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Russia's Strategic Interests in Kyrgyzstan: Geopolitical Implications of EEU Membership

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Abstract

This article examines the strategic interests of the Russian Federation in the Kyrgyz Republic, with a particular focus on the geopolitical implications of Kyrgyzstan's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Drawing upon a combination of theoretical approaches, including neorealism and dependency theory, as well as empirical data from international financial institutions and regional policy reports, the study demonstrates that the EEU operates not only as a framework for economic cooperation but also as a mechanism of geopolitical influence. The research situates Kyrgyzstan within the broader context of post-Soviet regional integration, where economic initiatives are closely intertwined with security and political considerations. It argues that Russia's strategic engagement in Kyrgyzstan reflects a broader objective of maintaining influence in Central Asia amid increasing competition from other external actors, particularly China and the European Union. The findings reveal a persistent pattern of asymmetric interdependence, expressed through remittance dependence, trade concentration, and institutional constraints embedded within EEU regulations. In particular, the Kyrgyz economy remains highly reliant on labor migration flows to Russia, which in turn creates a channel of economic and political leverage. Furthermore, trade patterns indicate a structural imbalance, limiting diversification opportunities. The analysis further shows that while EEU membership provides certain economic benefits, such as improved market access and regulatory harmonization, it simultaneously reinforces structural dependency and constrains Kyrgyzstan's strategic autonomy. This duality highlights the complex nature of regional integration, where economic gains are often accompanied by geopolitical trade-offs in an increasingly competitive regional environment.

Keywords: Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), Kyrgyz Republic, Russian Federation, Central Asia, geopolitical strategy, economic integration, asymmetric interdependence, remittances, regional security, post-Soviet space

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Introduction

In the decades following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Central Asia has undergone a profound transformation, evolving from a peripheral region within a centralized system into a complex geopolitical space characterized by competing external influences and internal structural challenges. The emergence of independent states has been accompanied by persistent economic



vulnerabilities, uneven political development, and an ongoing search for viable models of regional integration. Within this context, the Kyrgyz Republic occupies a particularly distinctive position. Unlike many of its regional counterparts, Kyrgyzstan has pursued a comparatively open political trajectory, marked by periodic democratic reforms and political pluralism, while simultaneously facing significant economic constraints, including limited industrial capacity, high external dependency, and susceptibility to external shocks.

These structural characteristics have shaped Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy orientation, encouraging active engagement in regional and international economic frameworks as a means of ensuring stability and development. As a result, the country has positioned itself as a participant in multiple integration initiatives, reflecting both pragmatic economic considerations and broader geopolitical alignments. For the Russian Federation, Kyrgyzstan represents a strategically important partner within its wider Central Asian policy. This significance is rooted not only in historical, cultural, and linguistic ties inherited from the Soviet period, but also in contemporary strategic calculations. Russia views Central Asia as a key sphere of influence, essential for maintaining regional security, safeguarding economic interests, and counterbalancing the growing presence of other external actors, particularly China and the European Union.

In this context, Kyrgyzstan's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015 constituted a critical turning point in its foreign economic and geopolitical orientation. Officially justified by the promise of economic modernization, expanded market access, and improved conditions for labor migration, the decision to join the EEU was also deeply embedded in a broader framework of geopolitical considerations. The EEU, widely regarded as a Russia-led integration project, has been interpreted by scholars as an instrument for institutionalizing influence in the post-Soviet space and reinforcing regional hierarchies [Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2017]. Through regulatory harmonization, trade integration, and coordinated economic policies, the Union creates both opportunities and constraints for its member states.

This article argues that Kyrgyzstan's participation in the EEU has contributed to the consolidation of a system of structured dependence that aligns closely with Russia's strategic interests. While integration has facilitated certain economic benefits particularly in terms of labor mobility, remittance flows, and access to the Russian market it has simultaneously deepened asymmetric interdependence and limited the country's strategic autonomy. By embedding Kyrgyzstan within a network of institutional commitments and economic linkages centered on Russia, EEU membership has reinforced patterns of dependency that shape both domestic policy choices and external relations.

