

## Strategic Solidarity

### HOW CENTRAL ASIA RESPONDS TO THE KREMLIN'S EXHORTATIONS

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The Central Asian states have endeavored over the past two decades to maintain the appropriate amount of distance from the regional hegemon, Russia. They have sought to balance good relations with it while preserving internal legitimacy and sovereignty. Their approach has hinged on three factors: (1) their structural dependence on Russia; (2) the level of Russia's insistence on conformity to its policies; and (3) their interests with other states and powers. Where these pull in the same direction, the result is visible manifestations of solidarity with Russia. Where they are at odds, regimes have been willing to resist Russian entreaties as the less risky option if capitulation might risk provoking domestic instability. Whereas the first factor changes slowly, the second and third have fluctuated over the years, usually in tandem, and most recently since the start of Vladimir Putin's third term.

The major change that has come with Putin's third term is the advent of the Kremlin's anti-Western campaign, starting after the 2011 mass protests in Russia and escalating during the Ukraine conflict. As part of this campaign, Central Asia has been subject to greater pressure to support Russian policies, both materially and symbolically. How have they responded? From 2011 to early 2015, their behavior indicated a concerted effort to placate Russian foreign policy. Yet after Ukraine stabilized, regimes felt sufficiently confident to return to the status quo ante and they began to part with Russia on symbolic matters, even making overtures to the United States. At the moment, as we approach the end of 2016, the major concern in Central Asia is not about an overweening Russia, but a weakened one.

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## Tending to a High-Maintenance Neighbor

Moscow's position before the 2010s was to prefer pro-Russian regimes on its borders but to tolerate ones that were not vocally anti-Russian. This stance was evident in its pragmatic approach to its neighbors until revolutions brought in new pro-Western governments in Ukraine and Georgia. Russia punished the former by raising the price of gas and the latter with a variety of pressures, most significantly, support for the leaders of Georgia's breakaway regions, culminating in the 2008 war. But in Central Asia, where NATO enlargement was not a factor, Russia did not necessarily perceive its influence as incompatible with those of the West or China. Unlike in Eastern Europe or the Caucasus, Central Asian leaders never promoted overtly anti-Russian foreign policies (although Russian officials appeared to [gloat](#) about President Kurmanbek Bakiyev's overthrow in Kyrgyzstan after he reneged on a pledge to shut down the Manas Transit Center).

The Central Asian states have accommodated great power interests surprisingly well over the quarter century by managing risk, being pragmatic, and playing up their willingness to work with all actors. Despite lying geographically within Russia's "privileged influence" zone, they resisted Russian pressure to cede their sovereignty. They secured billions of dollars in aid from the United States and the EU while resisting any substantive pressures for reform that might weaken the elite's hold on power. They were able to secure even greater amounts of Chinese investment and infrastructure without incurring meddlesome conditions. One result of the inflow of rents was surprising political continuity and surface stability.

As Russia's relations with the West worsened, especially after Putin returned to the presidency and was met by demonstrations in 2011, Moscow's demands on the near abroad deepened. Intent on creating a bloc to counterbalance the EU, Russia proceeded to establish the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the idea for which had lain dormant for a decade. Although its official purpose was to produce a free trade zone and create a large common market, it was widely seen as a geopolitical move. The economic rationale for pooling sovereignty was not sufficiently persuasive. The imbalance of power favoring Russia threatened to formalize a neo-imperial relationship. The Eurasian circumstance is different from, for example, the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1950 (predecessor to the EU), a union that contained equally large Germany and France.

The other new development was the Kremlin's new "civilizational" pivot, drawing a contrast in values between a progressive West and conservative East. Within Russia, manifestation of this new refrain included anti-LGBT laws, the persecution of the rock band Pussy Riot, and the branding of liberal oppositionists as fifth columns. This initiative, though initially intended for Putin's domestic audience, was later [generalized](#) to apply to a large bloc including post-Soviet and Muslim countries, and notionally, China as well.

After Russia's annexation of Crimea and escalating tensions with the West, there were two mechanisms that began to link Russian and Central Asian foreign and domestic policies more tightly: intimidation and emulation. First, Central Asian leaders, observing how important the Ukraine issue was to Putin, may have feared punitive actions, such as restricting migrant labor, if they did not follow Russia's lead. A stronger version holds that they feared invasion and territorial annexation like Ukraine if they notably deviated from Russia's interests—especially in places with large concentrations of Russians, such as Kazakhstan. According to the emulation mechanism, leaders need not fear Russia, but can take advantage of Putin's example to enact policies that serve domestic interests, or seek to ingratiate themselves with Putin for the prospect of future rewards. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish these mechanisms in practice, but the logic of emulation is more persuasive where policies of solidarity are observed.

### Central Asian Contortions

The Central Asian states did not share Russia's sense of grievance against the West nor support its territorial claim against Ukraine. Instead, the dominant responses were ambivalence and selective mimicry. The bellwether of Central Asian attitudes was their vote on a UN resolution to condemn Russia's annexation of Crimea. With reports of Russia [threatening](#) numerous countries before the vote, it passed 100 to 11 with 58 abstentions. Quite a few post-Soviet countries voted for it. Armenia and Belarus voted against it. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan abstained. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan did not vote at all. Azerbaijan voted—and spoke out—in favor of Ukraine's territorial integrity.<sup>2</sup>

Subsequent moves by the Central Asian states reveal a gradation of accommodation to Russia's policies in Central Asia, with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan the most supportive, Kazakhstan occupying a careful neutral position, and Uzbekistan the most resistant. However, with the passage of time, there was a general reversion to pragmatic foreign policies.

