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## Frontiers New and Old: Russia's Policy in Central Asia

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**Bobo LO**

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- *Russia and the New World Disorder*, Brookings and Chatham House, forthcoming spring 2015.
- “Russia’s Eastern Direction—Distinguishing the Real from the Virtual”, “Russie.Nei.Reports”, No. 17, Ifri, January 2014.
- *A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Myth – Authoritarian Modernization in Russia and China*, Carnegie Moscow Center Report, June 2012 (with Lilia Shevtsova), July 2012.
- *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing and the New Geopolitics*, Brookings and Chatham House, 2008.

## Abstract

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For much of the post-Soviet period, Central Asia has been a backwater of Russian foreign policy. But things are changing. Circumstances in and beyond the region are driving a more committed approach in Moscow. Central Asia is critical to Putin's aim of establishing Russia as the leading player in the Eurasian Heartland, and as an independent center of global power alongside the United States and China. While there is no serious intention to revive the USSR, the Kremlin is keen to ensure a primary right of influence over the affairs of the ex-Soviet republics.

However, there are numerous obstacles in the way of such ambitions. Central Asian states such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are no longer passive objects of Great Power diplomacy, but increasingly assertive actors. The United States will remain a key player in the region, even after the withdrawal of NATO combat troops from Afghanistan. And China is translating its powerful economic influence into a broader strategic presence. Despite the fanfare surrounding the Eurasian Union, Moscow's position is weakening. Its capacity to dictate to others is significantly reduced, competition is greater, and the threats to Russian security are proliferating. Moscow faces a hard struggle if it is to avoid a sharp decline of its influence in Central Asia.

# Contents

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<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>WHY CENTRAL ASIA MATTERS .....</b>	<b>7</b>
STRATEGIC DESIGN .....	7
THE SECURITY IMPERATIVE .....	8
POLITICAL CONVERGENCE .....	9
THE KAZAKHSTAN EXCEPTION.....	9
<b>GRAND AMBITION .....</b>	<b>11</b>
A DOMINANT STRATEGIC INFLUENCE.....	11
REGIONAL SECURITY MANAGEMENT.....	12
SAVING EURASIA FOR AUTHORITARIANISM .....	13
<b>METHODS ANCIENT AND MODERN .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES .....</b>	<b>18</b>
DECLINING STRATEGIC INFLUENCE .....	18
A DETERIORATING SECURITY ENVIRONMENT .....	19
AUTHORITARIANISM VERSUS SOVEREIGNTY .....	20
<b>UNCERTAIN PROSPECTS .....</b>	<b>22</b>
CONTINUITY .....	22
IMPERIAL REVANCHISM .....	23
RECALIBRATION .....	24
<b>EVERYTHING TO PLAY FOR.....</b>	<b>25</b>

# Introduction

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For much of the past two decades, former Soviet Central Asia has been a sideshow of Russian foreign policy. During the 1990s Boris Yeltsin ignored it almost entirely, and even under Vladimir Putin the region has received much less attention than the Slavic heartland (Ukraine and Belarus) or the Transcaucasus (Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia). Moreover, Moscow's interest, such as it is, has been largely derivative. Central Asia has featured primarily as a subset of Russian strategic design, and as a secondary theater of Moscow's relations with the United States.

There are signs, however, that things are changing. Developments in and beyond the region are coalescing into something of a perfect storm. The crisis in Russia-West relations, Moscow's 'turn to the East',<sup>1</sup> the withdrawal of American and NATO combat troops from Afghanistan, Chinese economic expansion in Central Asia, uncertainties about the political succession in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan – provide both motive and opportunity for a more committed Russian approach.

This article addresses five broad questions. First, where does Central Asia fit within contemporary Russian foreign policy? How much does it matter to Putin, and why? It is important to distinguish here between the significance of a unitary Central Asian 'space' (*prostrantsvo*) in Kremlin thinking, and Moscow's contrasting relations with the five ex-Soviet republics.

Second, what is Moscow trying to achieve in Central Asia? Is there a coherent game plan with clear-cut objectives, or is it largely reacting to developments and improvising as it goes along? Russian policy-makers are wont to speak of 'permanent interests', but things are always more complicated in practice. The pursuit of goals reflects an amalgam of principles, instincts, and expediency (aka 'pragmatism').

Third, how is Moscow going about its business? In the post-Soviet era, traditional methods of control are no longer sufficient, and there is an implicit acceptance that more diverse means must be employed, at the multilateral as at the bilateral level. One key question is whether this points to a less patrimonial or imperial

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<sup>1</sup> B. Lo, "Russia's Eastern Direction—Distinguishing the Real from the Virtual", *Russie.Nei.Reports*, No. 17, January 2014, <[www.ifri.org/?page=detail-contribution&id=7952&id\\_provenance=97](http://www.ifri.org/?page=detail-contribution&id=7952&id_provenance=97)>.

mindset in the Kremlin, or merely an understanding that more 'modern' methods of persuasion are necessary in a chaotic regional environment.

Fourth, what are the outcomes of Russian policies? There has been much talk in recent times of Putin's diplomatic dexterity, and of a resurgent Russian influence in post-Soviet Eurasia. In many respects, Central Asia – less developed and more remote from Western influence – would appear to be especially susceptible to a reinvigorated Russia. But to what extent has the Kremlin been able to realize its political, security, economic, and normative aims in the region?

