

REFLECTING ON A QUARTER CENTURY OF RUSSIA'S RELATIONS WITH CENTRAL ASIA

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Russia's geopolitical outlook in Central Asia is evolving. Its primary interests are maintaining its sphere of influence, keeping out Western influence and preventing the post-Soviet states there from drawing close to the West, and securing the region from external and internal threats to stability, especially with regard to spillover effects from Afghanistan. Russia also increasingly has to take into account the growing presence of China. As Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) gathers steam, the two so far appear committed to working together in Central Asia. They have agreed on a de facto duopoly: Russia takes the lead in regional military affairs and political stability, and China leads when it comes to economic development.

CENTRAL ASIA IN RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY

Central Asia is conspicuously absent from the official vocabulary of Russian foreign policy. The country's most recent Foreign Policy Concept, approved by President Vladimir Putin in November 2016, mentions the region just once—in the context of strengthening the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) for the purposes of consolidating mutual trust and partnerships in the region.¹ This may seem odd and may even contradict the practice of Russian diplomacy; however, it makes sense when one takes a closer look at the key elements of Russian foreign policy.

Focus on Major Powers

Russia prioritizes its relations with major global actors, powerful military-political blocs and alliances, and influential international organizations. Central Asia contains neither of the

first two. The SCO—founded by China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in 2001, and which now also includes India and Pakistan—is the sole regional organization that can be considered influential. However, it is hardly more than the sum of its parts; it is only a forum whose purpose is described somewhat vaguely in the Foreign Policy Concept as consolidating “mutual trust and partnership in Central Asia.”²

Russia dominates the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), whose members also include Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The CSTO is possibly even less than the sum of its parts, serving as a vehicle for Moscow's residual military presence in Central Asia. The Foreign Policy Concept describes it as “one of the key elements of the current security

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framework in the post-Soviet space . . . and in the adjoining regions,” and the document notes that “Russia seeks to facilitate the development of the CSTO into a prominent multifunctional international organization.”³ Unlike the SCO, it counts no other major power besides Russia among its members.

There are two other relevant organizations. The first is the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)—Russia’s vehicle for economic integration—which has only two Central Asian members (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) and little claim to international influence beyond what Russia can exercise on its own. The EAEU contains no other major powers. Second, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the oldest body covering Central Asia, is little more than a one-dimensional channel for Russian influence. It includes all five Central Asian states (with Turkmenistan as an observer) but no other major power, and it has no international influence beyond the post-Soviet space. The Foreign Policy Concept makes clear that the CIS’s purpose is to help keep this a zone of special interests:

While respecting the right of its partners within the CIS to establish relations with other international actors, Russia expects CIS member states to fully implement their obligations within the integration structures that include Russia, as well as further promote integration and mutually beneficial cooperation in the CIS space.⁴

This relatively crowded field of organizations constitutes Russia’s own unipolar regional universe—except for the SCO, in which China is the other heavyweight.

RUSSIA’S PIVOT TO ASIA

Russia’s relationship with China is more significant than its relationship with Central Asia. Moscow has entered a probably lengthy period of alienation from the West, and it is unlikely to restore even minimal trust with the United States as long as Putin remains in power. As a result, Russia is pivoting to the East. Central Asia does not play a big part in this pivot (contrary to Halford Mackinder’s famous thesis about “the geographical pivot of history”).⁵ In fact, the region occupies an increasingly peripheral role in Russia’s geopolitical considerations, while China moves to center stage.

China holds a highly significant place on Russia’s agenda in Central Asia. Beijing has become an indispensable strategic partner for the Kremlin as it seeks alternatives to the West, and it is an indispensable economic partner for the region’s countries. Moscow and Beijing now form a de facto duopoly in Central Asia, with Russia preeminent on political and security issues and China in charge of economic development. This leaves no room in the region for the influence of the West with its ideas about promoting democracy and its search for inroads for a military and political presence.

The timing of Russia’s pivot to the East was fortuitous relative to China’s own strategic moves. In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping, speaking in Kazakhstan, unveiled the BRI.⁶ This initiative envisions a single Eurasian economic space and a transcontinental transportation corridor between China and Europe, with one major route through Central Asia. The following year, Xi said that China was prepared to contribute \$40 billion toward the BRI through the Silk Road Fund.⁷ In May 2017, he announced that China would allocate a further \$14.5 billion to the fund.⁸

Meanwhile, the launch of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), another Chinese-led initiative, in 2014 was also a significant development. Russia joined the bank in 2015 and holds a \$6.5 billion share of its registered capital of \$100 billion.⁹ Moscow’s decision came after China consented to an affiliation between the BRI and the EAEU, with the SCO serving as the facilitating platform.¹⁰ This was more or less a compromise: Russia was forced to recognize China’s leading role in financing and investment in Central Asia, and China promised to consider Russian interests in the region.

