



# Changing Geopolitics of International Student Mobility: Implications for Central Asian Students

Yusuf Ikbal Oldac

Anglophone and Western countries have traditionally been dominant international study destinations. However, flow patterns in international student mobility (ISM) are not static. International data repositories such as UNESCO indicate that international students increasingly choose to study in countries other than Anglophone and Western contexts, although these destinations are still prominent. The world is witnessing a pluralization of destination countries.

Central Asia—a region made up of five countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, according to United Nations categorization—provides a stark example illustrating this pluralization trend. For outbound students from this region, traditional destination countries are not top study destinations. Instead, three nontraditional destinations have been surpassing traditional destinations by large numbers, especially since the 2010s. These are Turkey to the west, Russia to the north, and China to the east of Central Asia, forming a geopolitical triangle with Central Asia at its center.

## Central Asia and the Triangle Destination Countries

Central Asia has a strategic geopolitical importance, especially in the Eurasian context. Due to its central location, the region has traditionally been essential in connecting East and West—think of the historical silk road—and it is still key to the movement of goods and ideas, in both directions. Thanks to its connectivity with the West, China sees it as a crucial part of its Belt and Road initiative and has made significant investments in the region.

Central Asian countries are also post-Soviet countries that were once part of the same governance structure with Russia, the heir of the Soviet legacy today. The Russian language is prevalent in the region. Hence, these countries are important for Russia to maintain its sphere of influence, a reason for why they are designated as the Commonwealth of Independent States by Russia.

The region is also important for Turkey, as it is home to (mostly) Turkic people who share ethnolinguistic and religious commonalities. This argument has been further strengthened after the announcement of the Organization of the Turkic States in November 2021 in Istanbul, which included multiple agreements to integrate the region in domains such as education, economy, and logistics.

## Student Mobility Trends

Comparative trends based on UNESCO data indicate that Russia has been the top destination for Central Asian students since 2000, the earliest available data. The latest available number for Central Asian international students in Russia was 172,449, in 2019. By contrast, Turkey and China are relatively recent destinations for Central Asian students. Turkey emerged as a significant destination country starting from around 2010, when the number of students from Central Asia increased by more than 540 percent to 44,224 in the 10 years leading up to 2019.

China is another rising destination for Central Asian students. Data from the Chinese ministry of education indicates that China has become the third most popular destination for ISM from this region, with 18,450 students in 2018. In comparison, in 2019, the United States attracted 5,827 Central Asian students, the United Kingdom 2,863, and Germany

## Abstract

Especially starting in the 2010s, China, Russia, and Turkey have become top destinations for Central Asian students, significantly surpassing all traditional Anglophone and Western destinations. In this article, these three countries are called the “triangle” countries, since they form a geopolitical triangle to Central Asia’s east, north, and west. They have achieved considerable success in increasing their international student numbers, but due to tremendous ongoing geopolitical changes, the future of this success is uncertain.

*Central Asia has a strategic geopolitical importance, especially in the Eurasian context.*

6,355. This shows that the triangle countries significantly surpass traditional Anglophone and Western destinations for ISM from Central Asia.

### **An Uncertain Future**

Although the triangle countries have achieved considerable success in attracting international students from Central Asia, current momentous geopolitical changes raise uncertainties as to whether this trend will continue.

With the war in Ukraine, Russia's top position in attracting Central Asian students might be threatened. However, we must be careful in drawing conclusions here. The isolation of Russia, especially in the Western world, does not seem to apply as strictly in other parts of the world, including Central Asia. None of the Central Asian countries backed the UN motion on Ukraine. They either abstained or did not vote at all. The recent embargoes, expected to affect the Russian economy in the mid-to-long term, may have a stronger impact on Russia's ability to attract students from the region. Along with the prevalence of the Russian language and the ease of obtaining visas, Russia's comprehensive scholarships and job prospects after graduation have been strong drivers for student mobility from this region. The embargoes may affect the latter significantly in the coming years.

For China, what is creating uncertainties is its relative closing to the world due to its zero-COVID policy. International students have been blocked from entering the country for more than two years. Some students had to graduate without physically being in their schools for years. And at the time of writing this article, those who did not leave China for fear of not being able to return are now in strict lockdowns if they are in cities like Shanghai and Beijing. Central Asian countries do not follow such strict policies against COVID. Turkmenistan might be the strictest among them as the country is closed for international travel, but until now, there has been no strict lockdown inside the country. At the time of writing, there are signs of improvements in China on easing student visas, but no significant steps have been taken yet. Any policy change from China on this issue will help enhance its attractiveness for ISM.

For Turkey, the main uncertainty for attracting ISM from Central Asia is its economic woes. The comprehensive scholarships provided by the Turkish government are important drivers. However, the country is facing a serious devaluation of its currency, with the inflation rate hitting 70 percent in April 2022. The scholarships may become less attractive after these developments. Aside from this, Turkey may currently be in a relatively better position than Russia and China, as it did not close to ISM during the pandemic and is not facing harsh embargoes from a significant part of the world.

### **Conclusion**

While the triangle countries face serious challenges in maintaining their success in attracting ISM from Central Asia, they may still keep their position as the top three destinations for the region by large numbers compared to any other country. This is because no specific policy is currently being produced by the rest of the world to attract more students from this geopolitically important region. The competition will likely stay within the triangle countries. ▲

*Yusuf Ikbal Oldac is a Hong Kong Research Grants Council postdoc fellow at Lingnan University, Hong-Kong, China. Email: [yusufoldac@ln.edu.hk](mailto:yusufoldac@ln.edu.hk).*