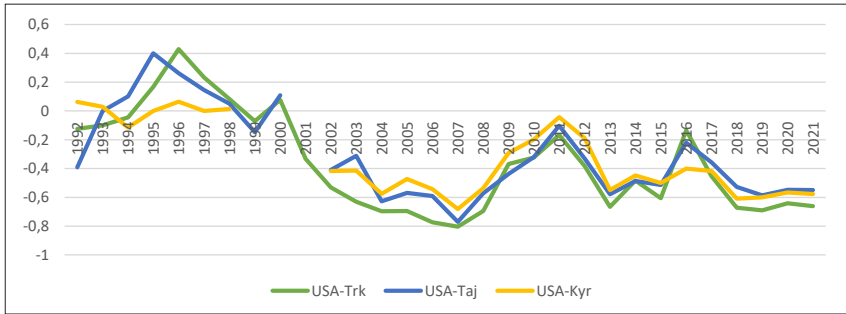
Turkmenistan, which has a policy of permanent neutrality, has been at a lower level compared to the other two countries (Tanrısever 9-11).

In 2008 and 2014, Russia's confrontation with Georgia and Ukraine affected the three Central Asian states' relations with Russia. As Russian pressure on the three Central Asian states for economic and political cooperation increased, they suddenly found themselves in a more vulnerable position. However, they began to seek cooperative relations with a range of partners, including the United States, in order to preserve their independence (Wishnick 2).

Political Affinity Analysis of the United States of America and Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan

The United States, another global power, is a relatively newcomer to Central Asia compared to Russia and China. After the US recognized the newly established states, Russia remained more moderate and distant from the region due to its near abroad policy. However, after the September 11 attacks, Russia started to establish military bases in the countries of the region in order to prevent the region from shifting to a radical line and to obtain strategic bases. The Central Asian states' rapprochement with the United States has been driven as much by a policy of balancing global powers such as Russia and China as it has been by a policy of getting rid of US criticism of democracy and human rights. Countries that initially welcomed US policies began to distance themselves from the US, concerned about the color revolutions that shook the countries in the region. U.S. influence in Central Asian states significantly waned in 2003 and reached its lowest level between 2007 and 2008 (Laruelle and Peyrouse 427). As can be seen in Figure 4, in line with the literature, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan's political closeness with the US reached its lowest level in these years, which is also reflected in the quantitative data.

In this study, the degree of political affinity between the United States of America and Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan was calculated and their similarity levels were visualized in Figure 4 below.



**Figure 4.** *Levels of political Affinity between the United States and Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan*

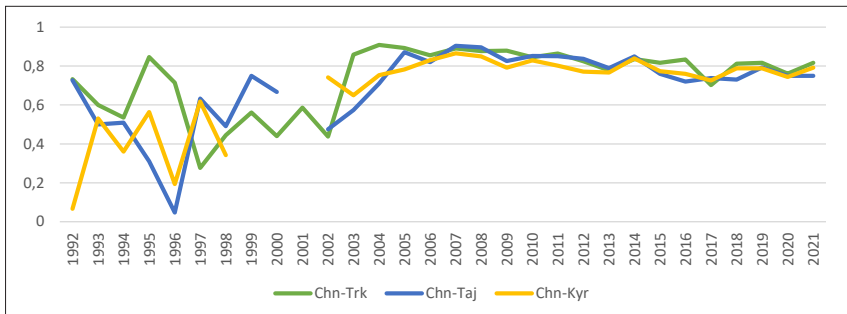
Figure 4 shows that after their independence, the US had closer voting alignment with Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan than with Kyrgyzstan. Laruelle and Peyrouse also characterized Turkmenistan, the most active in its attempts to escape Russian influence, as promising partners for the US (Laruelle and Peyrouse 428). However, especially in the post-2004-2005 period, relations have changed course and post-September 11 cooperation with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan has been more limited than in the early years.