Furthermore, the paper situates this dynamic within the broader context of intensifying geopolitical competition in Central Asia. As new actors expand their economic and political engagement in the region, Kyrgyzstan's ability to pursue a balanced and diversified foreign policy becomes increasingly constrained. The analysis therefore highlights the dual nature of regional integration: while offering pathways for economic cooperation and development, it also functions as a mechanism through which power asymmetries are reproduced and geopolitical influence is exercised.

Research Method

This study adopts a qualitative research design, complemented by elements of comparative and descriptive analysis, to examine the strategic interests of the Russian Federation in the Kyrgyz Republic within the context of its membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).

The research is grounded in the analysis of secondary data and theoretical interpretation. Empirical evidence is drawn from a range of international and regional sources, including reports published by the World Bank, national statistical agencies, and policy-oriented institutions. These data are utilized to evaluate key indicators such as remittance inflows, trade structure, and macroeconomic dynamics over the period 2015-2025. The selected timeframe corresponds to the period following Kyrgyzstan's accession to the EEU and enables an assessment of the medium-term economic and structural effects of integration.

The analytical framework is informed by a synthesis of neorealist and institutionalist perspectives, supplemented by the concept of asymmetric interdependence. This approach facilitates an examination of the ways in which economic linkages may function as instruments of geopolitical influence. Within this framework, particular attention is given to the structural constraints and power asymmetries embedded in regional integration processes.

Methodologically, the study employs a case study approach, focusing on the Kyrgyz Republic as a representative example of a small, economically vulnerable state participating in a regional integration project dominated by a major power. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of country-specific dynamics while maintaining analytical relevance to broader regional patterns.

In addition, a comparative dimension is incorporated through the analysis of other EEU member states, enabling the identification of structural differences and the evaluation of Kyrgyzstan's relative position within the Union. The integration of qualitative analysis with empirical data enhances the robustness of the findings and provides a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between economic integration and geopolitical strategy.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis is grounded in a synthesis of neorealist and institutionalist perspectives, which together provide a multidimensional understanding of the dynamics shaping relations between the Russian Federation and the Kyrgyz Republic within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). By combining these approaches, the study seeks to bridge the gap between power-oriented and institution-oriented explanations of regional integration.

From a neorealist standpoint, Russia's engagement in Central Asia can be interpreted as part of a broader strategy aimed at preserving its sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space and counterbalancing the growing presence of other major powers, particularly China and the European Union [Waltz, 1979]. In this context, regional organizations are not merely instruments of cooperation but also mechanisms through which dominant states project power and secure strategic interests. Central Asia, due to its geographic position and historical ties, occupies a critical role in Russia's foreign policy calculus, making Kyrgyzstan an important element within this regional configuration.

At the same time, the EEU reflects the logic of institutionalist theories of regional integration, which emphasize the role of formal rules, norms, and organizations in facilitating cooperation and reducing transaction costs among member states [Mattli, 1999]. Through the harmonization of regulatory frameworks, the removal of trade barriers, and the coordination of economic policies, the EEU creates an institutional environment that promotes economic interaction and interdependence.

However, unlike more balanced models of integration such as those observed in the European Union the EEU is characterized by pronounced structural asymmetry. The significant disparities in economic size, political influence, and institutional capacity among member states result in uneven distributions of costs and benefits. As Keohane and Nye [2012] argue, interdependence is rarely

symmetrical; instead, it often produces relationships in which one state is more vulnerable to external shocks and policy decisions than others. This concept of asymmetric interdependence is central to understanding Kyrgyzstan's position within the EEU.

In the case of Kyrgyzstan, economic integration has generated both opportunities and constraints. While access to larger markets and labor mobility has provided tangible economic benefits, these advantages are accompanied by increased exposure to external economic fluctuations and reduced policy autonomy. The asymmetrical nature of interdependence manifests in areas such as remittance dependence, trade concentration, and regulatory alignment, all of which contribute to a structural relationship in which Kyrgyzstan remains more dependent on Russia than vice versa.