Finally, what does the future hold for Russia in Central Asia? There are two interrelated questions in this connection. One asks whether Russia will shed its imperialist heritage and reinvent itself as a post-imperial power. The other concerns its standing in the region. Will Russia remain the leading player, if no longer a hegemon in the classical sense? Or are we witnessing the inexorable slide of Russian influence?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See M. B. Olcott, "China's Unmatched Influence in Central Asia", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 18 September 2013, <<http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/09/18/china-s-unmatched-influence-in-central-asia>>.

## Why Central Asia Matters

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It would be idle to pretend that Central Asia is more than a secondary theater of Russian foreign policy. Geopolitically, the Kremlin's worldview remains overwhelmingly centered on the United States and, to a lesser extent, China. In economic terms, it still looks primarily toward Europe.<sup>3</sup> And historically and civilizationally, Russia is much more invested in the affairs of the western ex-Soviet republics, as developments in Ukraine have highlighted.

At the same time, Central Asia is no longer the policy backwater it once was. Developments and relationships there really matter. Moreover, the region's importance to Moscow will continue to grow in absolute and relative terms over the next decade and beyond. The reasons for this attitudinal transformation encompass geopolitical goals, existential security anxieties, and ideas of political convergence and 'civilizational unity'.<sup>4</sup>

### *Strategic design*

The most important of these drivers is instrumental: Central Asia is significant principally because it is a pivot area within the larger Eurasian continent, and fundamental to Russian self-perceptions as a great global power. To adapt Halford Mackinder's summation from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, he who rules Central Asia rules the Heartland.<sup>5</sup> A great many things have changed over the past 100 years, including the emergence of the Central Asian republics as independent states. Nevertheless, their physical centrality continues to shape Kremlin

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<sup>3</sup> In 2013, the EU accounted for 48.5 percent of Russia's total trade, almost five times greater than China's share of 10.7 percent. See: European Commission, Directorate-General for Trade, "European Union, Trade with Russia", 27 August 2014, <[http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc\\_113440.pdf](http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc_113440.pdf)>.

<sup>4</sup> S. Lavrov, speech at the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, December 2008; mentioned in D. Trenin, "Russia's Spheres of Interest, not Influence", *The Washington Quarterly*, 22 September 2009

<sup>5</sup> In *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, Mackinder asserted: "Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island controls the world" (H. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Realities*, National Defense University, Washington DC, 1996, originally published in 1919).

thinking about regional geopolitics and the larger international system.

Such considerations are all the more pertinent in the wake of the United States' troubles in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the global financial crisis. In the Kremlin's vision of a multipolar order or 'polycentric system of international relations',<sup>6</sup> there are essentially three independent centers of global power: the United States, China, and Russia. Just as the United States leads the West, and China is increasingly dominant in the East, so Russia should possess its own strategic space or sphere of influence. In other words, to be a global power in the post-American world, one must also be a 'regional superpower'.<sup>7</sup> And this has considerably raised the stakes in engaging with the Central Asian states.

### ***The security imperative***

There are also more specific reasons for Moscow's heightened interest in Central Asia. The most immediate is concern about the potential for serious instability in what is traditionally described as Russia's 'soft underbelly' (a cliché, but no less accurate for all that).<sup>8</sup> The downsizing of the American force presence and withdrawal of NATO combat troops from Afghanistan; the enduring strength of the Taliban; the spread of Islamist extremism; and the devastating human cost of narcotics trafficking – amount to a compelling and multidimensional rationale for increased security engagement.

Such fears are compounded by the obvious fragility of several of the Central Asian republics – Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, in particular – and fears about the long-term stability of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Moscow has little faith in the capacity of the Central Asians to manage the growing threats in the region without substantial Russian involvement. On the contrary, with the exception of Kazakhstan, they are seen as part of the problem rather than as genuine partners in security-building.

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<sup>6</sup> "Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation", 12 February 2013, <[www.mid.ru/bdcomp/ns-osndoc.nsf/1e5f0de28fe77fdcc32575d900298676/869c9d2b87ad8014c32575d9002b1c38!OpenDocument](http://www.mid.ru/bdcomp/ns-osndoc.nsf/1e5f0de28fe77fdcc32575d900298676/869c9d2b87ad8014c32575d9002b1c38!OpenDocument)>.

<sup>7</sup> This term was first used by L. Aron in "The Foreign Policy Doctrine of Postcommunist Russia and its Domestic Context", in M. Mandelbaum (ed.), *The New Russian Foreign Policy*, Council on Foreign Relations, 1998, p. 33.

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey Mankoff uses the slightly more modern term, "arc of instability". See J. Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, 2012 (second edition), p. 6.

## ***Political convergence***

Putin and others in the Russian ruling elite have long sought to consolidate political likemindedness across the post-Soviet space. While Moscow has in the past distanced Russian 'sovereign democracy' from the 'oriental despotism' of the Central Asian regimes, this nicety has become moot in more recent times. Following the anti-Putin popular protests of 2011-12, the Kremlin is giving new emphasis to normative solidarity – not just against the subversive influence of Western liberal ideas, but also external influences in general.