#### Political Affinity Analysis of China and Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan

When political affinity is assessed from the perspective of China, another global power, it can be argued that China is one of the most influential players in post-Soviet Central Asia as a result of the overall increase in its global role, and also has the advantage of geographical proximity, some cultural links, and a growing political and economic presence. China borders Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. China, the world's second largest economy, has increased its economic influence in Central Asia in the context of its growing economy and increasing energy needs. Today, China has become the largest trading partner of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan, as well as the largest investor in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and its total volume of foreign trade with the Central Asian states is 2-3 times the current volume of foreign trade with Russia (Yakobashvili). It also broke Russia's transit monopoly over the natural resources of the Central Asian states (Melnikovova 252). The world's longest natural gas pipeline

(Orasam), with a length of about 7000 km, was constructed to transport Turkmenistan's natural gas to China, and the Kenkiyak-Kumkol pipeline was completed to connect West Kazakhstan (Aktobe region) oil directly to China (Yapıcı 211). With such projects, China is increasing its political ties with the Central Asian states while at the same time developing its own economic growth.

Within the scope of this study, the degree of political affinity between China and Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan was also calculated and their similarity levels were visualized in Figure 5 below.



**Figure 5.** *Political affinity between China and Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan*

Figure 5 shows that all three Central Asian states have a high level of political closeness with China. While relations with China in the post-independence period of the Central Asian states have fluctuated up and down, the post-2005 period has witnessed both a positive trend and a stable situation in the course of relations. It can be said that China's adoption of the "harmonious world" strategy in its new foreign policy announced in 2005 and its efforts to stay away from hegemonic discourses and behaviors have been effective in bringing the three Central Asian states closer to China.

## Conclusion

In this study, in order to evaluate the political affinity of three Central Asian states (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan) to global powers (USA, China, and Russia) based on quantitative data, 2664 resolutions taken in 29 years in the period 1992-2021 were analyzed using the S-score method. Thus, depending on quantitative and qualitative factors, the voting data of

the three Central Asian states, which bear the characteristics of the small state theory, in the UN General Assembly were analyzed and as a result of the analysis; 1) the level of political affinity in the foreign policy decisions of Russia and China is quite high (Figure 2), but the level of foreign policy similarity of these two states with the United States is quite low; and 2) the level of political affinity in the foreign policies of the three Central Asian states with Russia (Figure 3) and China (Figure 5) is quite high, but the level of similarity with the United States (Figure 4) is quite low.

In the post-Soviet era, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan (Hansen 294-210), which are located in a region defined by the close presence of two global powers (Russia and China), are trying to reveal their foreign policy preferences by developing strategies based on the presence of global powers. Therefore, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan's foreign policy preferences are shaped on the axis of global powers' interest policies in the region. However, despite the fact that Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan are small states that are very vulnerable to the influence of regional and global powers and lack the military capacity to counter this influence, they can play an effective role in foreign policy when they use the control of their domestic resources as a trump card against global powers in their own interests (Handel 51). Although Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan are small states in contact with more powerful actors, they have opted for a balancing policy rather than a strategy of pursuing great powers (Kazantsev et al. 57-71). As seen in Figure 2-5, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan's relations with China reached a high level of similarity after 2005, while their relations with Russia remained at a high level of similarity (0.8), but started to decline after 2011 (0.6-0.4). In the post-2001 period, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan expanded their foreign policy room for maneuver against Russia by improving their relations with the US and China. Increasing economic relations and energy cooperation with China helped them break out of the Russian orbit and gain the chance to act independently. However, as Figure 2-5 shows, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan's predominantly overlapping interests with Russia and China in the political sphere diverge from those of the United States.

Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, which have a vulnerable and fragile structure, need to make foreign policy choices by pursuing

multifactorial policies that avoid being subordinated to any of the global powers.