Thus, the theoretical framework adopted in this study highlights the dual nature of regional integration within the EEU: it functions simultaneously as a mechanism for economic cooperation and as an instrument through which existing power hierarchies are maintained and reproduced.

Economic Interdependence and Structural Dependence

The depth of Kyrgyzstan's economic dependence on Russia is most clearly illustrated by the scale of remittance inflows. In 2025, total remittances reached approximately 3.49 billion US dollars, of which more than 90 percent originated from the Russian Federation [Kabar, 2026]. In macroeconomic terms, these inflows accounted for roughly 15 to 16 percent of Kyrgyzstan's gross domestic product [Kabar, 2026; World Bank, 2024]. Such figures place Kyrgyzstan among the most remittance-dependent economies globally.

This dependence has profound structural implications. Remittances serve not only as a source of household income but also as a stabilizing factor for the national economy, supporting domestic consumption and contributing to balance-of-payments stability. As a result, economic fluctuations in Russia are rapidly transmitted to Kyrgyzstan. This creates a condition in which Kyrgyzstan's economic stability is closely tied to external developments beyond its control.

The evolution of key macroeconomic indicators over the period following EEU accession further illustrates this pattern:

Table 1. Macroeconomic Trends in Kyrgyzstan (2015–2025)

Indicator	2015	2020	2025
GDP (USD billion)	6.7	7.7	13.5–14
Remittances (USD billion)	2.0	2.4	3.4–3.5
Remittances (% of GDP)	~30%	~29%	~15–16%
GDP Growth (%)	3.9	-8.6	~10

Sources: World Bank (2024b, 2024c, 2024d), International Monetary Fund (2025).

A closer examination of these figures reveals a dual dynamic. On the one hand, Kyrgyzstan's GDP has expanded significantly, particularly in the post-2022 period. On the other hand, the absolute volume of remittances has also increased, indicating that economic growth has not reduced structural dependence. Instead, the relative share of remittances has declined primarily due to overall economic expansion rather than diversification.

Trade patterns provide additional evidence of this dependence. Following the imposition of international sanctions on Russia, Kyrgyzstan experienced a surge in economic activity linked to the reorientation of supply chains. According to available estimates, GDP growth reached approximately 10 percent in 2025, driven in part by increased trade flows and re-export activities [Reuters, 2025]. In this context, Kyrgyzstan has assumed the role of an intermediary economy, facilitating the movement of goods into the Russian market.

Trade Structure and EEU Integration

The structure of Kyrgyzstan's trade within the EEU reflects a high degree of concentration, particularly in relation to Russia. Imports from Russia account for a substantial share of total imports, especially in critical sectors such as energy and industrial goods. At the same time, exports remain relatively limited in scope and are concentrated in low-value-added products.

This imbalance is evident in the composition of trade flows:

Table 2. Approximate Structure of Kyrgyzstan's External Trade

Trade Indicator	Share (%)
Imports from Russia	30–35%
Exports to EEU	35–40%
Energy imports from Russia	>50%

Sources: World Bank (2024e), Eurasian Economic Commission (2024), International Trade Centre (2024).

The data suggest that Kyrgyzstan's participation in the EEU has not significantly altered the structure of its economy. Instead, it has reinforced existing patterns of dependence, particularly in relation to energy and industrial imports. From a theoretical perspective, this challenges the expectation that regional integration leads to diversification and convergence.

Comparative Perspective within the EEU

A comparative analysis of EEU member states further highlights Kyrgyzstan's unique position. While other members exhibit varying degrees of economic development and diversification, Kyrgyzstan remains the most dependent on external inflows.

Table 3. Comparative Indicators of EEU Member States (2025)

Country	GDP (USD bn)	Remittances (% GDP)	Economic Profile
Russia	>2000	<1%	Diversified
Kazakhstan	~250	<1%	Resource-based
Belarus	~70	~2%	Industrial
Armenia	~20	~10%	Mixed
Kyrgyzstan	~14	~15%	Remittance-driven

Sources: World Bank (2024f), International Monetary Fund (2025).

