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Russia's role and interests in Central Asia



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1

Introduction

IN THE POST-SOVIET PERIOD Russia has found it hard to come to terms with its role – and the perception and indeed reality of diminished influence it now has – in the neighbouring countries that were part of the USSR. In Central Asia over the past 20 years or more the situation has fluctuated. Obituaries, though, about the demise of Russia's place in the region would seem to be premature.¹ On the one hand, Russia's desire to strengthen its role in Central Asia is again intensifying in a selective way. The focus, for example, around the Customs Union, and the envisaged plan that this should also involve Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (beyond Kazakhstan and Belarus), is a clear marker of intentions. But on the other, it is hard to say what the longer term picture holds and how viable these plans will prove – not least against the backcloth of leadership change that will inevitably and eventually come to the countries in the region and the implications stemming from those changes.

The historical legacy has been a long one. From the nineteenth century – and even in the eighteenth century for some of the northern parts of Kazakhstan – most of Central Asia was part of the Russian empire. Over 70 years of Soviet rule further consolidated domination from Moscow; and that continues to leave a strong mark today as well as several levers of influence, including Russian-oriented elites, cultural ties, media influence, and not least in the economic and security spheres. In generational terms, two of the key leaders in the region – President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan and the ailing President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan – have held the reins of power continuously since the latter part of the Soviet period. In terms of migration, Central Asia is still home to just under 7 million Russians and nearly half a million Ukrainians; and the number of migrant workers from Central Asia in Russia is reckoned to be over 4 million,² with only an imprecise estimation for those working there illegally.

Any assessment of the current context provides a mixed picture. The geostrategic location of the region is, of course, key and – coupled with its immense hydrocarbon reserves – that means it continues to draw considerable interest from external actors. In what is a complex and fluid environment, the balance sheet would still place Russia as the most prominent external power in Central Asia, in terms of primarily i) its high-level political relationships, ii) its security cooperation in the region, and iii) arguably, its range of investment projects in these countries.

A number of changes – some underway, others afoot – makes, however, for a shifting kaleidoscope, both internally and among external actors. For example, China will continue to increase in significance as an economic actor throughout Central Asia, as evidenced not least by the recent visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to the region

¹ See, for example, Jonson L (1998), "Russia and Central Asia: a new web of relations" RIA, 1998, and Nixey J (2012), "The long goodbye: Waning Russian influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia", RIA, June.

² Regnum 22 January 2013, citing Russian MFA official.

in the first half of September 2013. But that context might be seen to pose a choice for some in the region: namely, do Central Asian countries want to risk the GDP they get in trade from China or the GDP generated from remittances from their nationals working in Russia? But the formal and informal nature of these processes (trade and remittances) also contrives to allow Central Asian states to finesse and indeed avoid a stark choice between the two. In any case, governments only partly control trade and migration, which tend to have their own dynamic. Perhaps the main consideration to bear in mind at the outset is that the five Central Asian states would prefer not to be dominated by either Russia or China, but to have options with both – including with other external actors.

This paper looks mainly at Russia's foreign policy approach towards countries in Central Asia, its key identified interests, recent policy initiatives and engagement – and offers some tentative pointers for the period ahead, and questions about the challenges likely to be faced.

2

Foreign policy approach

RUSSIA'S APPROACH TOWARDS CENTRAL ASIA over the past two decades can be divided initially into three phases: in the first phase, which stretches from the break-up of the USSR to the mid 1990s, Moscow had no clear Central Asia policy – or even one to deal with the rest of the former Soviet countries. The lack of interest and focus in Central Asia was ideological, political, economic, and even cultural. The second phase, in the second half of the 1990s, marked a shift and was based on the precepts of the 'Primakov doctrine', which sought – in part successfully, in part not – to regain Russia's role as a centre of influence in its own neighbourhood.