Within this schema, Central Asia has assumed growing importance as a forward defense zone of authoritarian (aka 'traditional') values across the post-Soviet space. It is not so much that a Color revolution in a Central Asian republic would threaten the Putin system. Rather, the Kremlin seeks to build an alternative ideational and political legitimacy that challenges Western notions of global governance and moral universalism. Internationally, the BRICS framework serves this purpose. At the regional level, however, no such instrument exists yet. Putin's Eurasian Union project is intended to meet this shortfall, but its viability depends on achieving further political and normative convergence at the bilateral level, starting with the most 'conservative' ex-Soviet republics, that is, in Central Asia. Putin views them as integral to a larger civilizational and normative entity extending from Kaliningrad to the Pacific.

## ***The Kazakhstan exception***

In some respects, Putin continues to see Central Asia as a collective construct, with certain common characteristics. At the same time, Russian policy in practice highlights a growing tendency toward disaggregation – as a patchwork of individual bilateral relationships of varying importance. Thus, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are lower-order priorities, whose significance is bound up in an almost entirely defensive agenda: to defend against Islamist extremism; reinforce regime security; and counter foreign influences of one kind and another (Western, Chinese, Islamist). Turkmenistan matters geoeconomically, as an energy pivot for gas exports traveling west and especially east. And Uzbekistan is a key component of the overall regional security picture.

But much the most important of the Central Asian states to Moscow is Kazakhstan. It is not only a critical bilateral relationship, but also the cornerstone of Putin's larger vision for Central Asia and the wider Eurasian continent. Unlike the other Central Asian

republics, it is viewed as a serious (if unequal) partner, while Putin's personal relationship with President Nursultan Nazarbayev is the closest he has with any foreign leader. With international attention on Ukraine, it is easy to overlook just how vital Kazakhstan is to Russia in relation to issues of strategic design, threat perceptions, and political and normative convergence.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> V. Tuleshov, "Kazakhstan Will Play Key Role in Russia's Foreign Policy", Valdai Club, 13 June 2012, <[http://valdaiclub.com/near\\_abroad/44361.html](http://valdaiclub.com/near_abroad/44361.html)>.

# Grand Ambition

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## *A dominant strategic influence*

The goals of Russian policy toward Central Asia flow logically from the reasons for the region's importance in the first place. They also reflect the challenges and constraints Moscow faces in implementing its agenda. In practical terms, this means that there is no serious intention to resurrect the Soviet Union. While Putin clearly regrets its passing, he is pragmatic enough to appreciate the implausibility of reconstituting it. The political dysfunctionality and economic backwardness of the ex-Soviet republics, mounting pressures within Russia itself, and the opprobrium attached to imperial projects in general make such an enterprise unattractive.

What Moscow seeks instead is a leading influence – somewhat akin to the relationship of imperial China with the tributary states around its periphery. It is keen to ensure that their decision-making takes place within certain parameters and according to certain 'rules'. The most important of these is that Russian interests are paramount, especially in matters of foreign and security policy. This means, in the first instance, that the Central Asian republics may not align themselves with foreign powers – the United States and NATO principally, but also the European Union, China, Iran, and Turkey. Ideally, Moscow would like them to join various Russian-led integrationist projects, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). But the modalities are less important than the understanding that these countries either side with Russia or with no-one at all. This sense of entitlement recalls Leonid Brezhnev's concept of 'limited sovereignty' during the Cold War, when the member-states of the Warsaw Pact were formally independent and even enjoyed substantial autonomy, but were strategically compliant.

Correspondingly, Moscow seeks to discourage or at least channel the participation of 'outsiders' in regional affairs. Although it appreciates that it cannot exclude them altogether, the Kremlin believes that it retains the capacity and the *right* to shape such interaction. In practice, this means two things: pushing foreign partners toward economic rather than security cooperation; and favoring the Chinese and other non-Western countries over the Europeans and Americans. Russian favoritism toward Beijing is

helped by the fact that the Chinese have eschewed any strategic ambitions, limited their security engagement in Central Asia, and talked up Russia's role as regional leader. Beijing's 'modest' approach has paid ample dividends, with Moscow putting up little resistance to major Chinese energy projects, such as the Central Asian Gas Pipeline (CAGP). From the Kremlin's perspective, it is far better that Turkmenistan gas should go east to China than to compete with Gazprom in its main European markets via pipelines – the Trans-Caspian and previously Nabucco – that would circumvent Russia.

## ***Regional security management***

The goal of enhancing security is a self-evident good, and is formally enshrined in the concept of combating the 'three evils' of terrorism, separatism, and extremism. Moscow's security priority – both toward the region as a whole, and in its relationships with individual republics – is to insulate Russia from the worst effects of regional instability. Concretely, this means containing the spread of Islamist extremism into the Russian Federation, stemming the flow of narcotics into the country, and reinforcing the authoritarian regimes of Central Asia.

