

Central Asian Leaders Opted to Attend Curtailed Parade in Moscow- Pavel K. Baev



The Victory Day celebrated on May 9 is a hugely important and emotionally loaded holiday for the majority of Russians and Ukrainians, Kazakhs and Uzbeks, whose grandfathers fought together and defeated Nazi Germany back in 1945. In Russia, this solemn Remembrance Day was gradually converted by all-pervasive propaganda into a manifestation of militarism and

aggressive

ambition. This year, however, the traditionally loud festivities were subdued and street parades were cancelled due to [security concerns](#). Russia's fourteen and a half months long war against

Ukraine is not going well at all, and the [very reduced military parade](#) on the Red Square in Moscow revealed the sad

degradation of the formerly proud army. Yet, the presidents of all five Central Asian states, as well as the President of Belarus and Prime Minister of Armenia, were there to make company for Russia's beleaguered President Vladimir Putin.

The circumstances of this collective action are rather murky as four days prior to the big day, only Kyrgyzstan's President Sadyr Japarov [announced his schedule](#) to travel to Moscow. Then Tajikistan's President Emomali

Rahmon [confirmed his visit](#), but it was only on May 8 that Kazakhstan's reform-committed

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Uzbekistan's domestically-preoccupied President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, and Turkmenistan's reclusive President Serdar Berdimuhamedov

boarded their planes without even a word on the [sudden change](#) in their respective plans. Only direct and urgent

phone calls from the Kremlin could have convinced them to make the politically difficult

decision, but there are no signs of such summons on the official websites or other track records.

What made the normally carefully scripted ceremonies in Moscow unusually tense was the shocking [drone attack](#) on the Kremlin in the early hours of May 3, with two

spectacular even if low-yield explosions over the cupola of the Senate palace, on which the main flagpole is proudly erected. No material damage was done, but the political resonance of this daring strike, which the Ukrainians deny any involvement in, was massive. Suspicions in a "[false flag](#)" operation staged by a

branch of Russian omnipotent security services remain thick, but it has become clear that the attempts by the top brass to deliver a due “retaliation” failed, as the hypersonic [Kinzhal Kh-47M2](#) air-launched missile was shot down over Kyiv by the US-supplied Patriot MIM-104 air-to-surface system. Putin was compelled to show determination in presiding over the parade, and the presence of Central Asian guests of honor became an [insurance against the risk](#) of another drone strike, which would have amounted to a major international incident.

Putin’s need in surrounding himself with high-level guests was quite obvious, but the motivations of six leaders (with the obvious exception of Alexander Lukashenko, who is [in no position](#) to refuse Putin’s summons) are less clear. All five Central Asian states are playing, with different skill and success, a balancing game regarding the Ukraine war, refusing both to condemn Russian aggression and to recognize the annexations. This game is [not that dissimilar](#) to the policy that Türkiye is pursuing, though none of them dares to supply weapons to Ukraine. There is, however, always a price to pay for playing it both ways, and Tokayev, for one, was hardly entertained listening to [Putin’s speech](#) on the “civilization” coming again under attack from the treacherous Western elites.

This minor humiliation of displaying loyalty to Russia’s ruler is made agreeable by the fact that Kazakhstan is one of the [main beneficiaries](#) of the evolving confrontation between Russia and the West. Tens of thousands of young Russians have escaped from mobilization to this country, and hundreds of businesses have [relocated](#) to Astana and Almaty. Kazakhstan’s export to Russia has increased manyfold, and [media investigations](#) show that a large part of this trade flow consists of goods from Europe travelling this long way to satisfy desperate Russian demand for industrial imports. The EU takes measures to plug holes in the sanctions regime and seeks to [ensure Kazakhstan’s cooperation](#) in preventing the supply of

spare parts and high-tech components that the Russian [defense-industrial complex](#) urgently needs, but the definition of “dual use” technologies has become impossibly broad and complex.

What both the autocratic and the semi-democratic leaders of the post-Soviet states worry about are the consequences of Russia’s fast-progressing weakening in the course of the unwinnable war. Moscow may be unable to perform the role of a “security guarantor”, which it demonstrated as recently as January 2022, deploying troops to Kazakhstan for a short [order-restoring mission](#). The durability of Putin’s regime remains, nevertheless, a crucial underpinning for stability in Central Asia, so the five leaders reasoned that a little demonstration of solidarity can do no harm. They are all aware that the unimpressive parade in Moscow took place in the shadow of the long-prepared Ukrainian offensive, which may break the deadlock in the devastating war. Whether Putin’s regime survives the impact of a very probable defeat is the question that looms large for all neighbors, as well as for the re-energized West committed to delivering victory to Ukraine, but the answer can only be delivered by the Russians, who cannot find a clue in the old victory for bringing to an end the tragic unjust war that has demoralized the society and shaken the Russian state.



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