

## The Changing Logic of Russian Strategy in Central Asia FROM PRIVILEGED SPHERE TO DIVIDE AND RULE?

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Russian strategy toward Central Asia generates great interest in Western academic and policy circles, but few analytical nuances. Depending on the source, Russia is often characterized as wanting to dominate or control the region, to reconstitute the Soviet Union, or to obsessively counter the influence of the West and/or a rising China. Although many note the numerous links, soft power mechanisms, and levers Russia utilizes in its dealings with Central Asian states, few discuss the strategic trade-offs involved in Russia's Central Asian policy nor explicitly address the evolution of its strategic choices.

This memo is a short version of a longer project that applies the analytical insights of an emerging literature on the logics of hierarchy and clientelism in international relations theory to the case of Russian strategy of influence in Central Asia. Although several excellent studies of Russian foreign policy have analyzed Moscow's complicated relationship with its near neighbors, most do so under the assumption that the post-Soviet states are balancing or bandwagoning under anarchy, according to realist theories, or are developing a broader Eurasian security community, in line with constructivist or sociological approaches. Within both these frameworks, disagreements between the post-Soviet states and Moscow are taken as evidence of the "failure" of Russian policy or as examples of its declining regional influence.

In fact, we argue, recent Russian policy toward Central Asia marks not a decline but a distinct shift in strategic logic—from one that emphasizes regional mediation and maximizing influence across the whole region to a more focused logic of hierarchy that seeks to support selected states with more focused instruments, take sides in regional disputes, and push for deeper integration within regional security and economic organizations that have narrower memberships. As scholars have argued, the logic of hierarchy is not one of geopolitical balancing but of pursuing "divide and rule" —

supporting a client state and backing its claims in local disputes or conflicts in exchange for securing its political loyalty. From this perspective, Russia seems to be abandoning its previous doctrine of exerting general regional influence in favor of pursuing more focused influence and integration with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

### **Sources of New Russian Strategic Thinking**

Through the 2000s, Moscow pursued a policy of promoting the maximum influence possible across all of the Central Asian states, a policy we might term “unite and influence.” This policy attempted to integrate the maximum number of Central Asian states into Russian-led security and economic institutions but avoided taking sides in sensitive regional disputes (water rights, borders, and ethnic tensions) so that Moscow could preserve its role as a regional mediator. Crystallized in then-President Dmitry Medvedev’s 2008 declaration after the Russia-Georgia war, Russia considered the former Soviet space a “sphere of privileged interests” and would pursue policies to safeguard and balance its special role.

Debates among policy experts on the future of Russia’s strategy for Central Asia gathered more scope in the second half of the 2000s, including new angles of approach such as soft power (Russian language, culture, and the notion of the “Russian world,” or *Russkiy mir*). Russia’s economic boom prior to the 2008 crisis, buoyed by the prices of raw materials, also played its part in reevaluating the tools of economic integration, and it inspired more ambitious and more precisely designed projects like the Customs Union. Two trigger events changed the state of the situation. The toppling of Kurmanbek Bakiyev and the violence in Osh in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 both vividly showed that no collective security structure, whether the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), was in a position to react to the internal instabilities of Central Asia. Based on that failure, Russia led a charge to amend the CSTO charter to include points on the ability to “react to crisis situations threatening the security, stability, territorial integrity, and sovereignty of member states,” which were adopted in December 2010.<sup>1</sup>

In 2011, the Institute for Contemporary Development (*Institut sovremennogo razvitiia* (INSOR)), then led by Igor Yurgens, who was said to be close to Dmitry Medvedev, and considered the spearhead for the new Kremlin-led slogan about “modernization,” drew conclusions from the CSTO’s disavowed failure in Kyrgyzstan and published a critical report on the future of the organization. The authors identified three key problems: the dearth of mechanisms for reacting to crisis situations, in particular humanitarian ones, which require peacekeeping measures and troops; the vagueness of the CSTO’s aims; and above all, the lack of regional unity. Notably, the report soundly criticized Uzbekistan for its reluctance to sign agreements or implement those already signed.<sup>2</sup> The report proposed that CSTO decisions be made on a majority,

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<sup>1</sup> Evgeny Troitskiy, “Kyrgyzstan Turmoil. A Challenge to Russian Foreign Policy,” *Swedish Institute for International Affairs* 8 (2012): 31.