The third phase is linked to President Vladimir Putin's coming to power in 2000 and the emphasis given, especially post 9/11, to stepping up Russia's involvement in Central Asia across the board.³ The revived level of engagement had a particular security dimension – both specific to the 9/11 context and also reflecting the main prism through which Moscow has traditionally viewed the region as a whole. But, in the economic domain, that gear-change was noted, with delayed effect, in the way Russia–Central Asia trade tripled between 2003–2007, from US\$7 billion to \$21 billion, a third of which is down to the hydrocarbon sector. The volume of official mutual trade in 2011 stood at \$27.3 billion,⁴ which is in fact behind China's overall trade figure with the region in that period of \$40 billion. And for 2012 the corresponding Chinese figure now stands at nearly \$46 billion but is set to rise sharply in the years to come.

By briefly tracking aspects of the recent Russian discourse on engagement in the region, identifying opportunities and risks, it may be possible to clarify whether and how to characterise a discernible fourth stage in Russia's approach to Central Asia in the post-Soviet period.

The Russian Federation (RF) Foreign Policy Concept (FP) of 2013 speaks both to the opportunities and the value of the Central Asia region to Russia – and also to the risks and challenges.⁵ On the one hand, an array of interests is not hard to identify: vital geo-political position, economic and trade opportunities, lasting Russian cultural impact, presence of Russian-speaking communities, etc. On risks and challenges, the FP Concept notes that "Russia will build up cooperation with the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) Member States in ensuring mutual security, including joint efforts to combat drug trafficking, transnational crime, and illegal migration. Priorities here are the neutralisation of specified threats coming from the territory of Afghanistan and the prevention of destabilisation of the situation in Central Asia." In its focus on destabilising factors, Russia's National Security Strategy to 2020 identifies the following risks: development of nationalistic mindset, xenophobia, separatism, and violent

³ Laruelle M (2009), "Russia in Central Asia: Old history, new challenges", EUCAM, September.

⁴ Figure cited by RF Ministry for Economic Development, September 2012.

⁵ The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (12 February 2013).

extremism, including religious radicalisation.⁶ The National Security Strategy document underscores the need to consolidate the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and other organisations, and to develop bilateral cooperation in the military and political spheres.

The subtext from both these documents suggests the degree to which Russian domestic and foreign policy towards Central Asia is heavily intertwined. At times, and in a perverse sense, Russia seems to be caught in two minds on Central Asia – unable to decide fully whether Central Asia is a foreign policy or domestic policy issue. Purely domestic considerations might point towards withdrawal from Central Asia. But foreign and security considerations pull firmly in the other direction. Certainly, the core interdependence between Russia and the Central Asian states today remains very much intact, including mutual borders more than 7,000 km long: specifically, 12 regions or *subekty* of the Russian Federation, which border the region, and among them such industrially developed ones as Samara, Volgograd, Chelyabinsk, and Omsk. In short, significant industrial potential is concentrated in border areas, and the major cities of the Volga region, Urals, and Siberia. Furthermore, strategically important communications linking central Russia to Siberia and the Far East are either close to the border or partially run through Kazakhstan's territory.

A key question stands out: to what extent does Moscow approach Central Asia as a region or as a collection of states, with a set of differentiated bilateral policies adjusted for each? In essence, both approaches are actively at work, but with more emphasis given to selective bilateralism.⁷ Certainly, bilateralism dominates in the security domain.⁸ On the one hand, as seen from Moscow or elsewhere, there are clear, objective reasons for viewing Central Asia as a region – stemming primarily from the context of Soviet-era fixed transportation and energy infrastructure on which the five countries continue to depend, and the trans-boundary waterways that cross the region. The five states are compelled and need to cooperate regionally in these areas, however patchy and mixed that cooperation may be. On the other hand, the more than two decades that have passed since the break-up of the Soviet Union have tended to accentuate the political, economic, cultural, and linguistic difference between the five countries, and this pattern of differentiation is likely to continue (and perhaps become more marked) in the medium term.