Central Asian elites were especially happy about this development. Xi’s proposal promised investment, grants, and loans, which were previously unavailable and would have been problematic without Russia’s consent. Linking the BRI with the EAEU allows Central Asian countries to cooperate with China directly on bilateral and multilateral terms.

The EAEU appears to be the loser in this arrangement. There have been no joint projects between it and the Chinese business community so far, as the resources China has made available are far greater than those of the Russian-led union. Consequently, as Moscow has pivoted toward Beijing, China also has entered Central Asia.

Not by Soft Power Alone

Even as Russia is using the EAEU and the CSTO to project its economic and military influence into Central Asia, the CIS has been somewhat marginalized. Once its original purpose of facilitating a civilized divorce among the former Soviet republics had been accomplished, it evolved into an instrument of Russian soft power. Moscow relies on the CIS to promote and preserve the use of the Russian language in the region's educational systems, media outlets, and official communications. These efforts have been met with increasing resistance. At best, the Central Asian countries see Russia's soft power as a conduit for propaganda and for manipulating their Russian-speaking citizens; at worst, they view its efforts as an attempt to create fifth columns for undermining their sovereignty.

Russia has used various sweeteners to make its partnerships appear worthwhile to its Central Asian neighbors. To mark the anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations with the Central Asian countries, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov listed the following Russian contributions to the region:

- \$20 billion invested in Central Asia since the dissolution of the Soviet Union;
- 7,500 Russian and Russian–Central Asian joint ventures doing business there;
- 150,000 Central Asian students studying in Russian universities, including 46,000 of whom have been awarded Russian government scholarships;
- \$37 billion in remittances from Russia to Central Asia between 2013 and 2016;
- \$488 million in debt forgiveness for Kyrgyzstan and \$865 million for Uzbekistan; and
- more than \$6 billion in bilateral and multilateral aid to Central Asia in the previous decade.¹¹

These initiatives look impressive as expressions of friendship, especially as Russian officials stress their cost in light of Western sanctions. However, they are dwarfed by the many billions of dollars that China has committed and promised to commit to the region, especially through the BRI. To assess how Russian diplomacy in Central Asia has evolved amid Moscow's pivot to Asia, it is useful to examine Russia's relationships with each of its Central Asian neighbors in turn.

RUSSIA AND KAZAKHSTAN: NEIGHBORS WHO NEED EACH OTHER

Kazakhstan's size, natural-resource wealth, international prominence, significant Russian population, and long borders with Russia and China all make it a uniquely important regional partner for Russia. The main purpose of Russia's security policy in what is its gateway to Central Asia is to protect the 7,500-kilometer border the two countries share.¹²

The Nazarbayev-Putin Relationship as a Lynchpin

The two countries' officials generally avoid commenting on the bilateral relationship because it primarily depends on the ties between Putin and Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev.¹³ The importance of this reality is hard to overestimate and therefore, considering the advanced age of the Kazakh president, questions about the relationship's future are inevitable. Russia hopes post-Nazarbayev Kazakhstan will follow his policy of cultivating carefully calibrated, balanced relations.

Russia treats Nazarbayev delicately, showing him respect whenever possible and avoiding unnecessary aggravations. For example, Moscow remained neutral in the 2017 conflict between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.¹⁴ After Nazarbayev met with the challenger to then president Almazbek Atambayev's chosen successor in Kyrgyzstan's election, Atambayev condemned Nazarbayev's actions as interference and wanted Russia to intervene. Had Putin agreed, it would have been problematic for him and his Kazakh counterpart: Nazarbayev yielding to Russian pressure would have been considered humiliating by Kazakh elites; his refusal to do so would have damaged Putin's reputation.

An Uneasy Relationship

The crisis in Ukraine presented Kazakh elites with a major test.¹⁵ Given the large (but shrinking) Russian population in the country, there was serious concern about the Kremlin-sanctioned campaign to recruit volunteers and mercenaries to be sent to eastern Ukraine under the pretense of protecting ethnic Russians living there.¹⁶ Kazakhstan quickly reacted to provocative statements that various Russian nationalists made at the height of the crisis in 2014.¹⁷ Concerned that separatist sentiments might spread in the predominantly Russian northern part of the country, Astana tightened control over