### Limitations of the Study

In this study, in assessing the political affinity of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan to global powers, political affinity was calculated based on the voting data used by the states in the UN General Assembly. This study is limited to the year 2021 since the dataset, from which the voting information is taken, includes session information until 2021. Although predicting states' foreign policies by looking at a single factor is considered a limited method, analyzing UN resolutions for this purpose is the most widely used method in the literature.

### Conflict of Interest Statement

There is no conflict of interest with any institution or person within the scope of this study.

### Notes

1 Central Asia, a political and regional concept, is a vast geographical region representing a landlocked area in the heart of Eurasia (Mackinder 241). Although there are different definitions of Central Asia as a geographical concept in various sources, for the purpose of this article, its scope is defined as the political borders of the former Soviet Central Asia.

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# Orta Asya Devletleri'nin Küresel Güçlere Siyasal Yakınlığının Analizi: Kırgızistan, Tacikistan ve Türkmenistan Örneği\*

Zuhal Çalık Topuz\*\*

## Öz

Uzun bir süre Sovyet rejimi altında kalan Orta Asya Devletleri, bağımsızlıklarını kazanmalarının ardından dünya siyasetinde küresel ve bölgesel politika tercihleri konusunda merak uyandırmaya başlamış ve bu durum küresel güç rekabetinde de Orta Asya'nın öneminin artmasına yol açmıştır. Küçük Devlet kavramı etrafında teorize edilen bu çalışmada, Orta Asya Devletleri'nden Kırgızistan, Tacikistan ve Türkmenistan'ın 1992-2021 yılları arasındaki Birleşmiş Milletler (BM) Genel Kurulu oy verileri analiz edilerek üç küresel güç olan ABD, Çin ve Rusya'ya karşı siyasal yakınlık derecelerinin ortaya koyulması amaçlanmıştır. Çalışmanın Orta Asya Devletleri'nden üç devlet ile sınırlandırılmasının nedeni yalnız bu devletlerin küçük devlet tanımına uygun olmasıdır. BM oy verilerine dayanarak elde edilen nicel analiz sonuçlarına göre üç Orta Asya Devleti'nin; siyasal yakınlık açısından kuruluşun günümüze Rusya ve Çin'e ABD'den daha yakın olduğu; özellikle 1995-96 yıllarından sonra ABD ile siyasal yakınlığın giderek farklılaştığı; Çin ile siyasal yakınlığın ise özellikle 2000'li yıllardan sonra artış gösterdiği anlaşılmıştır.

## Anahtar Kelimeler

Orta Asya, siyasal yakınlık, Birleşmiş Milletler, küçük devlet, küresel güçler.

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# Анализ политической близости государств Центральной Азии к мировым державам: на примере Кыргызстана, Таджикистана и Туркменистана\*

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## Аннотация

Долгое время находившиеся под советской властью государства Центральной Азии после обретения независимости начали занимать центральную позицию в глобальных и региональных политических решениях в мировой политике, и неопределенность относительно того, какой центр силы окажется в поле притяжения, вызвала глобальную конкуренцию за власть в регионе. В этом исследовании, в основе которого лежит концепция малого государства, анализируются данные голосования трех государств Центральной Азии - Кыргызстана, Таджикистана и Туркменистана - в период с 1992 по 2021 годы на Генеральной Ассамблее ООН, а также политическая оппозиция трем глобальным державам – США, Китаю и России, с целью выявить степень политического сходства. Причина, по которой исследование ограничено тремя государствами Центральной Азии, заключается в том, что только эти государства подходят под определение малых государств. Согласно результатам количественного анализа, полученного на основе данных голосования ООН, три государства Центральной Азии с точки зрения политической близости были ближе к России и Китаю, чем к США, от основания до настоящего времени; особенно после 1995-96 годов

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политическая близость с США все более менялась; установлено, что политическая близость с Китаем особенно возросла после 2000-х годов.

**Ключевые слова**

Центральная Азия, политическая близость, Организация Объединенных Наций, малое государство, мировые державы.