Regional security management has, however, proved a highly problematic area of Russian policy-making. Over the past 15 years, Putin has struggled to reconcile security imperatives with geopolitical objectives. In the wake of 9/11, he decided that Russian interests were best served by supporting the US-led intervention into Afghanistan. And he overrode the objections of his entourage, including then Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov, against the establishment of US bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. But it did not take long for the pendulum to swing back again. By 2004-05, the geopolitical minuses of a seemingly long-term American presence came to outweigh any security dividends. Accordingly, the Kremlin was the prime mover behind the communique at the 2005 SCO summit in Astana, calling for the closure of the US bases in Central Asia.

This shift showed that the security-geopolitical balance is conditioned not simply by regional circumstances, but also the state of Russia-US relations and the wider international context. On the one hand, the American force presence in Afghanistan – and Central Asia – has been viewed as critical in containing Islamist extremism. On the other hand, the US intervention has transformed the geopolitical map in Eurasia. It has undermined Russia's once hegemonic position, and facilitated (albeit unwittingly) the rapid expansion of Chinese economic influence, and growing assertiveness among the Central Asian republics.

These tensions have resulted in a naysaying and self-contradictory approach. Thus, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has criticized ‘artificial timelines’ for the (precipitate) withdrawal of NATO forces.<sup>10</sup> But Moscow has also accused the United States and NATO of outstaying their welcome in central Eurasia, and successfully pressured Kyrgyzstan to terminate the lease on the American base/transit center at Manas.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, it has blamed Washington for the sharp increase in Afghan opium and heroin production, and the influx of narcotics into Russia.<sup>12</sup> But it has blocked US proposals to develop a network of counter-narcotics centers in the Central Asian republics.<sup>13</sup> It inveighs against the threat of the ‘three evils’, but its more immediate concern is the penetration of Western liberal ideas – as recent moves to bolster ‘international information security’ indicate.<sup>14</sup>

## **Saving Eurasia for authoritarianism**

The Russian military intervention in Ukraine has highlighted just how allergic Putin is to grassroots democracy, and the lengths to which he is prepared to go in order to preserve existing power relations. In Central Asia, the likelihood of a popular revolution along the lines of Ukraine and Georgia is remote. (Kyrgyzstan’s Tulip Revolution in 2010 ended up being a palace coup in all but name.) And the disastrous outcomes of the Arab Spring revolutions have served to strengthen the resolve of existing regimes, while dampening Western interest in democratic change. Nevertheless, the Kremlin remains committed to maintaining transnational ties with the Central Asian ruling elites – in effect, looking to preserve a community of personal vested interests. Its purpose is less to meet a clear and present danger than to create conditions whereby the putative threat of democratic regime change is forever banished.

There is another purpose, too. The Kremlin regards a de facto authoritarian concordat as complementary to geopolitical ends. In

<sup>10</sup> “Sergei Lavrov Criticizes NATO Policy Towards Afghanistan”, *Afghanistan.ru*, 21 April 2012, <<http://en.afghanistan.ru/doc/353.html>>.

<sup>11</sup> This finally closed in June 2014.

<sup>12</sup> “Putin Criticizes ISAF for Afghan Drug Threat Inaction”, *RIA-Novosti*, 8 May 2013, <<http://en.ria.ru/russia/20130508/181039938-print/Putin-Criticizes-ISAF-for-Afghan-Drug-Threat-Inaction.html>>.

<sup>13</sup> R. Solash, “Russia Said to Block U.S. Drug Plan Amid Wariness over Central Asian Influence”, *Radio Free Europe/RadioLiberty*, 17 February 2013, <[www.rferl.org/content/russia\\_reportedly\\_blocks\\_us\\_plan\\_central\\_asia\\_opium\\_drugs\\_narcotics\\_afghanistan/24488075.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/russia_reportedly_blocks_us_plan_central_asia_opium_drugs_narcotics_afghanistan/24488075.html)>.

<sup>14</sup> See summit declaration of Head of SCO member-states, Dushanbe, 12 September 2014, <[www.tajikembassy.in/downloads/Dushanbe%20Declaration-2014.pdf](http://www.tajikembassy.in/downloads/Dushanbe%20Declaration-2014.pdf)>. This refers to a draft SCO ‘Rules of conduct in the field of ensuring international information security’.

much the same way that a liberal consensus has supplied the foundation for NATO and the EU to project significant international influence, so Putin hopes that political and normative convergence between Russia and the Central Asian republics will lead to a more integrated approach toward the West in particular. By emphasizing shared values and history, he seeks to develop a deeper sense of solidarity.<sup>15</sup>

In this enterprise, ‘civilizational unity’ plays an important, if subsidiary, role. Moscow’s purpose is not so much evangelical as instrumental. While disseminating Russian culture is desirable in itself, it is secondary to the larger purpose of consolidating a broader Moscow-led consensus across post-Soviet Eurasia, in which the various dimensions – strategic, political, economic, and civilizational – are mutually reinforcing.

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<sup>15</sup> In his initial exposition of the Eurasian Union, Putin wrote that “these times call for close integration based on new values and a new political and economic foundation. We suggest a powerful supranational association capable of becoming one of the poles of the modern world ...”, *Izvestiya*, 10 October 2011, <[www.russianmission.eu/en/news/article-prime-minister-vladimir-putin-new-integration-project-eurasia-future-making-izvestia-3->](http://www.russianmission.eu/en/news/article-prime-minister-vladimir-putin-new-integration-project-eurasia-future-making-izvestia-3->).