Table 1: Chinese Economic Influence in Central Asia

	Bilateral Trade Volume With Russia (2016) ¹	Chinese Bilateral Trade Volume (2016) ²	China's Rank Among Central Asian Trade Partners (2016) ³	Recent Chinese Investments and Loans ⁴
Kazakhstan	\$12.9 billion	\$12.5 billion	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> From 2001 to 2015, Chinese direct investment in Kazakhstan amounted to \$13 billion.⁵ Chinese companies own stakes in several key Kazakh oil fields, and China controls up to 30% of Kazakhstan's oil extraction.⁶ In May 2017, two Chinese companies agreed to purchase 49% of Kazakhstan's Khorgos dry port, a key hub for China's BRI route to Europe.⁷ China's Jiangsu Province has agreed to invest \$600 million for developing the infrastructure surrounding Khorgos.⁸
Uzbekistan	\$2.7 billion	\$3.6 billion	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China is Uzbekistan's largest foreign investor; from 1992 to 2017, the total volume of Chinese investments reached \$8 billion, primarily for industrial and infrastructure projects.⁹ China helped construct and partially finance the \$1.9 billion Pap-Angren railway, which opened in 2016.¹⁰ In May 2017, Uzbekistan and China signed 100 agreements worth \$20 billion.¹¹
Turkmenistan	\$902 million	\$5.9 billion	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Turkmenistan has received billions in loans from China for the development of its gas fields. In 2011, Turkmenistan reportedly received \$8 billion in Chinese loans, as well as an additional undisclosed sum in 2013.¹² In 2009, a consortium led by the China National Petroleum Corporation acquired a \$10 billion production sharing agreement for the Galkynysh Gas Field.¹³ In 2016, Turkmenistan reportedly exported roughly 30 billion cubic meters of gas to China via the three existing Central Asia-China gas pipelines through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.¹⁴
Kyrgyzstan	\$1.2 billion	\$5.7 billion	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As of August 2017, China holds 41% of Kyrgyzstan's approximately \$4 billion in external governmental debt.¹⁵ Chinese foreign investment in Kyrgyzstan comprises 30% of the total.¹⁶ In 2015, China's total foreign direct investment stock to Kyrgyzstan reached \$984 million, up from \$45 million in 2005. China has primarily invested in the infrastructure, energy, and construction sectors.¹⁷ As of 2017, China and Kyrgyzstan have signed more than ten investment agreements worth \$1.8 billion.¹⁸
Tajikistan	\$688 million	\$1.8 billion	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In 2015, China invested \$273 million in Tajikistan, 58% of total investment, compared to Russia's direct investment of \$35 million.¹⁹ By October 2016, China's accumulated direct investments reached over \$1 billion.²⁰ In 2014, construction began on the Tajik section of Line D of the Central-Asia gas pipeline, for which China National Petroleum Corporation plans to invest \$3.2 billion.²¹

1 "World Integrated Trade Solutions," World Bank, 2016, <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/CHN/Year/LTST/TradeFlow/EXPIMP/Partner/by-country>; and "Kazakhstan," Atlas MIT Trade Database, 2016, <https://atlas.media.mit.edu/en/profile/country/kaz/>.

2 Ibid.

3 Rankings based on bilateral trade volumes in 2016 according to data from the World Bank, Atlas MIT, and the European Union Directorate-General for Trade.

4 Given the lack of consistent foreign investment indicators for all five Central Asian countries, illustrative Chinese investment figures, deals, and projects have been provided for each country.

5 Timofey Bordachev, "Russia and China in Central Asia," Valdai Discussion Club, June 2016, <http://valdaiclub.com/files/11127/>.

6 Shawn Snow, "Central Asia's Lukewarm Pivot to China," *Diplomat*, August 16, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/08/central-asias-lukewarm-pivot-to-china/>; and Mariya Gordeyeva, "China Buys Into Giant Kazakh Oilfield for \$5 Billion," Reuters, September 7, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-oil-kashagan-china/china-buys-into-giant-kazakh-oilfield-for-5-billion-idUSBRE98606620130907>.

7 "Chinese Companies Buy Stake in Dry Port In Kazakhstan," *China Daily*, May 15, 2017, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2017-05/15/content_29355527.htm.

8 Jack Farchy, James Kyngge, Christ Campbell, and David Blood, "One Belt, One Road," *Financial Times*, September 14, 2016, <https://ig.ft.com/sites/special-reports/one-belt-one-road/>.

9 Ren Qi, "Belt and Road a 'Great Opportunity': Uzbek Official," *China Daily*, December 5, 2017, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2017-12/05/content_35220289.htm; "Uzbekistan, China Planning to Sign \$20 Billion in Agreements During Mirziyoyev's Visit to Beijing," Interfax, May 10, 2017, <http://www.interfax.com/newsinf.asp?id=753179>; and "China To Expand Central Asian Presence with \$10 Billion in Loans," Reuters, December 5, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/china-centralasia/china-to-expand-c-asian-presence-with-10-bln-in-loans-idUSL5E8N59DS20121205>.