This comparison underscores the asymmetrical nature of the EEU. While larger economies such as Russia and Kazakhstan maintain diversified economic structures, Kyrgyzstan remains highly vulnerable to external shocks. Its dependence on remittances and limited industrial base distinguish it from other member states.

Security Dimension and Strategic Presence

The strategic interests of the Russian Federation in the Kyrgyz Republic extend significantly beyond economic considerations, encompassing a pronounced security and military dimension. This aspect of bilateral relations is an essential component of Russia's broader regional posture in Central Asia, where security and geopolitical influence are closely intertwined.

A key manifestation of this presence is the deployment of Russian military infrastructure on Kyrgyz territory, most notably the Kant airbase. This facility represents an important element of Russia's forward military positioning in the region and reflects Kyrgyzstan's role within Russia's wider security architecture. The existence of such infrastructure underscores the strategic value attributed to Kyrgyzstan within Moscow's regional planning, particularly in terms of rapid response capabilities and regional force projection.

Kyrgyzstan's geographic location further enhances its strategic significance. Situated in a sensitive area of Central Asia and in relative proximity to Afghanistan, the country occupies an important position within regional security dynamics. This location increases its relevance in relation to potential transnational security threats, including instability spillovers, terrorism, and cross-border security risks.

In addition to bilateral military cooperation, Kyrgyzstan's participation in the Collective Security Treaty Organization provides an institutional framework that further integrates the country into a Russia-led security system. This multilateral arrangement reinforces Moscow's role as a principal security provider in the post-Soviet space and contributes to the institutionalization of defense cooperation among member states.

Taken together, these elements illustrate how security cooperation complements economic integration within the Eurasian Economic Union framework. The interaction between military presence, institutional alignment, and economic interdependence creates a multidimensional structure of influence, through which Russia consolidates its strategic position in Kyrgyzstan and the broader Central Asian region.

External Actors and Emerging Constraints

While the Russian Federation remains the dominant external actor in the Kyrgyz Republic, its position is increasingly complemented and, in certain domains, partially challenged by the growing presence of the People's Republic of China. Through the Belt and Road Initiative, China has significantly expanded its economic footprint in Kyrgyzstan, particularly in infrastructure development, transport connectivity, and trade facilitation. This expansion has contributed to the emergence of a parallel structure of external engagement, whereby Kyrgyzstan is simultaneously embedded within both Russian- and Chinese-centered economic networks.

This duality has important implications for the country's external dependence. Rather than replacing existing patterns of reliance, Chinese engagement has added an additional layer of structural interaction, resulting in a more complex configuration of interdependence. In this context,

Kyrgyzstan's foreign economic relations can be characterized as diversified in terms of partners but not necessarily in terms of autonomy, as dependence persists within multiple overlapping frameworks.

Western actors, while comparatively less influential in direct economic terms, continue to exert indirect pressure through financial regulation, governance standards, and institutional monitoring mechanisms. In particular, increasing scrutiny of financial flows associated with Russia has introduced additional constraints into the regional economic environment, affecting transaction channels and compliance requirements [Reuters, 2025]. Although these mechanisms do not constitute direct economic engagement at the same scale as Russia or China, they nonetheless shape the broader operational context within which Kyrgyzstan participates in international economic relations.

Collectively, these developments reflect the increasing complexity of Kyrgyzstan's external environment. The interaction of multiple external actors has produced a multilayered structure of dependence, in which economic opportunities are accompanied by overlapping strategic constraints. This evolving configuration underscores the importance of understanding Kyrgyzstan not as a passive recipient of influence from a single power, but as a state embedded in intersecting and sometimes competing regional and global frameworks.