For Russia, the five Central Asia countries are certainly viewed differently and the growing divergence of domestic situations in these countries is duly noted: for example, Kazakhstan is considered a key partner and regarded as such.⁹ President Nazarbayev is singled out and identified in President Putin's eyes as worthy of special respect and attention. (Kazakhstan is one of the most consistently pro-Russian post-Soviet countries and President Nazarbayev is the master of a multi-vectored foreign policy). Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are beneficiaries of considerable Russian aid – and are targets now for inclusion in the Customs Union, even though their added value to that mechanism will be slow in coming. The lever of economic aid, from a Russian perspective, needs to be – and is being – used more to get closer security cooperation, and this has been particularly more evident over the past year. Since late 2012 Moscow has written off considerable amounts of debt from each, linked in part to Russian military base and facilities agreements in each case.

Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, for their part, are seen as difficult to control. Uzbekistan's departure from the CSTO in June 2012 seems to have been a particular catalyst, coupled with other factors in the security sphere that suggested something of a shift in Russia's approach. Turkmenistan, with its debt and promises of gas exports, has become more dependent on China since 2010. That said, Tashkent and Ashgabat also get significant

⁶ Russia's National Security Strategy to 2020 (12 May 2009).

⁷ "The future of Russia's involvement in Central Asia", Central Asia Policy Forum, George Washington University, December 2012.

⁸ Laruelle, *op cit*

⁹ "Russia's interests in Central Asia", Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), No 10, 2013.

Moscow attention despite the many strains and tensions that run through both sets of relationships with their northern neighbour. Ambitions, though, in relations here are necessarily more modest than with others in the region.¹⁰ However, it must be noted that the true extent of Russia's bilateral relations with each of the Central Asia countries is also largely obscured from view and difficult to capture fully.

In broad terms, though, what seems to emerge is that a fourth stage in the Russian approach to Central Asia is at least becoming discernible over the last year or so, and it is a trend to watch: what Alexander Cooley and Marlene Laruelle call a “more focused logic of hierarchy”.¹¹ That arguably involves a push for deeper ties with a narrower group of states, specifically gravitating towards Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, predominantly in the economic and security fields, and drawing also on the tools of soft power (Russian language, cultural influence including via the media, etc).

¹⁰ *Ibid*

¹¹ Cooley A, Laruelle M, (2013), “The changing logic of Russian strategy in Central Asia”, PONARS Eurasia Policy Menu No 260, August.

3

Main interests in Central Asia

Energy interests

RUSSIA STILL HAS A DOMINANT ENERGY PRESENCE IN CENTRAL ASIA. But again the picture is mixed. Traditionally, its activities were focused on Kazakhstan where relations among the energy industry's ruling old-guard remain extremely close. For example, the Russian company Lukoil is active in as many as seven oil and gas onshore projects and three offshore exploration projects in the Kazakhstan sector of the Caspian shelf. It still controls the main pipeline for Kazakhstani oil and by increasing the capacity of the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) – a project that continues to be a crucial test of bilateral energy cooperation – it has convinced Kazakhstan to feed more oil into it and give up more control. Currently, Kazakhstan accounts for approximately 40 per cent of Lukoil's proven reserves; projects in Kazakhstan provide over 90 per cent of oil and over 40 per cent of natural gas produced by Lukoil outside Russian territory. Rosneft, operating in Kazakhstan under the N-Exploration brand, has been less successful in Kazakhstan so far. And it has to be said that Russia's share in Central Asian oil sales overall remains modest. Despite a rapid rise since 2003, trade in the hydrocarbon sector is still below its Soviet-era levels.¹²

Indicators on gas are more upbeat. In Uzbekistan the two largest Russian companies, Gazprom and Lukoil, are not only involved in gas purchases there, but develop their own production capacities as well. The two corporations, along with their affiliates, account for over 20 per cent of natural gas production in Uzbekistan. In Turkmenistan, Russia's interests are restricted to the natural gas sector. Itera is the only Russian company directly participating in the development of Turkmen energy resources, although Lukoil has been trying to find its way into the Turkmenistan market. Russia's presence there remains limited, as Ashgabat allows foreign investment only in offshore gas fields which are more cost-intensive and technically difficult to develop.¹³ More broadly, export routes are no longer exclusively in Russia's hands. Turkmen gas is already exported directly to Iran and now to China. Kazakh oil is exported to China and also to the West via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. The market of diversified export destinations has meant that Moscow no longer can control Central Asian gas and oil prices, as in previous times, because it is now shaped by the energy needs of, for example, Iran, the West, and China, and what they are prepared to pay.