10 Bruce Pannier, "Uzbek President in China to Sign \$20 Billion in Agreements, Talk Security," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, May 11, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/uzbekistan-president-china-visit/28480763.html>.

11 Ibid.

12 Paul Stronski, "Turkmenistan at Twenty-Five: The High Price of Authoritarianism," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 30, 2017, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/01/30/turkmenistan-at-twenty-five-high-price-of-authoritarianism-pub-67839>; and Gary Sands, "China Striving to Boost Energy Imports From Turkmenistan," EurasiaNet, November 24, 2017, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/86181>.

13 Sands, "China Striving to Boost Energy Imports from Turkmenistan."

14 Bruce Pannier, "The End of the (Gas Pipe-) Line for Turkmenistan," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 6, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmenistan-gas-pipeline-china-berdymukhammedov-iran-russia/28353522.html>.

15 Dirk van der Kley, "Can Central Asia's Poorest States Pay Back Their Debts to China?," *Diplomat*, December 1, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/can-central-asias-poorest-states-pay-back-their-debts-to-china/>.

16 Kuban Abdymen, "Kyrgyzstan Cheers Rise of China's Investment," *Global Times*, November 3, 2016, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1015733.shtml>.

17 Dinara Taldybayeva, "Prospects for China - Kyrgyzstan Economic Relations in the Framework of the Silk Road Economic Belt Project," HKTDC Research, March 28, 2017, http://china-trade-research.hktdc.com/business-news/article/The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative/Prospects-for-China-Kyrgyzstan-Economic-Relations-in-the-Framework-of-the-Silk-Road-Economic-Belt-Project/obor/en/1/1X000000/1X0A9JIX.htm?lien_externe_oui=Continue.

18 "Kyrgyzstan Foreign Investment," Santander Trade Portal, November 2017, <https://en.portal.santandertrade.com/establish-overseas/kyrgyzstan/investing-3>.

19 "China Leads in Direct Investment in Tajikistan's Economy," Asia Plus, February 3, 2017, <https://news.tj/en/news/tajikistan/economic/20170203/236278>.

20 Ibid.

21 Jacopo Dettoni, "China Extends Tajikistan \$500 Million Swap Line to Keep Currency Afloat," *Nikkei Asian Review*, September 5, 2015, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/China-extends-Tajikistan-500-million-swap-line-to-keep-currency-afloat>.

the activities of pro-Russian activists and the "Russian World" propaganda on social media networks.¹⁸

In most cases, Russians leave Kazakhstan because of its ethnic and linguistic policies.¹⁹ The authorities are determined to build what they call Kazakh Eli, or the Land of Kazakhs—as opposed to Kazakhstan—an approach that worries Russians. Nazarbayev's decision to have the country switch from the Cyrillic alphabet to a Latin one illustrates the desire to reduce Russian influence. The government of Kazakhstan subsequently criticized instances of overreach regarding cultural and linguistic policies, as well as the rush to switch alphabets, but billboards calling for the creation of Kazakh Eli and commemorating Kazakhstan's five-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary appeared in 2015.²⁰ This signaled that the government believed that the threat of Russian separatism had been thwarted. This threat will gradually wane as the percentage of Russians in Kazakhstan diminishes over time.

Nevertheless, given the open border between the two countries, a "Russian spring" in parts of Kazakhstan is possible, especially if provoked from the outside. In January 2017, Pavel Shperov, a member of the Russian State Duma from the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party, said that it was wrong to describe Russians living in Kazakhstan as a diaspora because they lived on territory that had temporarily been taken away and that would be returned to Russia in the near future.²¹ Party leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy had made similarly provocative statements previously.²² Shperov's speech led Kazakhstan's Foreign Ministry to protest to its Russian counterpart, and the remarks also provoked lively debate in the country's media landscape.²³ Later in the year, the Kazakh Constitution was amended in part to underscore the "immutability" of the country's independence and territorial integrity.²⁴

The Costs and Benefits of Russian Friendship

As important as Kazakhstan is for Russia, Moscow is even more important for Astana. A healthy relationship is essential to Kazakhstan's survival, since its key commercial routes (railways, highways, and pipelines) pass through Russia. Kazakhstan's participation in the EAEU has taken a toll on its economy. The Ukrainian conflict and Western sanctions have caused collateral damage in Kazakhstan.²⁵ The sanctions have had a significant impact on small and medium-sized businesses that depend on European imports. Russia has indiscriminately limited the transit of European goods across the border to keep out goods subject to its own countersanctions.²⁶ Turkish goods shipped through Russia faced similar restrictions in 2015, albeit on a much smaller scale, after Turkey shot down a Russian bomber.²⁷

However, the conflict did allow Kazakhstan to record a diplomatic success when its mediation led to reconciliation between the two sides in 2016.²⁸ This breakthrough enhanced Nazarbayev's international reputation, especially in the post-Soviet space and the Turkic world. Kazakhstan has also mediated in the Syrian civil war.²⁹ Its offer to provide a venue for talks enabled Russia to create an alternative to the Western-influenced Geneva format and to demonstrate its commitment to the peaceful resolution of the conflict.