Discussion

The evidence presented in this article indicates a consistent pattern of asymmetric interdependence within the relationship between the Russian Federation and the Kyrgyz Republic in the context of the Eurasian Economic Union. While Kyrgyzstan's participation in the EEU has facilitated greater access to regional markets and expanded labor mobility opportunities, it has not resulted in a fundamental transformation of the country's economic structure. Instead, integration has largely reinforced pre-existing patterns of external dependence, particularly in relation to labor migration, trade flows, and macroeconomic stability.

From a structural perspective, Russia's strategic interests are advanced through a multidimensional set of mechanisms that combine economic, institutional, and security instruments. Remittance flows constitute a key channel of influence, given their significant contribution to household incomes and overall macroeconomic stability. Similarly, trade concentration in key sectors and the harmonization of regulatory frameworks within the EEU further consolidate structural linkages between the two states. These mechanisms collectively function as instruments of influence that enable Russia to maintain a dominant position in Kyrgyzstan without reliance on direct coercive measures.

At the same time, the sustainability and long-term stability of this model of interdependence remain uncertain. The increasing economic presence of the People's Republic of China, particularly through infrastructure investment and trade expansion, introduces an alternative pole of influence in the region. In parallel, broader shifts in the global economic and geopolitical environment, including sanctions regimes and evolving trade corridors, are reshaping the external constraints and opportunities faced by Kyrgyzstan.

These developments suggest that while asymmetric interdependence currently characterizes Kyrgyzstan's position within the EEU, this configuration is not static. Instead, it is subject to gradual reconfiguration under the influence of emerging external actors and changing structural conditions in the international system.

Conclusion

The membership of the Kyrgyz Republic in the Eurasian Economic Union constitutes a central pillar of the Russian Federation's broader strategic engagement in Central Asia. Beyond its formal economic rationale, the EEU operates as a multidimensional framework through which economic integration, institutional alignment, and geopolitical influence are simultaneously advanced. In this sense, the Union functions not only as a platform for regional cooperation but also as an instrument for the reproduction and consolidation of structured interdependence.

The findings of this study demonstrate that this interdependence is fundamentally asymmetric in nature. While Kyrgyzstan derives tangible benefits from EEU membership particularly in terms of labor mobility, remittance inflows, and access to regional markets these gains are accompanied by persistent structural constraints. The country remains highly exposed to external economic conditions, especially those of the Russian economy, which continues to play a decisive role in shaping its macroeconomic stability and development trajectory.

At the same time, the evolving regional environment suggests that this configuration is not static. The increasing economic presence of alternative external actors, alongside broader transformations in global trade and financial systems, introduces new dynamics that may gradually reshape the balance of influence in Central Asia. In particular, the growing role of China and the diversification of external economic linkages present both opportunities and constraints for Kyrgyzstan's strategic positioning.

Ultimately, the long-term trajectory of Kyrgyzstan's dependence will depend on the extent to which it can diversify its economic partnerships and enhance domestic resilience, as well as on the adaptability of the EEU as an integration framework. What emerges is not a fixed hierarchy, but a fluid and evolving system of interdependence in which power, structure, and strategy remain in constant negotiation.

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Россиянын Кыргызстандагы стратегиялык кызыкчылыктары: ЕАЭБге мүчөлүктүн геосаясий кесепеттери