In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan investments by Russian energy companies are represented primarily by Gazprom which, through its affiliated structures, actually has a monopoly

¹² Sinitsina I (2012), "Economic cooperation between Russia and Central Asian countries: Trends and outlook", University of Central Asia Bishkek, Working Paper No 5.

¹³ *Ibid*

of the oil product markets of these countries. In both countries large-scale cooperative investment projects with Russia are focused on electric power generation. One of the main hydropower plant projects is Kambarata hydro-power station in Kyrgyzstan. \$2.1 billion has been earmarked by Moscow for a second Kambarata power station, to add to an existing one already operational, but decision-making was initially delayed.¹⁴ An agreement was reached during the September 2012 visit of President Putin to Bishkek for Russia to proceed in construction of a further four hydroelectric power stations in Kyrgyzstan by 2016.¹⁵

In Tajikistan there was some ambiguity about Russia's position on the construction of the Rogun dam. But there is more clarity now on the hydropower station construction project. In fact, the largest project in Tajikistan is the Sangtuda 1 HPS, which was commissioned in July 2009. The RF Government and Russian companies Rosatom and Inter RAO UES own 75 per cent of Sangtuda 1 shares and have invested about \$680 million in its construction, with the Tajikistan Government investing approximately \$120 million.¹⁶ Several other cooperative projects are either under discussion or waiting go-ahead. An important factor that previously held back a Moscow decision on Russian investment was Uzbekistan's opposition to hydropower construction in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan due to environmental risks caused by the possible reduction in runoff and water levels of the Amu-Darya and Syr-Darya Rivers. That may now be changing with an indication that Russia will be an active backer of the Kyrgyz upstream position.

Economic interests

Russia is no longer the number one trading partner of the five Central Asian states as a whole, having been supplanted in that role by China.¹⁷ That said, Russia's economic engagement with Central Asia is more multi-faceted, encompassing sectors such as mining, construction, the military-industrial complex, telecommunications, transport, and agriculture. Overall trade turnover in 2011 stood at \$27.3 billion. Russia's main exports to Central Asian countries are primarily manufactured goods: namely, food-stuffs, machinery, textiles, and transportation equipment. The main products exported from Central Asia to Russia are still natural and agricultural raw materials, as well as chemicals.¹⁸

Another important factor to bear in mind is that, in particular, Kazakhstan's infrastructure is linked to Russia, which views its southern neighbour as the gateway to all the other countries in Central Asia. Furthermore, the issue of Soviet-era debt to Russia is a key consideration, mainly as this is partly used as leverage by Moscow in an indirect and sometimes less indirect way to seal military-security arrangements, as observed particularly in the case of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (see 'Security interests' section below).

In order to pursue its economic interests, Moscow has initiated a number of economic institutions – although the 'alphabet soup' of organisations has a variable and patchy track-record so far: the Customs Union; the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC); Eurasian Development Bank; Anti-Crisis Fund; CIS Free Trade Zone Agreement, among others. For its part, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) is mooted to be launched in 2015. [The purpose of this paper is not to try to assess or evaluate these bodies, actual or potential. But suffice to say, Moscow does have notionally a number of tools (multilateral and bilateral) in the economic sphere, and it has a tendency, if anything, perhaps to underplay the economic scope or possibilities it has at its disposal.]

¹⁴ Laruelle, *op cit*

¹⁵ Christian Science Monitor, 27 October 2012.

¹⁶ Sinitsina, *op cit*

¹⁷ Nixey *op cit*

¹⁸ RIAC *op cit*.