Kazakhstan's efforts at conflict resolution involving Russia strengthen its ability to act independently in other respects. For instance, Astana has attempted to maintain ties to NATO despite the skepticism, if not discontent, this prompted among some Russian elites. In November 2015, during an uptick in violence in eastern Ukraine, Kazakh Foreign Minister Erlan Idrissov said he welcomed greater engagement with the United States.³⁰ Under NATO's Partnership for Peace program, Kazakhstan hosted the 2017 Steppe Eagle military exercise with U.S., UK, Turkish, Tajik, and Kyrgyz troops—but without Russian participation. This exercise provoked Russian criticism. One newspaper article, for example, said: "The U.S. trains Kazakhstan's military personnel free of charge, instilling in them its values and ideology."³¹ The country remains Russia's closest ally in the CIS, but as one Kazakh analyst wrote, "Russia is generally frustrated with Kazakhstan's multi-vector policy," especially after what happened in Ukraine.³²

RUSSIA AND UZBEKISTAN: PATIENCE IS A VIRTUE

Meanwhile, Russia's policy toward Uzbekistan has undergone a significant change since the death of former president Islam Karimov and the accession of Shavkat Mirziyoyev to the presidency in 2016. Moscow's principal goal is to enhance its influence in the region by building up bilateral relations and relying on Tashkent as a hub for its efforts to secure Central Asia from the threat of instability spilling over from Afghanistan.

Russia's leadership has a record of patient, nonconfrontational relations with the difficult, stubborn autocrats of Central Asia, including Karimov, who was perhaps its most difficult partner there. Putin always showed him respect, carefully listening to his long monologues and emotional tirades, especially on Afghanistan.³³ In the decade following Karimov's turn back toward Russia, Uzbekistan rejoined the CSTO but then left once again in 2012. Uzbekistan did not join the EAEU or sign a free-trade agreement with it, despite long declaring an intent to do so.³⁴ Russia has remained unfazed by these twists and turns, despite the lack of measurable progress in the relationship and Moscow's inability to draw Uzbekistan closer to its orbit, even in the economic sphere. Russia now appears determined to build a better relationship with the new leadership in Tashkent and to shape Uzbekistan to serve Moscow's goals in the region.

A New Chapter

Russia's patience paid off when Mirziyoyev became president, especially as his main rival for the position was the more pro-Western Rustam Azimov. Mirziyoyev surprised many observers by visiting Turkmenistan for his first foreign trip. Uzbekistan has sought to normalize relations with Ashgabat, which imploded in 2002 when Turkmenistan accused the Uzbek security services of participating in a failed coup attempt against then president Saparmurat Niyazov.³⁵ Visiting Ashgabat first demonstrated that Mirziyoyev's foreign policy would focus first on Central Asia.³⁶ He visited Kazakhstan and Russia next, and only then Europe and the United States. His actions pleased the Kremlin, especially in light of the many agreements signed during his trip to Moscow.

The first deals pertained to cooperation involving military technology.³⁷ By the end of 2017, Uzbekistan had chosen

an assortment of weapons and equipment to purchase from Russia: attack and military-transport helicopters, armored vehicles, small arms and ammunition, and multirole Su-30SM fighter aircraft.³⁸ The Uzbek army still uses Soviet-era weapons and is interested in repairs, maintenance, and upgrades.³⁹ Officers resumed training in Russian military academies through arrangements that had been suspended since Uzbekistan withdrew from the CSTO in 2012.⁴⁰ In addition, the Russian Foreign Ministry has been asked to help Uzbek military personnel learn Russian.

Russia has welcomed Mirziyoyev's plans to reform the military. Uzbekistan cannot afford to spend more than it already does on these efforts, as it already devotes almost 4 percent of GDP to defense and security.⁴¹ Russia, therefore, offers Tashkent the same discounted rates for military equipment that it gives to CSTO members.⁴² Moscow's goal is to offer maximum incentives for cooperation to its key partner in securing the border with Afghanistan.

Trading Up

Economic cooperation with Russia has increased under Mirziyoyev too. His visit to Moscow in April 2017 produced agreements worth \$16 billion.⁴³ Uzbekistan's deputy minister of foreign trade said that trade between the two countries might reach \$5 billion in 2017.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, Mirziyoyev's initiative to create an association of Central Asian leaders and business communities is unlikely to fully overcome the political, resource, economic, and tribal differences among the region's countries—but his efforts can help manage and perhaps reduce these divides. Mirziyoyev's attempts could position Uzbekistan as the driving force of this process, enhancing his standing in the region. If that happens, a strong relationship with Tashkent could enhance Russia's influence in the region.