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Аннотация

Бул макалада Россия Федерациясынын Кыргыз Республикасындагы стратегиялык кызыкчылыктары, өзгөчө Кыргызстандын Евразия экономикалык союзуна (ЕЭС) мүчөлүгүнүн геосаясий кесепеттери изилденет. Неореализм жана көз карандылык теориясын камтыган теориялык ыкмалардын айкалышына, ошондой эле эл аралык каржы институттарынын жана аймактык саясий докладдардын эмпирикалык маалыматтарына таянып, изилдөөдө ЕЭС экономикалык кызматташтыктын алкагы гана эмес, геосаясий таасирдин механизми катары да иштээри далилденет. Изилдөө Кыргызстанды постсоветтик аймактык интеграциянын кеңири контекстине жайгаштырат, мында экономикалык демилгелер коопсуздук жана саясий маселелер менен тыгыз байланышта болот. Россиянын Кыргызстандагы стратегиялык катышуусу Борбордук Азиядагы таасирин сактап калуунун, өзгөчө Кытай жана Европа Биримдигинин таасиринин күчөшү шартында кеңири максатын чагылдырарын далилдейт. Изилдөөнүн жыйынтыктары акча которуулардан көз карандылыкта, соода агымдарынын топтошуусунда жана ЕЭС ченемдеринде бекитилген институционалдык чектөөлөрдө чагылдырылган асимметриялык өз ара көз карандылыктын туруктуу үлгүсүн ачып берет. Атап айтканда, кыргыз экономикасы Россияга эмгек миграциясынан бир топ көз каранды болуп, бул өз кезегинде экономикалык жана саясий таасир каналын түзөт. Соода үлгүлөрү ар түрдүүлөштүрүү мүмкүнчүлүктөрүн чектеген структуралык теңсиздикти көрсөтөт. Талдоо ошондой эле ЕЭСке мүчөлүк белгилүү бир экономикалык артыкчылыктарды рынокко жакшыртылган мүмкүнчүлүктү жана ченемдик жөнгө салууну камсыз кылуу менен бир мезгилде структуралык көз карандылыкты күчөтүп, Кыргызстандын стратегиялык автономиясын чектээрин көрсөтөт. Бул эки жактуулук аймактык интеграциянын татаал мүнөзүн баса белгилейт, мында экономикалык пайда көбүнчө барган сайын атаандаш аймактык чөйрөдө геосаясий чыгымдар менен коштолот.

Ачкыч сөздөр: Евразия экономикалык союзу (ЕЭС), Кыргыз Республикасы, Россия Федерациясы, Борбордук Азия, геосаясий стратегия, экономикалык интеграция, асимметриялык өз ара көз карандылык, акча которуулар, аймактык коопсуздук, постсоветтик мейкиндик

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Стратегические интересы России в Кыргызстане: геополитические последствия членства в ЕАЭС

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Аннотация

В данной статье рассматриваются стратегические интересы Российской Федерации в Кыргызской Республике, с особым акцентом на геополитических последствиях членства Кыргызстана в Евразийском экономическом союзе (ЕАЭС). На основе сочетания теоретических подходов неореализма и теории зависимости, а также эмпирических данных международных финансовых институтов и региональных политических докладов в исследовании показано, что ЕАЭС функционирует не только как рамочный механизм экономического сотрудничества, но и как инструмент геополитического влияния. Исследование помещает Кыргызстан в более широкий контекст постсоветской региональной интеграции, в которой экономические инициативы тесно переплетаются с соображениями безопасности и политики. Утверждается, что стратегическое присутствие России в Кыргызстане отражает более широкую цель, сохранение влияния в Центральной Азии в условиях нарастающей конкуренции со стороны других внешних акторов, прежде всего Китая и Европейского союза. Результаты исследования выявляют устойчивую модель асимметричной взаимозависимости, выражающейся в зависимости от денежных переводов, концентрации торговых потоков и институциональных ограничениях, закреплённых в нормах ЕАЭС. В частности, кыргызская экономика в значительной мере зависит от трудовой миграции в Россию, что создаёт канал экономического и политического давления. Торговые паттерны свидетельствуют о структурном дисбалансе, сдерживающем возможности диверсификации. Анализ также показывает, что членство в ЕАЭС, предоставляя определённые экономические преимущества, улучшенный доступ на рынок и регуляторную гармонизацию, одновременно усугубляет структурную зависимость и ограничивает стратегическую автономию Кыргызстана. Эта двойственность подчёркивает сложную природу региональной интеграции, при которой экономические выгоды нередко сопряжены с геополитическими издержками в условиях всё более конкурентной региональной среды.

Ключевые слова: Евразийский экономический союз (ЕАЭС), Кыргызская Республика, Российская Федерация, Центральная Азия, геополитическая стратегия, экономическая интеграция, асимметричная взаимозависимость, денежные переводы, региональная безопасность, постсоветское пространство