A considerable part of Russian aid is channelled as development assistance to the low-income countries of Central Asia, and this is done both bilaterally and in the framework of CIS and EurAsEC etc. Of note, though, is the fact that Russia is not among the top ten donors providing international assistance to any of the Central Asian countries, a reality that reflects Russia's modest participation in international development aid programmes. The total amount of bilateral humanitarian aid provided, for example, by Russia to Kyrgyzstan after the violent clashes of April and June 2010 was estimated at \$25 million. That compares with \$1.1 billion to Kyrgyzstan from international financial organisations allocated within a 30-month period for the revival of the economy, as well as the reconstruction and rehabilitation of destroyed buildings in the south of the country.¹⁹

Among the most prominent issues from Russia's economic engagement with Central Asia are those of labour migration and regional remittances. These have become a vital aspect of the Russia–Central Asia relationship. Precise figures are hard to come by. Some estimates of migrants to Russia and Kazakhstan, searching for seasonal or temporary work, as 2 million from Uzbekistan, 800,000 from Tajikistan, and 600,000 from Kyrgyzstan, at any one time.²⁰ A spokesman for the RF Ministry of Foreign Affairs says there may be as many as “4.5 million” Central Asian labour migrants living and working in Russia.²¹ For the most part, these migrants are unskilled labourers who tend to find employment as street cleaners, agricultural workers, or in particular, as labourers in the construction industry. The economic significance of labour migration for the Central Asian states is difficult to overstate. Again, reliable data is not easily obtainable. But it is clear that remittances from labour migrants have played an enormous role in supporting the economies of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan over the last 9–10 years. Tajikistan, in particular, is considered to be the most dependent country in the world, in proportional terms, on remittances from labour migrants. It is estimated that Tajik labour migrants sent back to their home country remittances totalling \$2.7 billion in 2011 – equivalent to over 45 per cent of Tajikistan's recorded GDP.²² The figures are lower for Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, but still significant, with labour migrants' remittances reportedly accounting for nearly 29 per cent of Kyrgyzstan's GDP and 8 per cent of Uzbekistan's.

For Moscow, the input from a sizable low-paid Central Asian labour force is not insignificant to the RF economy, not least in view of demographic challenges and needs facing Russia, and particularly because migrant workers are prepared to take on menial but essential jobs. For the poorer Central Asian states, labour migration has offered a vital economic ‘shock absorber’, relieving the social pressure that higher levels of unemployment would otherwise have built up or exacerbated. However, certain dynamics here are shifting: recent evidence after the global financial crisis suggests that the remuneration and rewards of migrant work in Russia are not as great as they once were, and Russian antipathy in some areas towards migrant workers has been worsening. Many resent the fact that 2 per cent of Russia's GDP is remitted to Central Asia. Steps are now mooted to attempt to reduce the flow of migrants from Central Asia. In President Putin's address to the Russian Federal Assembly in December 2012, he mentioned 2015 as the target for the introduction of stricter oversight measures applicable to foreign nationals, especially from CIS countries. It remains to be seen how that will be implemented.

An interesting development of late is the fact that workers from Central Asia have been pushing their Chinese competitors off the lowest rung of the ladder in eastern Siberia. (Chinese citizens still comprise a sizeable majority of the foreign workforce in, for example, the Amur Region, as well as other areas of the Russian Federation that border China. But the ratios are changing in favour of more Central Asians.) Aside from lower

¹⁹ Sinitsina *op cit*

²⁰ From author's discussion with analysts in Moscow at the RF Diplomatic Academy, March 2013.

²¹ Regnum, 22 January 2013, *op cit*

²² RIAC *op cit*

wage expectations, Central Asians have a competitive advantage because they do not need visas to travel to Russia.²³ Chinese workers, on the other hand, must cope with a visa regime that hampers many would-be illegals from crossing the border. For those wishing to work officially, the approval process takes months. The upshot is that Central Asian illegal migrants appear to be finding life a little easier in the Far East of the Russian Federation than their counterparts in big cities in European Russia.