## Methods Ancient and Modern

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Moscow recognizes that the challenges of a fluid regional (and international) environment demand a multidimensional approach to prosecuting Russian interests. This means employing various forms of 'soft' power as well as more traditional means of political-military influence; resorting to multilateral mechanisms to supplement bilateral relationships; and engaging in geopolitical balancing both at the regional and global level.

The primary instrument used by the Kremlin is the fostering of *inter-elite ties*, especially between Putin and his direct counterparts. The Central Asian states are characterized by feeble institutions and highly personalized decision-making. Individual transnational – or 'trans-imperial'<sup>16</sup> – networks therefore represent crucial transmission belts for Moscow. For example, without the active backing of Nazarbayev, the Eurasian Economic Union (and its predecessor the Customs Union) would not have got off the ground. Similarly, Putin's support for Kyrgyzstan President Almazbek Atambayev, and the latter's dependence on Kremlin goodwill, is the single most important factor in Moscow's resurgent influence in that country. Conversely, Russian leverage is weakest where such personal rapport is lacking – Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Although even in those countries Moscow retains real levers of influence by virtue of close ties between the respective security and military establishments.

The use of *economic instruments* is critical. Although the Ukraine crisis has shown that the Kremlin still believes in the utility of military might, for the most part it acts on the basis that co-optation is more effective than coercion. It therefore pursues several interrelated paths: promoting a natural interdependence dating from Soviet times (and earlier) in response to Western-led globalization and outside competition; supplying substantial technical assistance;<sup>17</sup> employing millions of migrant workers, whose remittances are critical to the

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<sup>16</sup> C. Wallander, "Russian Transimperialism and Its Implications", *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 3, n. 2, spring 2007.

<sup>17</sup> One notably example here is the financing and building of Kyrgyzstan's controversial Naryn dam: "Russian Control of Central Asian Dams 'Risks Full Conflict With Uzbekistan'", *acquaNOW.info*, 27 September 2012, <[www.ooskanews.com/daily-water-briefing/russian-control-central-asian-dams-risks-full-conflict-uzbekistan\\_24527](http://www.ooskanews.com/daily-water-briefing/russian-control-central-asian-dams-risks-full-conflict-uzbekistan_24527)>.

survival of several regional economies (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, in particular);<sup>18</sup> and tightening the links between elite business interests.

Moscow continues to set great store by *military diplomacy*. This is reflected most obviously in the presence of a substantial Russian troop contingent in Tajikistan, and major bases such as Kant in Kyrgyzstan and Ayni in Tajikistan. Such engagement serves a notably different function to troop deployments in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. There, the purpose is to exert pressure on Kyiv, Tbilisi, and Chisinau, respectively. In Central Asia, by contrast, Russian troops are there to support, not undermine, existing regimes, and to highlight Russia's indispensability in the process. Military assistance programs perform a similar function, as well as strengthening inter-service ties.<sup>19</sup>

The Kremlin's conviction in great power multipolarity does not preclude it from exploiting *regional multilateral mechanisms*. On the contrary, the latter serve to facilitate and legitimize the pursuit of Russian *national* interests. Thus, the CSTO and the EEU perform roughly analogous roles to the Warsaw Pact and COMECON (Council of Mutual Economic Assistance) during the Cold War. Their utility today lies not in their negligible contribution to Russian national security and economic prosperity, while regional integration for its own sake holds little appeal for Moscow. What matters is that these organizations support the core strategic aims of a post-Soviet Eurasia dominated by Moscow, and of Russia as an independent 'pole' in the international system.

Moscow's instrumentalism is illustrated by its attitude toward the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The fact that this is the most inclusive multilateral body in central Eurasia actually counts against it. While the Kremlin views the SCO as sometimes useful in challenging the legitimacy of Western institutions and policies, it has no interest in seeing it become an effective vehicle for regional integration. For such integration would be on terms decided by others; China's leading influence in the SCO cuts across Putin's Eurasian vision. Consequently, Moscow has blocked Beijing's efforts to establish an SCO Free Trade Zone.<sup>20</sup>

*Cultural diplomacy* remains an important means of promoting Russian interests, not least as an asymmetrical response to China's growing economic influence. Emphasizing civilizational unity and

<sup>18</sup> 700 000 Kyrgyzstan migrant workers in Russia send home an estimated USD 2 billion per annum, according to A. Malashenko, "Kyrgyzstan: a White Ship Amidst the Ice of Post-Soviet Authoritarianism", Carnegie Moscow Center briefing, Vol. 14, No. 2, March 2012, p. 7-8. Similarly, worker remittances from Russia account for 45 percent of Tajikistan's GDP: Malashenko, "Tajikistan: Civil War's Long Echo", Carnegie Moscow Center briefing, Vol. 14, No. 3, April 2012, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> "Russia to Give Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan Free Military Equipment", *East Time*, 12 April 2014 (<<http://easttime.info/news/kyrgyzstan/russia-give-tajikistan-and-kyrgyzstan-free-military-equipment>>).