<sup>2</sup> I. Yurgens, ed., *ODKB: otvetstvennaia bezopasnost'* (Moscow: INSOR, August 2011), <http://www.insor-russia.ru/files/ODKB.pdf>

not consensus, basis, in order to prevent Tashkent from blocking the functioning of the organization. It seems that there were even informal discussions about the possibility of excluding Tashkent, but the CSTO General Secretariat, which is keen on maintaining good relations with Islam Karimov, would have been formally opposed to it and was supposedly embarrassed by the frankness of the INSOR report.<sup>3</sup> INSOR, which made headlines with its provocative discourse calling for Russia to join NATO, also noted astutely that neither NATO nor the European Union would try to cooperate with the CSTO when it had yet to demonstrate its effectiveness on the ground. It is therefore Russia's very legitimacy as a security provider that was at stake in CSTO reform, argued INSOR. In other words, the security bloc's lack of effectiveness internally was hindering its external legitimacy.

INSOR's proposals are often devalued by foreign experts, since they are deemed representative of a minority point of view, one that has become more marginal thanks to Vladimir Putin's return to power in May 2012 and the failure of Medvedev to push through his "modernization" agenda. This stance nonetheless shows a poor grasp of the mode of operation of Putin's inner circle, from which Medvedev has never dissented. INSOR's proposals must be understood to be experimental: they suggest new strategic lines of thinking within the Kremlin and open new official lines of debate.

The Arab Spring has also accelerated this rethinking of Russia's Central Asian strategy. Although the Kremlin provides unfailing support to the Central Asian regimes and claims to endorse non-interference, Kremlin officials could hardly fail to make the parallel between the fall of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak and the situations in Central Asia, in particular the seemingly imminent succession to Islam Karimov. There is little information available on this topic, but the declaration of Russian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Grigory Karasin, expressed during a hearing devoted to Central Asia in the Russian parliament in April 2011, was revealing: the region, he said, is threatened by a "cocktail" of political repression, social and economic depression, and the seizure of the country's riches by a small elite. Further high-level political tensions over the operations of MTS, a Russian telecom provider that was expropriated, also suggest that Russian officials are willing to publicly acknowledge that Moscow exerts little influence over domestic issues and the elites' management in Uzbekistan.

In a similar vein, the Russian Council for Foreign Affairs, which operates under the sway of Igor Ivanov as an umbrella for multiple projects on Russia's domestic evolution and foreign policy, and which mediates scholarly knowledge with the policy community in Russia and abroad, released a long report at the beginning of 2013 on Russia's strategy for Central Asia, with a specific focus on the post-2014 changes in regional security.<sup>4</sup> Reintegrating Afghanistan within Russia's Central Asian radar

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<sup>3</sup> Viktor Litovkin, "INSOR testiruet OKDB," *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, September 16, 2011, [http://nvo.ng.ru/realty/2011-09-16/1\\_insor.html](http://nvo.ng.ru/realty/2011-09-16/1_insor.html)

<sup>4</sup> RIAC, *Interesy Rossii v Tsentral'noi Azii: sodержanie, perspektivy, ogranichiteli* (Moscow: Russian Council for Foreign Affairs, 2013), [http://russiancouncil.ru/common/upload/RIAC\\_Central\\_Asia.pdf](http://russiancouncil.ru/common/upload/RIAC_Central_Asia.pdf)

reveals a change underway, after more than two decades of denial following the “trauma” from the Soviet-Afghan war. The report notes the growing divergence of domestic situations in Central Asia and calls for this lack of regional unity to be addressed by designing Russian strategies on a country-by-country basis. It also recognizes that Russia is now merely one player among others, thereby admitting the region is now multipolar in nature, a situation that has its advantages but also its disadvantages.

While recommending soft power tools (fostering language policy, cultural influence via the media, and renewed Russian expert knowledge on the region), the report also underlines social and political challenges (like labor migration, radicalization, and the elites’ legitimacy question), elements that had hitherto not been part of Russia’s narrative on the region, and raises difficult topics such as regional water disputes. It also calls for country-specific strategies and devotes a specific section of its recommendations on bilateral relations, including: a high level of security and economic integration with Kazakhstan, seen as the intermediary between Russia and the rest of Central Asia; security cooperation in exchange for economic aid for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan; and modest ambitions for Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. In sum, Kazakhstan is to be Moscow’s privileged partner, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan more classical clients, and Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan more independent states.

### **Russia’s Shifting Relations with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan**

Many of the trade-offs associated with Moscow’s strategy can be seen in its swinging relationship with Uzbekistan over the last 15 years and its accompanying importance for Russia’s relations with Kyrgyzstan. At the very start of his presidency, Vladimir Putin made strategic engagement with Uzbekistan a top priority. The Russian president symbolically visited Tashkent and proposed numerous steps to improve security cooperation on counterterrorism issues, especially in the wake of attacks by the Islamist Movement of Uzbekistan in 1999 and 2000. The onset of the U.S. campaign in Afghanistan brought Tashkent much closer to Washington, but the color revolutions of 2003-2005, coupled with Western criticism following the Andijon crackdown, brought Karimov closer to Moscow. In 2005, Uzbekistan evicted the U.S. military from its base in Karshi-Khanabad and signaled its intent to join the Russian-led CSTO. Internal security and intelligence cooperation also improved, as Moscow became more acquiescent to Tashkent’s requests to turn over political opponents and accused extremists residing on Russian soil. Economically, Russian companies, including Gazprom, were granted a number of lucrative concessions and in 2006 Uzbekistan also joined the newly formed Eurasian Economic Community (Eurasec). In June 2010, when ethnic violence broke out in southern Kyrgyzstan and interim premier Roza Otunbayeva appealed to Moscow to intervene and restore order, Medvedev’s refusal was, in part, attributed to Uzbekistan’s objections and apprehensions about such a Russian intervention in a border region.