The whole question of economic cooperation between Russia and Central Asian countries is closely linked to security issues, primarily counteracting drug trafficking from Central Asia to Russia, the scale of which is estimated to be comparable to the volume of mutual official trade (around \$20 billion or more). In Russia this problem has, apart from the humanitarian impact, an economic dimension, which constitutes, as elsewhere, a major priority concern. Drug trafficking financially supports the illegal economic sector, corruption, and organised crime in both Russia and Central Asian countries.²⁴ According to the UN, the Russian narcotics market accounts for 20 per cent of the world turnover, with the annual revenue from all drug sales amounting to approximately \$13 billion. Thus, Russia has the second largest volume of drug turnover – second only to Europe, where the figures are cited as 26 per cent and \$20 billion, respectively, according to the UN report.²⁵ In addition, narcotics production in Afghanistan, far from being reduced after over a decade of International Security Assistance Force intervention (ISAF), is soaring again.

Security interests

Russia is the most powerful security actor in the region. On the one hand, it has both the means to react to a crisis and an assumed responsibility to engage. But on the other, it also has a palpable reluctance to intervene and would only do so if Russian territory or key interests were at stake. That was seen during and after the 2010 Osh pogroms in Kyrgyzstan to which Russia failed to respond, as it did not view the violence as a direct threat to its interests.²⁶ While multilateral arrangements (CSTO, SCO) play their role in Moscow's eyes, there is a strong sense, and an important development in Russia's policy towards Central Asia, that bilateralism increasingly dominates in the security domain. With the key emphasis on bilateral ties with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, two equally important pillars stand out: military cooperation and economic support/leverage.

In the military sphere, Russia's bilateral security cooperation with Tajikistan involves the deployment of its second-largest military contingent abroad – the 201st Motorised Rifle Division. About 7,000 troops are deployed at the base near Dushanbe, in three motor-rifle regiments. In October 2012 a bilateral agreement was concluded between Dushanbe and Moscow, which provides for rent-free basing rights for Russian forces until 2042. It remains to be seen whether Russian border guards will again return to a role on the Tajikistan–Afghanistan border at some point over the coming year. RF border guard units left Tajikistan in 2004.

In Kyrgyzstan an extension on the Russian military facilities at Kant takes those arrangements through to 2032, with a possible extension beyond that for a further five years. The new agreement will run from 2017 and provide for a unified or integrated Russian military base in Kyrgyzstan, combining all the various facilities at Kant and elsewhere in the country.²⁷ The Russian side has written off substantial Kyrgyz debts to Russia, amounting to \$489 million. The same has been done in the Tajikistan context. Russia will spend over \$1.5 billion to bolster the Tajik and Kyrgyz militaries.²⁸ Kyrgyz debts were also converted into a capital holding for Russia in Dastan, one of

²³ EurasiaNet, 1 August 2013.

²⁴ Sinitsina *op cit*

²⁵ "Addiction, crime and insurgency: The transnational threat of Afghan opium", UN report, UNODC, 2009.

²⁶ "The Future of Russia's Involvement in Central Asia", Central Asia Policy Forum *op cit*

²⁷ Defence News, 20 September 2012

²⁸ *Ibid*

Kyrgyzstan's military-industrial complex's only enterprises. Thus, debt cancellation, and substantial aid (eg, \$2 billion to Kyrgyzstan), are used to leverage these military-security arrangements into place.

The Russian authorities have succeeded in keeping or regaining a number of military and research facilities in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The most important ones in the post-Soviet space are those in Kazakhstan, which accordingly constitute a major element of the Russian defence system. Since the 1990s, Astana has given Moscow the use of several firing ranges in exchange for military equipment, technical maintenance, and officer training. Furthermore, Moscow rents, for example, the Baikonur space complex from Astana (70 per cent of Russian rocket launches take place there), as well as missile test firing ranges in the regions of Karaganda, Zhambul, Aktobe, and Kyzyl-Orda.²⁹ Russia does not have any military facilities in either Turkmenistan or Uzbekistan.

In the multilateral security sphere the loose organisation and requirements of frameworks such as the CIS, CSTO, and SCO, in which Moscow shares leadership with Beijing, allow for flexible arrangements in which some members can choose deeper integration – as with the Customs Union – while others can opt out of initiatives.

