

## Central Asia's Autocrats

### GEOPOLITICALLY STUCK, POLITICALLY FREE

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It is often [said](#) that China, Russia, and the United States are playing a “great game” in Central Asia. To the extent that these three states are playing games in Central Asia, they are in fact decidedly different ones. China is playing Monopoly. Russia is playing Risk. The United States is playing Solitaire. For policymakers in Beijing, the game is business. For policymakers in Moscow, the game is existential. For policymakers in Washington, the game is an afterthought. Central Asia is material for Beijing; China can easily walk away if its natural resources and infrastructure investments sour. Central Asia is imperial for Moscow; Russia will not walk away if its influence is questioned. Central Asia is inconsequential for Washington; the United States has all but forgotten the region now that attention has shifted away from Afghanistan.

As a result, Central Asian political elites are in the curious position of needing to woo a comparatively disinterested Chinese suitor, acknowledge the desires of its decidedly interested northern neighbor, and decide whether it is worth attempting to reengage a distracted United States. Though an awkward dance, it is not an impossible one. Neither Beijing, nor Moscow, nor the United States cares it is being two-timed. As such, Central Asian leaders are limited in their ability to leverage relations with one great power to extract concessions from another. At the same time, because the great powers are content playing their separate games, Central Asian elites need not fear that negotiations with one might jeopardize relations with the others. This frees Central Asian leaders to devote a minimum of energy to geopolitics and maximum attention to domestic politics.

#### **The China Game**

China's interest in Central Asia is economic. Beijing is attracted to Central Asia's hydrocarbons and metals, not the region's politics. In contrast to Washington, which

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claims it has a “Silk Road Strategy,” China actually does have a plan, a “Silk Road Economic Belt.” In a March 2015 articulation of the plan, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs [explained](#) that the objective of China’s Silk Road Economic Belt is:

Aimed at promoting orderly and free flow of economic factors, highly efficient allocation of resources and deep integration of markets; encouraging the countries along the Belt and Road to achieve economic policy coordination and carry out broader and more in-depth regional cooperation of higher standards; and jointly creating an open, inclusive and balanced regional economic cooperation architecture that benefits all.

What China is most keen to develop are energy resources. Beijing’s Silk Road Economic Belt seeks to:

Advance cooperation in hydropower, nuclear power, wind power, solar power and other clean, renewable energy sources; and promote cooperation in the processing and conversion of energy and resources at or near places where they are exploited, so as to create an integrated industrial chain of energy and resource cooperation.

Beijing’s March 2015 announcement of its Silk Road Economic Belt was little more than an articulation of the massive economic investments China has already made or committed to in Central Asia. Tajikistan anticipates \$6 billion in investments from China in the near future—investments destined for the construction, textiles, and metal industries. China is already the major player in Tajikistan’s gold industry. The Chinese Zijin Mining Group holds a 75 percent share of the Zarafshan gold joint venture, a venture responsible for the lion’s share of Tajik gold production. The newly built Junda China Petrol Company oil refinery in Kara-Balta, Kyrgyzstan, has the capacity to meet half of Kyrgyz fuel consumption needs. According to U.S. Department of State statistics, China invested \$334 million in Kyrgyzstan in 2012, an amount two and a half times greater than Russia’s foreign direct investment for the same period. FDI figures for Kazakhstan are even more staggering. In a report issued in December 2014, the Eurasian Development Bank (EDB) found that Kazakhstan received 91.5 percent —\$22.57 billion of the \$24.67 billion—that China invested in 2013 in the EDB member states of Kazakhstan, Russia, and Belarus. Although China’s investments in Turkmenistan are not on the same scale as Chinese investments in Kazakhstan, China has notably displaced Russia as the largest consumer of Turkmen gas. Ever hungry for more energy, China concluded \$15 billion in oil, gas, and uranium agreements with Uzbekistan in 2013. In so doing, it has eclipsed Russia as Uzbekistan’s largest foreign investor.

Russia, it should be noted, is also economically important in the region. For Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, remittances from labor migrants working in Russia will continue to be a much-needed source of revenue for these countries’ struggling

economies. The long-term pattern, however, is clear: Moscow simply cannot match China's economic might.

Chinese investment is in its early days. Should China's new Silk Road Economic Belt take off and Beijing make good on its promise to create a \$40 billion fund to improve Eurasia's transportation infrastructure, Beijing's economic preeminence in the region will become even more pronounced.

### **The Russia Game**

Remittances and the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union, which includes both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, speak to Moscow's enduring economic influence. Economics, though, is not Moscow's endgame in the region. Rather, what Moscow wants is for its political domain over Central Asia to be uncontested. Moscow ensures this continued domain through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a Russian-led defense pact that includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, as well as Armenia and Belarus.

Despite the Soviet collapse, Moscow's political elites still view Central Asia as part of the broader Russian empire. That Central Asians continue to travel to Russia for work and Central Asian leaders accede to Moscow's Eurasian Union are signs of Russia's continued tutelage in this former Soviet space.