<sup>20</sup> H. Zhao, "China-Russia Relations in Central Asia", The ASAN Forum, 22 November 2013, <[www.theasanforum.org/china-russia-relations-in-central-asia/](http://www.theasanforum.org/china-russia-relations-in-central-asia/)>.

shared values assists the larger purpose of a Russian-led Eurasia. Through the communication of popular culture (TV shows) and news to a wide regional audience, the Kremlin hopes, in effect, to establish a Moscow consensus, similar in its impact to the much-storied (if bogus) Beijing consensus. The overriding message it promotes is that Russian-led culture and values are much better suited to Central Asia than the destructive beliefs of the West (or the alien values of Chinese neo-Confucianism).

## Unintended Consequences

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Despite Putin's conscientiousness relative to his predecessors in the Kremlin, his commitment of time, energy, and resources has yet to pay off. If we measure Russia's performance against the objectives outlined earlier – geopolitical control, regional security management, and authoritarian solidarity – we find that there have been more failures and setbacks than 'wins'. Moreover, such successes as there have been are qualified and fragile, while the negative trends are becoming more serious.

### *Declining strategic influence*

Over the past 10-15 years, Central Asia has become a more geopolitically diverse and disorderly region. Russia has lost its hegemonic position, while the ex-Soviet republics are no longer passive objects of Great Power diplomacy, but increasingly assertive actors, jealous of their sovereignty. Even the weakest, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, have a strategic flexibility unimaginable in the 1990s. Turkmenistan has oriented itself toward China, Uzbekistan alternates between courting the United States and bearding Moscow, and Kazakhstan has managed with considerable skill to preserve a tri-vectored foreign policy (Russia, China, and the West).

Putin has sustained the institutional momentum behind his Eurasian Union project, and cemented Russia's military presence in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Overall, however, the geopolitical tide in Central Asia and Eurasia is running against Moscow. The United States will remain a powerful player in the region, particularly now that it has concluded a security treaty with Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup> China is the dominant economic player in Central Asia, particularly (but not only) in the energy sector. There is increasing activity by other regional actors – Turkey, Iran, India, Pakistan, and Japan. Most importantly, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are distancing themselves from Russian-led integration, while reaching out to other external powers. Both

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<sup>21</sup> M. Stancati and N. Hodge, "Afghanistan Signs Security Treaty with US, NATO," *The Wall Street Journal*, 30 September 2014, <<http://online.wsj.com/articles/u-s-afghan-bilateral-security-agreement-signed-1412076436>>.

have concluded huge economic agreements with Beijing;<sup>22</sup> Uzbekistan has allowed the opening of a NATO liaison office in Tashkent, while continuing to accuse Moscow of imperial designs;<sup>23</sup> and Kazakhstan has explicitly criticized the ‘politicization’ of the Eurasian Union, and warned against attempts to infringe upon its sovereignty.<sup>24</sup>

The notion that Russia can carve out a dedicated strategic space to reassert itself as the leading power in Eurasia appears fanciful, as do its pretensions to be an independent center of global power with equal status to the United States and China. In fact, Moscow’s geopolitical position in Eurasia is arguably weaker than at any time since the fall of the Soviet Union. Its ability to realize its strategic objectives is diminished, and the obstacles it faces are ever more formidable.

## ***A deteriorating security environment***

Moscow’s current prioritization of geopolitical aims over security objectives has meant that the latter have suffered. There is no clear strategy, but rather a series of ad hoc arrangements that have done little to assist a more benign regional environment. To a large extent, this outcome points to the limits of Russian influence in Central Asia. Moscow has no demonstrable capacity to be the regional security provider, whether bilaterally or through organizations such as the CSTO.

It is a similar tale with efforts to contain the threat of Islamist extremism. This has yet to spread into the middle Volga region (Tatarstan) – but not because of any action Moscow has undertaken. As the activities of Islamic State (IS) have underlined, the overwhelming concentration of Islamist extremist activity today is in the Middle East. This has had the fortuitous effect of ensuring that Russia remains a low-priority target for terrorist financing and manpower. By contrast, the Kremlin’s equivocal stance on combating narcotics trafficking has contributed to a severe aggravation of this problem. In the past few years, Russia has ‘graduated’ from a transit

<sup>22</sup> Chinese President Xi Jinping’s visit to four Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan) in September 2013 was headlined by USD 30 billion worth of agreements with Astana and USD 15 billion with Tashkent. See T. Balmforth, “Kremlin Calm as China’s Clout Rises in Russia’s Backyard”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 12 September 2013, <[www.rferl.org/content/russia-calm-china-central-asia-influence/25104383.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-calm-china-central-asia-influence/25104383.html)>.

<sup>23</sup> See M. Laumulin, “Virtual Security of Central Asia”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, 7 October 2012, <<http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Virtual-Security-of-Central-Asia-15694>>.