The drawback is that many of the agreements nominally adopted by these structures are never implemented, with members often not ratifying the necessary national legislation to bring them into force or else not providing adequate financing to support them. But, from Moscow's perspective, attempts to create stronger institutions have their own drawbacks. While such efforts could make these institutions more effective instruments of Russian power, the changes also alienate other members, who typically either pay lip service to the outlined obligations and then decline to enforce them or, as with Uzbekistan, escape them by exiting the institutions. Uzbekistan's most recent withdrawal from the CSTO (June 2012) and its reluctance to fully engage in an integration framework that involves Russia and Kazakhstan are nothing new in that regard.

4

Geopolitical dimension

THERE IS A PARADOX at the heart of how Moscow views Central Asia. The region is and remains Russia's backyard and 'sphere of influence' – a zone of "privileged interests".³⁰ But in slowly coming to terms with its new role in Central Asia, Russia today recognises it is now merely one player among others, tacitly acknowledging the region is indeed multi-polar. Since third countries are increasing their impact on (not least) the economic policies of Central Asia, Russia must adjust to those realities and interact with new actors within the region, a situation that has its advantages but also disadvantages in Russian eyes. In terms of neighbouring regional powers – India, Iran, Turkey – Moscow sees they lack the means to displace Russian superiority. On US involvement, there is the calculation that the US focus will diminish markedly post-drawdown from Afghanistan. Broader Russian–US relations have been severely strained but have still found practical areas of cooperation in the Central Asia region over Afghanistan.

China, though, is in a different category altogether. It could well prove problematic to Russia in the longer term in Central Asia.³¹ More generally, Moscow is in two minds about whether China represents predominantly an opportunity or a risk – or even a threat to Russia. In the Central Asian context, both powers have managed to achieve their goals without clashing abrasively with one another. But the outlook is that this situation could change – and perhaps quite abruptly, particularly because the competition for control over Central Asia's subsoil resources is likely to become acute. Thus far, Russo-Chinese cooperation in Central Asia has been workable since Beijing seems to have an interest in keeping Central Asia under Russia's political and security umbrella.

If the Chinese leadership, however, were to consider that, for whatever reason, activities from their side should be modified in Central Asia to become involved in political, military, and cultural issues, and not just in economic commercial ones, then Beijing's interests would clearly come into conflict with Moscow's. Russian analysts and commentators discreetly acknowledge that if it wanted to, China could "buy up tomorrow" large swathes of Central Asia. That is not happening for now – but the data evidence shows a year-on-year drive that cannot be ignored.³²

Stark assessments from some Russian analysts and observers seek to depict three options for the Central Asia region: to stay in the Russian fold; to lapse into chronic instability – whether as a result of some form of religious radicalism or through criminalisation of the state by mafia networks; or fall under Chinese domination.³³

³⁰ Former President Dmitry Medvedev, quoted in interview to *The New York Times*, 31 August 2008.

³¹ Laruelle M, Peyrouse S (2009), "China as a neighbour: Central Asian perspectives and strategies", Silk Road Monograph, CACI, Washington DC, April.

³² From author's discussions with Russian analysts at a roundtable in Moscow at the RF Diplomatic Academy, March 2013.

³³ *Ibid*

5

Some conclusions

...and key questions

THIS BACKGROUND PAPER, as with the others offered in this series, precedes the actual research component of the project, so the summary pointers here are only tentative.

