

THE FIGHT FOR INFLUENCE: RUSSIA IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Russia is determined to remain the dominant power in Eurasia, and building an effective Central Asia policy that protects Russian interests is part of achieving that goal. The fact that Moscow's influence in the region is waning is presenting Russia with new challenges. Yet, Russia, for the foreseeable future, will remain a key partner of Central Asian countries and will help them balance Chinese and American activities in the region.

Key Themes

- Central Asian states pursue strategies that involve developing relations with various economic, political, and military forces, including China, Russia, the United States, and countries of Europe and the Muslim world.
- Russia's influence is limited by external actors operating in the region—including the United States and particularly China, whose presence in Central Asia is rapidly expanding.
- To strengthen its position in Central Asia, Russia is focusing on regional integration by creating organizations like the Customs Union and the Eurasian Union. Moscow exerts its military-political influence through the Collective Security Treaty Organization.
- The process of creating the Customs Union and Eurasian Union has been difficult. The countries in the region, while viewing Russia as a guarantor of their external security, fear that such integration may encroach on their sovereignty.

Recommendations for Moscow

- Russia must define its national security interests in the region more clearly and look for opportunities to implement them.
- Russian politicians should avoid referring to Eurasia as the post-Soviet space, since this fosters distrust between Russia and Central Asian countries.
- To maintain its influence, Russia should play a more active role in infrastructure projects in Central Asia, an area in which it has started to yield to China. In particular, Russia could assist in solving the problem of water shortages in Central Asia, which Moscow has essentially avoided in recent years.
- Russia's competition with other actors in Central Asia should not close the door to cooperation with them. Given the possibility that the Arab uprisings and the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan could spread instability to Central Asia, cooperation between powers operating there will be key.
- Identifying potential sources of crises and other issues that jeopardize peace and stability in the region, such as unregulated migration from Central Asia to Russia and the radicalization of Islam, is now more important than ever. Russia should make its migration policy clear and acceptable to its partners in the region, and it should cooperate with them to fight extremism.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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