In contrast to Beijing, which is hands off when it comes to Central Asian politics, Moscow actively intervenes in the region's political affairs. Tajik President Emomali Rahmon owes his seat to Moscow's support during and after Tajikistan's 1990s civil war. Russian state media—media which blankets the Kyrgyz press—actively [undermined](#) President Kurmanbek Bakiyev's rule and made the Kremlin's position clear, once the Kyrgyz president was ousted in 2010, that he "would not be welcome in Moscow." In Astana, not a single Kremlin initiative has crossed President Nursultan Nazarbayev's desk without receiving his approval. Although Nazarbayev needs little prodding, Russian President Vladimir Putin does [emphasize](#) from time to time that he is "confident that a majority of its [the Kazakh] population supports development of close ties with Russia....Nazarbayev is a prudent leader, even the most prudent in the post-Soviet space. He would never act against the will of his country's people."

Moscow's influence in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan is, admittedly, less pronounced than in the three other Central Asian states. Both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have avoided Moscow's multilateral treaties and organizations. At the bilateral level, though, Russian-Uzbek and Russian-Turkmen relations remain stable. Here too there is little indication that Central Asia's seeming outlier states have any intention of challenging Moscow's political hegemony in the region.

## **The U.S. Game**

U.S. policy toward Central Asia is entering a new, third stage. In the decade after the Soviet collapse, Washington focused its efforts on encouraging Central Asian states to democratize. Following the September 11 terror attacks and the initiation of military actions in Afghanistan, Washington pivoted from democracy promotion to power projection. Now that the United States has drawn down its force in Afghanistan, Washington is attempting to define anew its mission in Central Asia.

This effort at redefining the U.S. mission in Central Asia has begun with a rocky start. Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in a March 2015 speech introducing the new yet “Enduring Vision for Central Asia” awkwardly began his [remarks](#) by noting the “sometimes Byzantine regional politics of Eurasia and Central Asia.” Blinken went on to outline Washington’s three objectives in Central Asia: (1) advancing “mutual security,” (2) “forging closer economic ties,” and (3) “advocating for improved governance and human rights.” Good luck. Moscow has the market on regional security. China eclipses U.S. foreign investment in the region. And the Uzbek, Tajik, Kazakh, and Turkmen leaders have repeatedly demonstrated that they can ignore with impunity any U.S. efforts at promoting good governance and human rights.

Short on economic resources, Kyrgyzstan has long welcomed Washington’s aid. This aid, in return, afforded Washington a Central Asian partner open in principle, if not always in substance, to good governance and political reform. The Kyrgyz-U.S. relationship soured, however, when the U.S. Department of State awarded Azimjon Askarov, an activist jailed following the Osh 2010 ethnic riots, one of the two Human Rights Defenders Awards granted for 2014. The Department of State, in announcing the award, praised Askarov for being a “uniting figure,” for “bringing together people of all ethnicities and backgrounds.” The Kyrgyz government rejects this assessment and has jailed Askarov for allegedly provoking ethnic conflict and violence. The tiff between Washington and Bishkek and the resulting annulment of their bilateral assistance treaty, in place since 1993, will result in the elimination of tax, customs and diplomatic status courtesies accorded to USAID projects and workers. If the United States is playing a game in Central Asia, it is increasingly playing alone.

## **Three Games, Little Leverage, Much Freedom**

For the region’s states to have leverage, the three great powers would need (1) either to be playing the same game or (2) care that they are being two-timed. Russian, Chinese, and U.S. policymakers do not care. In fact, Moscow likely welcome’s Beijing’s no-strings-attached investments in Central Asia, and Beijing is likely grateful that Moscow, in pursuing its regional political hegemony, continues to shore up Central Asia’s autocrats. Washington, for its part, appears happy to check out.

China welcomes Central Asia's natural resources but, economically, Central Asia is a minor component of Beijing's international investment portfolio. Central Asia needs Chinese investments more than China needs Central Asia. Russia, in contrast, is obsessed with Central Asia. Even if Russia were not important to the region—and economically, culturally, and historically Russia is important—Central Asians are in no position to spurn Moscow. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine serves as a clear reminder to Central Asian leaders of this reality. And the snap military exercises Russia mounts in Central Asia demonstrate Moscow's ability to project power.

Central Asians are geopolitically stuck. They have been geopolitically stuck for a long time. Being stuck, though, offers one clear advantage: playing to the great powers' interests internationally allows Central Asian autocrats a free hand at home. The Uzbek, Kazakh, Turkmen, Tajik, and Kyrgyz leaders need not worry that any external power will challenge Central Asia's domestic status quo. Yes, the United States will from time to time offer a dissenting voice, rhetorically pushing a vision of good governance and human rights. But this is a vision that Central Asian leaders have learned they can ignore, a lesson reemphasized by Washington's recent delivery of 308 mine-resistant ambush protected vehicles to Uzbekistan, the region's worst human rights violator. Political change may yet come to the region, but this change will not come as a result of any great power rivalry in Central Asia.