- In what is a complex and changing context, Russia seems likely to remain for now the most prominent external power in Central Asia, in terms of its high-level political relationships, its security cooperation in the region, and its range of investment projects in the region. However, China's role and significance as an economic actor continue to grow steadily throughout Central Asia. To reiterate, as of 2010, Russia is no longer the number one trading partner of the five Central Asia countries as a whole. In Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan, it has already been overtaken by China. A key variable here is whether, and (if so) to what extent China seeks to translate its growing economic presence into political influence. For the time being, China sees Central Asia as a second-tier foreign policy priority and has shown less interest than expected thus far in capitalising on its economic power there for increased political leverage.
- Moscow will continue to view the region predominantly through the security prism and as a set of risks to be contained rather than as an opportunity for new inroads or expansion. Russia is more inclined to deal with its own interests in Central Asia, rather than expose itself to risks that would arise if it really took on the role of regional 'policeman'. The marked reluctance to make an active intervention, for example under CSTO auspices, during or after the Osh events in June 2010, underscored the view that caution and prudence are Moscow's watch-words in Central Asia.³⁴ Even if there had been an appetite for intervention in Kyrgyzstan, the Moscow assessment seems to have been that it would almost certainly have been misinterpreted; and the Russian calculation was probably that non-intervention had no direct political cost.
- Multilateral formats, such as CSTO and SCO, to an extent serve their purpose from the Kremlin's perspective. The CSTO is partly a vehicle to bolster Russia's sense of significance. But Moscow's ambitions to use, for example, the CSTO and EurAsEC to cement its influence in the region are still rather thwarted by tensions among the Central Asians themselves. The lingering impression, therefore, for these and other reasons, is that the CSTO remains largely ineffective and will continue to suffer from the lack of a common vision.
- In another domain, though, the Customs Union will be an important project and indicator to monitor in the coming year or two, with regard not only to Kazakhstan but also to Kyrgyzstan and perhaps Tajikistan. In all of this, it is likely to remain the

³⁴ For a fuller discussion of these issues, see Matveeva A (2013), "Russia's changing security role in Central Asia", *European Security*, February.

case that bilateral relations, based on a differentiated approach, will constitute the main focus for Russian interaction and dealings in the region, with Kazakhstan very much in prime position. A recent Russian International Affairs report noted that Moscow's policy towards Central Asia, in the face of a lack of regional unity, should be largely based on designing Russian strategies on a country-by-country basis.³⁵

- In essence, though, a basic component of the Russian approach, hitherto offering uncritical support where it can to the Central Asian states and economic benefits in exchange for geopolitical loyalty to Moscow, seems set to continue unchanged. That is predicated on a view that Central Asia is the last bastion of Russia's 'sphere of influence' outside its own borders.³⁶

The next few years will be a key period for the region. For now, the challenges are perhaps best captured in a set of pressing questions which give a sense of the fluidity, shifts, and uncertainty ahead. There is no comfort in easy answers – and none offered here. Rather, the highlighted questions below are offered as an invitation to consider the possible implications and consequences of anticipated or upcoming changes.

- How does Moscow view the impact and implications of drawdown by NATO forces (ISAF) from Afghanistan and the post-2014 implications for security in Central Asia, and its own role in the region?
- What risks and opportunities do succession politics in Central Asia hold for Moscow, specifically regarding Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan?
- To what extent have developments from the Arab uprising and civil strife in the Middle East been prompting a rethink in Russia's Central Asian strategy?
- How would Russia react to future conflict/crisis in Central Asia?
- What is the medium-term outlook for Sino-Russian relations in the region, particularly if Beijing seeks to shift gear from mainly an economic to also a more proactive political and even security role?

³⁵ RIAC *op cit*

³⁶ For further recommended reading on this, see Cooley A (2012) *Great Games, Local Rules* (Oxford, OUP); Malashenko A (2012), "Central Asia: What is Russia counting on?", ROSSPEN, Carnegie Moscow Center; Dannreuther R (2002), "Political Islam and the geopolitics of Russia-Central Asian relations" in *Central Asia and Islam*, (Hamburg Deutsches Orient-Institut); and Lo B (2009), *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing and the New Geopolitics* (Brookings Institution Press).

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with local people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe that everyone should be able to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from insecurity and violent conflict.

COVER PHOTO: In preparation for Putin's visit to Dushanbe (to coincide with Tajik President Rahmon's birthday), Tajik and Russian flags fill Dushanbe's main streets with posters promoting Tajik-Russian partnership. © KAREN WYKURZ



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