Kyrgyzstan, a state whose fate is closely linked to Russia's but with a history of openness to the West and democracy assistance, has typically been reluctant to place all its geopolitical eggs in the Russian basket. Yet following Russia's foreign policy course, the government signaled a sharp break with the West, including introducing copycat legislation requiring registration of foreign agents and prohibiting "gay propaganda." The most extreme measure was the abrogation of a longstanding agreement with the US governing foreign assistance following the State Department's [granting](#) of a human rights award to Azimjon Askarov, an ethnic Uzbek defense lawyer who was imprisoned following the outbreak of ethnic violence in 2010. These moves occurred within an anti-

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<sup>2</sup> This is unsurprising, given its unwillingness to endorse a territorial pretension analogous to Nagorno-Karabakh.

American campaign in the media and in political discourse. Yet, this new agenda, which was out of character for Kyrgyzstan, did not last. In late 2015, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry visited all five Central Asian states and was greeted warmly in Bishkek. Officials spoke of restoring better ties with the United States, and the Supreme Court reviewed Askarov's sentence. The copycat bills that generated so much [press](#) in the West were never in fact passed by parliament. From the vantage point of late 2016, these episodes of geopolitical vacillation resemble past swings of the pendulum (if more drastic).

Tajikistan, which like Kyrgyzstan is heavily dependent on remittances from labor migrants working in Russia, continued an existing trend of pursuing Russia-friendly policies. It had previously ratified an agreement extending Russia's military presence to 2042. The years after the Euromaidan saw an intensifying crackdown against political opponents and religious believers. This might be perceived as a nod to trends in Russia, but it can just as easily be explained by the regime's domestic logic. By mid-2016, Tajikistan was signaling its intention to join the EEU. Its [accession](#) would not be the result of deliberate Russian pressure—although it would provide Russia the symbolic cachet of one more member—but rather a move compelled by the fact that its main trading partners other than China were already part of the bloc.

Although one of the earliest members of the EEU, Kazakhstan has usually placed sovereignty concerns over conformity to Russia's wishes. Notably, it balked at further integration through the EEU, including the possibility of a common currency. And while Russia may have sought an exclusive trading relationship, Kazakhstan has preferred a more open one. President Nursultan Nazarbaev made a formal [request](#) to the EEU that his country be allowed to deepen trade ties with both China and the EU. Kazakhstan notably resisted joining Russian counter-sanctions against the EU levied in the spring of 2015 and maintained relations with Ukraine's government, which is loathed in Russia. Perhaps the turning point was Putin's (seemingly) offhand comment in August 2014 that Kazakhstan's statehood began in 1992, which resonated in Kazakhstan by galvanizing a reaction to defend its sovereignty.

Bucking the broader trend, Uzbekistan first leaned away from Russia before inching back. Recently deceased former president Islam Karimov was characteristically standoffish initially, displaying no interest in ceding sovereignty by joining the EEU. Putin could not have expected full Uzbek cooperation on Crimea, nor did it make any known threats to secure it. Not only did Uzbekistan make no detectable movement toward the Russian position on Crimea, it willfully [turned](#) toward China for investment to compensate for a diminished Russian presence as a result of its economic problems. Yet by mid-2016, Uzbekistan appeared to be leaning closer to Russia than it did in the immediate aftermath of the Euromaidan. By forgiving a longstanding Uzbek debt, Russia [appeared](#) to be attempting to coax Uzbekistan back into its orbit. Common

security concerns and Uzbek dependence on migration to Russia leave an opening for closer relations provided Russia does not push too hard.

### Opportunism Prevails, Yet Again

Given the past behavior of the Central Asian states, it is hard to conclude that any state's sympathy for Russia's ideological objectives has been more than superficial. As it happens, the Central Asian states' domestic moves that conformed to Russia's designs—closing NGOs, [branding](#) oppositionists as terrorists, and [playing](#) to nationalist-tinged bigotry—all served to strengthen the control of incumbent regimes. Conveniently, leaders could claim to Western critics that they adopted these measures under Russian pressure, chalking up both domestic and international victories. Next to an “expansionist” Russia, Central Asia's rulers could market themselves as moderate and reasonable partners, even as they continue to tighten the screws at home.

More alarming from the Central Asian perspective than a vindictive Putin throwing his weight around is Russia's economic malaise, a result of low oil prices and self-inflicted wounds in its confrontation with the West. These factors reverberate in Central Asia through less generous patronage, collapsing regional currencies, and a decline in Russia's ability to absorb labor migrants, along with heightened xenophobia against dark-skinned migrants. Central Asia's leaders are paying the price for failing to adopt policies that could improve domestic employment and foregoing opportunities to decouple their economies from Russia's. If migrants were to return *en masse* to Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, these countries would face new stability challenges.

For the most part, the forces pushing Russia and Central Asia together are stronger than those pulling them apart. Russia, for all its pretensions, is too important to fail, and Central Asia's leaders fear its further isolation from the world economy. Due to Russia's domestic problems and its preoccupation with geopolitical matters on its Western flank, Central Asia is (for the time being) an afterthought. This means that Moscow need not waste precious hard currency building infrastructure projects (dams) or punish Central Asian states for anything less than an egregious transgression. The state of relations in the region over two years after Euromaidan therefore resembles that of old, with hardheaded realism and brazen opportunism prevailing in the capitals of Central Asia.