RUSSIA AND TURKMENISTAN: IMPROVING RELATIONS

Like its Uzbekistan policy, Russia's goals in Turkmenistan have changed significantly in the past decade. The country's natural gas previously was the key element of the relationship, but the gas trade between the two countries has declined dramatically over the past ten years as a result of China's big push to develop economic ties with Turkmenistan and build gas pipelines.⁴⁵ The situation along the Turkmen-Afghan border is now the most important issue on the agenda. Like elsewhere

in Central Asia, another Russian priority is minimizing Western influence.

The only gas-related issue on Moscow's agenda today is preventing the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline, which would bypass Russia to carry Turkmenistan's gas to Europe. Russia wants to prevent new competitors from entering the European gas market and to stop Turkmenistan from developing commercial and political ties with the West. With no plans under way to implement the project, these interests appear to be well protected.⁴⁶

Meanwhile, the situation along the border with Afghanistan has deteriorated. President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov inherited extreme suspicion of any foreign presence from his predecessor, Saparmurat Niyazov, who pioneered a doctrine of absolute neutrality.⁴⁷ For example, Turkmenistan refused to allow the United States to more fully utilize its airport located near the border for military operations in Afghanistan.⁴⁸ Russian officials have tried to engage their counterparts repeatedly about the situation on the country's southern border and offered assistance. The latter has declined such help but has agreed to improve border defenses.⁴⁹

Russia has taken steps to raise the level of mutual trust between the two countries. It reportedly has offered to share intelligence on the situation on the Afghan border, and Russian specialists have advised their Turkmen colleagues on better ways to equip border posts.⁵⁰ Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu visited Turkmenistan in 2016, meeting with the president, the defense minister, and the chief of the general staff. In the fall of 2017, a delegation from Russia's defense ministry traveled to the country—for the first time in a long while—to discuss the “military-political situation in the Central Asian region and plans for international military cooperation.”⁵¹ Such official contacts are unprecedented and noteworthy; Turkmenistan has no tradition of discussing security issues with foreigners, and its generals are prohibited from traveling abroad for consultations with peers.

Russia's decision to rely on Uzbekistan as the conduit for its efforts to shore up regional security conditions appears to be paying off with Turkmenistan, which has been more receptive to cooperation with the latter than with it. Russia is gradually accomplishing its goal of drawing Turkmenistan closer. Moscow is careful to make clear that it is not trying to bring the

country into Russian-dominated organizations like the CSTO and the EAEU. In 2017, Berdimukhamedov led a delegation to the CIS summit, where the Turkmen delegates presented Putin with an alabai puppy—a famous breed of Turkmen shepherd dog—which Putin named Vernyy, the faithful one.⁵²

RUSSIA AND KYRGYZSTAN: A COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIP

Russia has been largely successful in pursuing its priorities in Kyrgyzstan, priorities that, like Moscow's interests elsewhere in the region, include keeping the country in its orbit, minimizing Western influence, and preventing the spread of instability from Afghanistan.

Kyrgyzstan traditionally has been the most Russia-friendly Central Asian country, but relations have been complicated of late. Russia seems to be more comfortable with authoritarian regimes than with democratic ones, and its approach to Kyrgyzstan is no exception. However, the country has tried to experiment with democratic governance, and it has paid a heavy price for its attempt to be different in a region with a long tradition of elitism, nepotism, and totalitarianism. This democratic experimentation triggered significant social upheaval in an economically underdeveloped and resource-poor country with a history of ethnic tensions between the Kyrgyz majority and the Uzbek minority.⁵³ In recent years, Kyrgyzstan has experienced two coups with numerous casualties, the exile of two presidents, the violent suppression of protests, the persecution of the opposition, and the killing of journalists.

Economic conditions have caused an exodus of migrant workers to Russia, between 500,000 and 1 million of whom were in the country in 2017.⁵⁴ According to the World Bank, their remittances in 2016 amounted to nearly \$2 billion and were equivalent to 30.4 percent of Kyrgyzstan's GDP.⁵⁵ The value of remittances from Kyrgyz migrant workers in Russia during the first quarter of 2017 was \$433 million, which exceeded the previous record from the same time period in 2013.⁵⁶ These migrant workers have been well organized for many years. Hundreds of thousands of them either have received Russian citizenship in a simplified procedure or at least enjoy some employment benefits due to their country's EAEU membership.