However, Uzbekistan’s preference for bilateral deals and for concerns over its own sovereign autonomy would soon generate structural tensions within these organizations. In 2008, Uzbekistan suspended its participation in Eurasec, wary of the

proposed integration of the economic space and the erosion of its voice in decision-making procedures. A number of seemingly contradictory statements made by new Russian president Dmitry Medvedev about Russia's position on the construction of Tajikistan's Rogun dam and other hydropower issues further heightened Uzbekistan's anxiety. In 2009, Uzbekistan resumed security cooperation with the United States and NATO by becoming the hub for the opening of the Northern Distribution Network, a northern transportation network designed to supply NATO forces in Afghanistan. Tashkent saw the opening of NDN as an opportunity to renew its security and economic engagement with the United States.

Following Uzbekistan's departure from the CSTO in June 2012, a new Russian strategy of "divide and rule" seems to be accelerating. Rather than trying to maximize and balance relations with the Central Asian states, Russia is now aggressively entering into a classical client-state relationship with Kyrgyzstan and, to a lesser extent, Tajikistan, the region's smallest and poorest countries but also the ones where Russian influence has remained strong for twenty years. In exchange for supporting them materially and in their local rivalries, Moscow seeks closer ties and fealty to its foreign policy directives. Russia hosts millions of labor migrants from both countries, maintains close cooperation with security and intelligence services, has a number of economic interests, and projects its soft power by broadcasting Russian language media and supporting educational programs. Both Central Asian states also host Russian military facilities, are members of the CSTO, and have accumulated bilateral debts to Moscow.

Just in 2012, Moscow and Bishkek concluded a number of new bilateral agreements that not only bring the countries closer but cross a number of "red lines" that have long given Tashkent concern. In 2012, the sides announced that all Russian defense facilities within Kyrgyzstan would be integrated, including a new proposed base in Batken, and treated as whole legal entity, thereby denying Bishkek the right to renegotiate the terms of each individually. Russia also promised over \$1 billion in renewed security assistance, specifically designed for border security activities, reportedly to include armored vehicles, satellite equipment, and helicopters. In late 2012, Moscow also proposed a plan to reduce Kyrgyzstan's bilateral debt, sequenced and conditioned over a number of years, and promised to invest in its upstream Kambarata hydropower projects. The latter signaled a shift from acting as a prospective mediator in regional water disputes to an active investor and backer of the Kyrgyz upstream position. Finally, Kyrgyz and Russian officials confirmed that Kyrgyzstan will join the Russian-led Customs Union by the end of 2013, joining Kazakhstan and Belarus in what is the region's most tightly-knit economic organization.

### **Conclusions and Implications for the Region**

Although it is still too early to tell whether the Kremlin's strategic shift in Central Asia will be permanent or even formalized, we see three potential consequences for the stability and political future of the region. First, it has the potential to alter the "multivector" equilibrium that has characterized the foreign policy orientation of all the Central Asian states over the last decade. Prior to 2012, all the Central Asian states

sought to maintain a balance between their relations with Russia, China, and the United States. But just as Kyrgyzstan shows signs of becoming a Russian client, closer to Moscow's fold, so too Turkmenistan, in its debt and promises of gas exports, since 2010 has become dependent on China.

Second, it is likely to feed a growing regional security dilemma over border issues between Uzbekistan and its neighbors. Fears of possible U.S.-Uzbek security cooperation following NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan appear to be driving a regional security dilemma, with the upstream countries receiving backing from Russia in response to the perception that Uzbekistan is turning to the West. Uncertainty over the nature of the U.S. footprint, the credibility and scope of Russia's regional security guarantees, and possible regional changes of regimes in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are exacerbating regional insecurity and tensions about borders.

Third, a more focused attempt to maintain tight relations with Kazakhstan and to integrate Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan within Russian-backed security and economic mechanisms may also magnify the sense of economic competition with China that, for the most part, has been kept mostly private for the last decade and focused primarily on securing Kazakh and Turkmen energy. From this perspective, recent calls for a Eurasian Union would take this changing Russian strategy to the next stage and suggest that the proposed organization is as much designed to counter growing Chinese regional influence as it is Western.

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