<sup>24</sup> V. Tuleshov, “Kazakhstan Will Play Key Role...”, [2]; S. Akimbekov, “Needless Rush: Another Look at Eurasian Integration”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, 21 March 2014, <<http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Needless-Rush-16499>>.

route into a primary destination for Afghan heroin.<sup>25</sup> Today, the number of users is conservatively estimated at 1.7 million, and the incidence of drug-related diseases, such as AIDS/HIV, has increased dramatically.<sup>26</sup>

## **Authoritarianism versus sovereignty**

In one sense, Moscow has been successful in developing an authoritarian likemindedness. The likelihood of a Color or Maidan revolution in any of the Central Asian republics is remote, amidst a general trend of de-democratization across the region. However, the corollary of such ‘success’ is that the authoritarian leaders of Central Asia have become even more eager and committed to preserving national – and their own personal – sovereignty,<sup>27</sup> and increasingly suspicious of Moscow’s integrationist agenda.<sup>28</sup> In this connection, events in Ukraine have had two unfortunate consequences for Putin. They have slowed the practical (as opposed to institutional) momentum of the Eurasian Union; and they have accelerated the outreach of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan to outside parties. It is telling that Nazarbayev, the inventor of the original economic concept of a Eurasian Union, has developed decidedly cold feet, even while he has publicly supported Moscow’s position on Ukraine.<sup>29</sup>

In short, normative likemindedness has been useful in alleviating Russian concerns about democratic upheaval. But it has not made the Central Asian states more pliable, with the partial exceptions of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. And just as the United States has found that the export of American popular culture and consumerism to developing countries does not necessarily predispose them toward liberal democracy, so Russia is discovering

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<sup>25</sup> According to the Federal Drug Control Service, authorities seized 2.6 metric tonnes of heroin in 2013, a 20 percent increase on the previous year – ‘More than 60 kg of heroin worth \$500 seized in Siberia, *Tass*, 23 October 2014, <<http://en.itar-tass.com/russia/755981>>.

<sup>26</sup> I. Nechepurenko, “Russia Fights Addiction to Afghan Heroin”, *The Moscow Times*, 27 May 2013, <[www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/russia-fights-addiction-to-afghan-heroin/480593.html](http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/russia-fights-addiction-to-afghan-heroin/480593.html)>.

<sup>27</sup> I. Torbakov rightly observes that “authoritarian power is *indivisible*: it cannot be transferred or delegated to any supra-national bodies”, see “What Does Russia Want? Investigating the Interrelationship between Moscow’s Domestic and Foreign Policy”, *DGAP Analyse*, n. 1, May 2011, p. 11.

<sup>28</sup> A. Wood, “A Russian Requiem”, Chatham House expert comment, 8 April 2014, <[www.chathamhouse.org/media/comment/view/198918](http://www.chathamhouse.org/media/comment/view/198918)>.

<sup>29</sup> Astana has rejected the idea of a Eurasian Parliament, and indicated that Kazakhstan will not delegate trade policy to the Eurasian Union: Kazakhstan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Astana Calling*, n. 336, 10 January 2014, p. 4, <[http://kazembassy.no/uploads/file/Astana%20Calling%20No\\_336%282%29.pdf](http://kazembassy.no/uploads/file/Astana%20Calling%20No_336%282%29.pdf)>.

that a liking for Russian TV does not mean that the Central Asians wish to be incorporated within a larger Russian space.

## Uncertain Prospects

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It is very difficult to predict the future of Russia's engagement in and with Central Asia, given the presence of multiple variables: the vagaries of Russian domestic politics; succession outcomes in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan; the security situation in Afghanistan; Russia's relations with the West, and particularly with the United States; and, the evolution of Sino-Russian partnership. All these are potential game-changers, either singly or in various combinations. It may therefore be more useful to consider the outlook in terms of three possible scenarios: broad continuity; imperial revanchism; and recalibration.

### *Continuity*

The continuity scenario is the 'lazy' analytical option, and open to the charge of a lack of imagination.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, there are several reasons to suggest that it may be as plausible as any, at least over the next decade. The most persuasive is that Putin's Russia lacks the capacity to make good on an active neo-imperial agenda, or the enterprise to embrace a more enlightened, post-imperial approach. Instead, it will look to hold the line: working with Central Asian elites, countering Western normative influence, and pursuing a mixture of political cooperation, strategic restraint, and economic competition vis-à-vis China. In this, it will be helped by diminishing Western interest in Afghanistan and Central Asia; the risk aversion of regional elites, including a reluctance to openly defy Moscow; and strategic restraint in Beijing, which will continue to concentrate on economic priorities.

Such a scenario is premised on the absence of strategic shocks in the region, for example a Maidan-style revolution; containment of the most violent manifestations of Islamist extremism; more or less stable (if unsatisfactory) relations between Russia and the West; a China that is politically stable and prospering economically; and a

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<sup>30</sup> Or what Rajan Menon calls "presentism (the infinite extrapolation from the present)": "The China-Russia Relationship: What it Involves, Where It Is Headed, and How It Matters for the United States", Century Foundation Report, p. 3, <<http://72.32.39.237:8080/Plone/publications/pdfs/pb690/Menon.pdf>>.

relatively smooth political transition in Astana and Tashkent, akin to the succession of Saparmurad Niyazov by Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov in Turkmenistan in 2006.

## ***Imperial revanchism***

The drawback with the continuity scenario is that it depends on a lasting – and lucky – confluence of circumstances, and on the hope that change, if and when it comes, will be gradual and relatively smooth. This view is ahistorical and underestimates that we are living through tempestuous times, in which there are abundant opportunities for strategic shocks to alter the calculus of decision-makers in Russia, Central Asia, and elsewhere. It makes sense, then, to consider more radical scenarios, including the possibility of a resurgent Russian imperialism.