Kyrgyzstan's perennial border disputes with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan also pose an issue for Russia, which worries about the possibility of Afghan militants entering Kyrgyzstan through Tajik territory as happened in 1999 and 2000.⁵⁷ These disputes frequently result in violent clashes involving the countries' militaries and civilians. The unresolved issue of hydropower resources threatens to further raise tensions among the three neighbors.⁵⁸ They cannot agree on the construction of two hydroelectric plants in Kyrgyzstan and one in Tajikistan.⁵⁹ Uzbekistan is firmly opposed to these projects and claims they threaten its water supply, while Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan want to pursue them for power generation, as well as—probably—for added leverage vis-à-vis their more powerful neighbor.

In 2012, Russia could not help but be drawn into the dispute, since such large hydropower projects in the region require its financial and logistical participation. But it backed off in 2016, unwilling to antagonize Uzbekistan's then president Karimov.⁶⁰ When Russia blamed difficulties in accessing credit markets due to Western sanctions, then president Atambayev effectively accused it of treachery and canceled Kyrgyzstan's power-plants contract with Moscow. Russia downplayed this episode, making allowances for Atambayev's volatile personality and desire to grandstand before a domestic audience.⁶¹

Atambayev then caused a serious crisis within the EAEU in 2017. When Nazarbayev met with an opponent of his favored successor, Atambayev countered by hurling insults at the Kazakh president, his associates, and the Kazakh people.⁶² In response, Kazakhstan's customs officials started inspecting all cargo bound for Kyrgyzstan through the Kazakh-Kyrgyz and Russian-Kazakh borders, which essentially amounted to an economic blockade. As a result, the EAEU has almost stopped functioning in Central Asia. Russia pretends that nothing out of the ordinary has happened; otherwise, it would have to admit the failure of its integration efforts in Eurasia.

In the aftermath of the election of President Sooronbay Jeenbekov in October 2017, Russia is likely to help cautiously and gradually restore trust between Kyrgyzstan and its neighbors. This effort is likely to take a long time. Moscow seems to understand that its role should be secondary and that it should simply support Uzbekistan's integration efforts and leadership in the region.

Russia can afford to take the long view on Kyrgyzstan, which would have a hard time escaping its orbit. The United States' transit center at Manas was shut down in 2014 at the request of the Kyrgyz government following a mix of Russian pressure and enticements.⁶³ This leaves Kyrgyzstan with only two major power partners—China and Russia. Western influence has been minimized, and Russia's claim to a sphere of influence is respected.

RUSSIA AND TAJIKISTAN: A SPECIAL CASE

Regime stability and threats from Afghanistan are Russia's principal concerns in Tajikistan. Migrant labor and tensions among Central Asian countries round out the agenda between the two states. Tajikistan is home to Russia's 201 Division, which—in addition to serving as a hedge against threats from Afghanistan—is a pillar of the regime of President Emomali Rahmon in the eyes of the Tajik ruling elite. The country's place in Russia's sphere of influence is not in question, but it is a difficult partner. Its response to Russian appeals to join the EAEU has been cautious. It reiterates that it will carefully review the experiences of the union's newest members, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, before deciding.

At any given time, over 1 million of Tajikistan's 8 million people live and work in Russia. Their remittances amounted to 37 percent of the country's GDP in 2015.⁶⁴ The status of Tajik migrants in Russia differs from that of Kyrgyz ones. Because Tajikistan is not a member of the EAEU, its citizens are not entitled to the same protections as Kyrgyzstan's. Rahmon defends their rights publicly and in very emotional terms. Tajik migrant workers in Russia often are targets of xenophobic sentiments.⁶⁵ Russian media often use the word Tajik derisively. Conversely, every incident involving Tajik migrants and every assault against them, especially if fatal, reverberates in Tajikistan and damages the reputation of Russia and its citizens. There is no reason to believe that the situation will improve in the near future. General intolerance and hostility toward foreigners are on the rise in Russia and show no signs of subsiding, and Tajiks are perceived to be at the very bottom of the social ladder.

By contrast, exchanges between Moscow and Dushanbe on security issues have become more constructive of late. Russia has been helping to upgrade Tajikistan's law-enforcement

agencies and army.⁶⁶ The goal is to make the army smaller but more efficient and combat-ready. It has received the newest Russian surveillance equipment.⁶⁷ Russia's security services share intelligence on the deployment patterns of Afghan militants since the extensive and poorly guarded Tajik-Afghan border is considered to be most vulnerable to jihadi infiltration. The return of Russian troops to the porous border, which Tajikistan's forces have been patrolling alone since 2004, is still not on the table.⁶⁸ Dushanbe has agreed, however, to utilize the resources of Russia's 201 Division for patrolling the border, should the need arise.⁶⁹ Many believe that the authorities continue to keep Russian military personnel away from the border to cover up drug trafficking there, and it is alleged that they receive compensation for shielding traffickers.