The trigger here could be a political transformation in one or more of the Central Asian states. Putin's suggestion in August 2014 that Kazakhstan was an artificial state created and maintained by President Nazarbayev leaves open the possibility that Russia could intervene under certain circumstances.<sup>31</sup> Thus, if a post-Nazarbayev transition led to a Western-leaning regime, Moscow might react along similar lines to its intervention in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. The parallels are imperfect, of course, given Ukraine's fundamental importance in Russian historical and civilizational perceptions. But there are important commonalities as well, above all the existence of a large ethnic Russian minority close to Russian territory. Indeed, in percentage terms, this minority is larger – 23.7 percent of Kazakhstan's total population versus 17 percent in Ukraine.<sup>32</sup>

Another game-changer would be if China were to translate its economic influence into a substantial strategic presence. Although Beijing has consistently denied any intention to displace Russia, its extraordinarily rapid expansion into Central Asia is creating its own logic. The notion that economic interests can be neatly separated from their geopolitical consequences is naïve (or disingenuous). In particular, if the Chinese made good on the vision of a Silk Road Economic Belt, it would not be long before it supplants Russia as the leading political and strategic, as well as economic, player in Central Asia. Crucially, unlike the United States, it enjoys the advantages of physical proximity and a long history of engagement with the region.

<sup>31</sup> "President Vladimir Putin of Russia on Kazakhstan and Its Future", *Tengri News*, 30 August 2014, <[http://en.tengrinews.kz/politics\\_sub/President-Vladimir-Putin-of-Russia-on-Kazakhstan-and-its-future-255793/](http://en.tengrinews.kz/politics_sub/President-Vladimir-Putin-of-Russia-on-Kazakhstan-and-its-future-255793/)>.

<sup>32</sup> See *CIA World Factbook*, <[www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2075.html#rs](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2075.html#rs)>.

Moscow would hardly take this development lying down. Although it would look to avoid confrontation, one might reasonably expect it to counter Chinese influence through various means: exerting direct pressure on Central Asian elites; exploiting various sources of economic leverage, such as control over westward oil and gas pipelines, and the existence of millions of migrant workers in Russia; and even reinforcing its military presence in Central Asia, with or without local permission. The result of such an escalation would be an increasingly fraught regional environment, characterized by uncertainties in Sino-Russian relations, continuing Russia-US tensions, unresolved problems in the Central Asian republics (interstate quarrels, failures of domestic governance, Islamist extremism), and chronic instability in neighboring countries (Afghanistan and Pakistan).

## ***Recalibration***

At a time of authoritarian conservatism in Russian domestic politics, and crisis with the West, it seems inconceivable that Moscow will embrace a post-imperial approach toward Central Asia. Yet this scenario should not be entirely discounted. One reason is that more forcible methods of projecting influence are unlikely to be successful in the face of the constraints identified earlier, namely the growing sense of independence among the Central Asian republics, and the activism and impact of major actors, such as China.

In these circumstances, the Kremlin will need to find more creative ways of promoting Russian objectives. One such avenue might be the EEU, but on a less Moscow-centric and more equitable basis. Another, more generalized approach would involve Russia's transformation into a model of good governance and effective modernization. The attraction for the Central Asians would not be normative – indeed, local elites may well be spooked by the spectacle of Russian democratization – so much as political. A more liberal regime in Moscow would be less inclined to pursue a patrimonial approach to bilateral relations or impinge on local elite interests. At the same time, Russia would continue to reap the benefit of long-standing trumps: close political ties; economic complementarities; cultural and civilizational affinities; and the virtue of being distinct from a moralizing West and a disconcertingly powerful China.

## Everything to Play for

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Russia's interaction with Central Asia has been shaped by many influences, and these are likely to remain significant in coming decades. The fluidity of the current environment means that several outcomes are possible – not only the three scenarios sketched out above, but also hybrids combining elements from each. Perhaps the only relative certainty is that Russia faces a difficult and protracted process of strategic adaptation if it is to sustain its position in Central Asia. This will involve, in the first instance, treating the Central Asians as fully sovereign partners, rather than as ex-imperial subjects obliged to do its bidding. It will entail flexibility and sensitivity on the modalities of regional cooperation. And it will mean valuing engagement with Central Asia for its own sake, rather than primarily as a theater of Great Power contestation.

An attitudinal transformation on this scale seems a remote prospect today. Regional uncertainties, a fluid international context, and the most serious crisis in Russia-West relations in more than three decades suggest that if there is to be change, it is likely to be for the worse. In Central Asia, as in other areas of Russian foreign policy, Putin's conviction in his own rightness – and righteousness – appears unshakable. Faced with mounting domestic and external pressures, the Kremlin's natural response is to revert to the familiar, seeking refuge in authoritarian autarky and the occasional *coup de théâtre*.

In the long term, such a barren approach is doomed to fail. Although Russia continues to enjoy considerable advantages in its interaction with Central Asia, these assets are by no means timeless. All the Central Asian states, including the most backward and dysfunctional, are displaying an enhanced desire for sovereignty and strategic choice. In these challenging circumstances, Moscow will need to do much more than rest on tradition and an anachronistic sense of entitlement.