China also has offered security assistance to Tajikistan, including help securing the Afghan border.⁷⁰ Beijing wants to more closely monitor the many Uighur Islamist radicals who live in Central Asia and could easily cross into the country via Afghanistan. China recently announced plans to build a military base for Afghan troops on the Afghan side of the border,⁷¹ but the Tajik side is off limits, perhaps for the same reasons that Russian troops are not allowed there.

In economic terms, Tajikistan is becoming increasingly dependent on China, which has become one of its main trading partners. China accounts for 53 percent of the country's external debt and provided 58 percent of its foreign direct investment in 2016.⁷² Tajikistan is unlikely to repay its debt and accumulates more through long-term, low-interest loans. Dushanbe likely will have to repay Beijing by granting access to its natural resources, by transferring stakes in strategic enterprises to Chinese corporations, or even possibly by ceding some territory to China.

Such developments could worsen the situation in the near future in what is probably the most unstable Central Asian country, alongside other issues such as domestic tensions, the brutal persecution of opposition activists and Muslims, and the ever-present Afghan threat. Most likely, Russia will attempt to prevent further instability in partnership with China, with the latter providing an economic lifeline to the embattled regime and Russia acting as the guarantor of its security and survival. In November 2017, the CSTO

Collective Rapid Reaction Force conducted an anti-terrorist military exercise in Tajikistan that involved 5,000 troops; more than 60 aircraft; and 1,500 pieces of weaponry, including a Iskander-M short-range ballistic missile system.⁷³ This exercise illustrated Russia's likely approach to any crisis in the country; the label of an anti-terrorist exercise offered a convenient cover to prepare for defeating all manner of enemies, foreign and domestic.

CONCLUSION

Russia's policy in Central Asia is evolving as a result of developments in and around the region, as well as changes in its relationships with other major powers. The breakdown in Moscow's relations with the West has resulted in a major geopolitical pivot to Asia and the pursuit of an even closer relationship with China. Worsening ties with the West have also reinforced Russia's long-standing policy of minimizing and, to the greatest possible extent, eliminating the influence and presence of the West in Central Asia. The pivot has strengthened the emerging Russian-Chinese duopoly in Central Asia, which the latter's BRI further reinforces. Russian policy shows a good deal of sensitivity to each Central Asian country's circumstances and demonstrates flexibility in developing tailored approaches to them. The most significant development in these bilateral relationships is the emergence of Uzbekistan as the most important partner for Russia's regional security policy.

The difficult situation the region faces—defined by poverty, lack of economic opportunity, underdevelopment, authoritarian governance, and instability arising from ethnic and religious rivalries—is compounded by the threat of instability spilling over from Afghanistan and of the exploitation of grievances by militant organizations. This presents Russia, China, and the Central Asian countries with an increasingly challenging environment. All indicators are that Russia's and China's likely responses will be consistent with the patterns they have established in recent years that bring to bear their respective advantages, with China driving economic development and Russia ensuring the political stability and security of the region's potentially fragile regimes.

Russia has been successful in securing its sphere of influence in Central Asia and expelling Western interests. This accounts for two out of its three principal objectives in the region.

Moscow's partnership with China has served its interests in the region so far, and the point at which their interests may diverge still appears to be rather far in the future. Achieving the third goal of securing the region from external and internal threats of instability is the crucial element that will ultimately determine the success of Russia's overall policy in Central Asia.

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U.S.-RUSSIA POLICY OPTIONS FOR THE LONG HAUL

With the U.S.-Russian relationship badly frayed, what are the biggest risks for escalation, deterioration, and miscalculation? What, if any, opportunities exist for halting a continued downward slide?

With an eye toward informing the conversation about key issues in U.S.-Russian relations, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has commissioned a series of analytical papers by leading U.S., Russian, and European experts and practitioners to take a cold-eyed look at these challenges.

Building on the work of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace—Chicago Council on Global Affairs Task Force on U.S. Policy Toward Russian, Ukraine, and Eurasia, these papers seek to better inform the conversation about U.S.-Russian relations and to expand the range of

perspectives beyond the relatively narrow confines of the current discussion in Washington and other capitals. The papers highlight the glaring differences between Russian and Western approaches to and perspectives on transatlantic, European, and Eurasian security.

The search for mutual understanding and dialogue is all the more challenging at a time when many of the long-established communication channels between Moscow and the West have been suspended as a result of what is increasingly described as a new cold war. Many of the perspectives in this collection differ, at times fundamentally, from the consensus view held by Western policymakers and analysts. Nevertheless, it is all the more vital for policymakers, analysts, and opinion-makers in the West to be informed about views held by their Russian counterparts, as these views oftentimes reflect and inform official Russian policy. This project is supported, in part, by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.



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