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Perspectives on Russia's Policy towards Central Asia

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Central Asia is one of the most important regions in Russian foreign policy. The succession of power in Kazakhstan and other countries in the region are used by Russia to increase political pressure. China's actions are a challenge for Russian policy and lead to an increase in activity in the area of regional security. This may force Russia to put more resources in its Central Asia policy but that will not reduce its activity in other regions in the EU's neighbourhood.

In response to failures in the implementation of Eurasian integration, Russia is intensifying bilateral relations with countries in Central Asia. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan on 4–6 February. On 28 March Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Kyrgyzstan, for the first time since President Sooronbay Jeenbekov took office in 2017, and last year, on 18–19 October, visited Uzbekistan for the first time since President Shavkat Mirziyoyev took office in 2016. The visit in Uzbekistan was combined with an informal summit of the presidents of Russia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan in Kazakhstan. Cooperation on regional security was a common element of all the talks.

Importance of Central Asia for Russia. Russia perceives the region as a potential source of destabilisation through terrorism, organized crime, or ethnic conflict. The significance of the region for Russia's security is reflected in its 2015 National Security Strategy and 2016 Foreign Policy Concept. Russia has military infrastructure in the region, including bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (its largest abroad) and the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan.

For Russia, having a presence in Central Asia also has ideological meaning. Russia perceives this region as part of the Russian world (Russkiy Mir) and the participation of the states in this region in Eurasian integration is a prerequisite of Russia's goal of full reintegration of the post-Soviet area.

From Russia's perspective, the stabilisation of Afghanistan is crucial to security in the region; therefore, Russia has strengthened its contacts with the Taliban (on 5–6 February, a conference of the Afghan opposition with the participation of the Taliban took place in Moscow). The diplomatic aim is to increase the Taliban's room for manoeuvre in relations with the U.S. and to strengthen their position inside Afghanistan. In the context of the reduction of the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, Russia wants to increase its influence in this country and use that in relations with other countries in the region.

Instruments of Russia's Policy. The security problems, though, are a pretext for Russia to put pressure on the Central Asian countries. Its instruments of influence include multilateral cooperation formats: Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

However, the countries in the region are reluctant to deepen transnational integration under the EEU (its members) or accession (Tajikistan), which limits the effectiveness of this policy instrument. The EEA also is not conducive to improving the economic situation in the region. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan's membership in the EEU generates negative economic consequences for them. Harmonisation of customs policy and raising external tariffs limits the benefits in turnover with partners outside the organisation, raises the cost

of re-exports of goods and hinders cross-border trade. The slow introduction of the common energy market (to be in place from 2025) enables Russia to sign trade agreements with each member state on preferential terms (especially with regard to energy sources and electricity imported from Russia). Due to political dependence on Russia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan cannot withdraw from the EEU and remain susceptible to Russian influence, especially during periods of crisis or political succession, such as the transfer of power by Nursultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan. Economic influence in Central Asia, although weakened due to the problems with the Russian economy since 2014 and the growing role of China, remain an important political instrument for Russia. It is one of the most important partners in the region (accounting for about 30% of trade exchange) and the largest labour market for citizens of these countries. After China, it is the second-largest source of foreign direct investment. Regional economies remain susceptible to fluctuations in the Russian economic situation and the value of the rouble.

Russia uses cultural ties, historical heritage, and Russian-language media as political instruments. Connections among the political elite, both the older generation originating from the Soviet nomenklatura and younger ones connected by business relations with Russia, are also significant. Russia's interests are also served by a number of state institutions, such as the Russkiy Mir Foundation and Federal Agency for the CIS (Rossotrudnichestvo), as well as Russian minority associations and Slavic universities. Another instrument of influence in the region is Russian minorities, mainly in Kazakhstan, where Russians make up about 23% of the population.

The Limits on Russia's Activities. Factors that restrict Russia's ambitions include the independent foreign policy attempts of countries in the region, such as Uzbekistan's multi-vector policy and Turkmenistan's neutrality. Neither country is a member of the EEU or CSTO.

The growing attractiveness of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) challenges economic integration within the EEU. Russia is trying to minimise China's growing economic advantage by coordinating its concept of Eurasian integration with the Chinese initiative. In 2015, President Vladimir Putin and Chinese leader Xi Jinping signed a declaration that their countries seek common interests in EEU and Chinese projects, but this did not entail real ventures.

China is also increasing its involvement in regional security, previously dominated by Russia. In February, information appeared about the establishment of a Chinese military base in Tajikistan, a CSTO member. The beginning of a permanent Chinese military presence in Central Asia may be a challenge for Russia, especially if China strives to further develop its military infrastructure in the region. So far, though, China has not declared its intention to create a competing security system, rather its stated goal is to stabilise its borders (a military presence in the Wakhan Corridor in Afghanistan also serves this purpose), which is in line with Russia's interests.

Another challenge for Russia is preserving the role of the Russian language as a tool of influence in Central Asia. For Russia, it is thus disadvantageous when countries in the region stop using Cyrillic (after Kazakhstan converted to the Latin alphabet, only Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan still use Cyrillic).

Conclusions. Security will remain a priority for Russia in its Central Asia policy. It prefers bilateral relations with countries in the region, intensifying military contacts, and increasing its military presence in the region (Increasing Russia's military presence in Kyrgyzstan was one of the topics Putin's visit to Kyrgyzstan this year). Forms of multilateral cooperation, such as CSTO (enabling the use of rapid-reaction forces), will be increasingly used to legitimise its military activities.

Russia seeks to strengthen its position in Afghanistan through its relations with the Taliban, which may take over power in the country, as well as its traditional allies—Afghan Uzbeks and Tajiks. Influence on the stability of Afghanistan and its borders will be used in relations with its neighbours—Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

Greater cooperation between Russia and China is possible because stabilisation of the region is in both their interests. It is possible that this will lead to strengthening the role of SCO. However, China's violation of Russia's monopoly on security issues in the region, combined with economic domination, will have a negative impact on the latter. Russia may be forced to engage more resources when formulating political counter-competition to China. This probably will not reduce Russian involvement in other regions, such as Eastern Europe.

Russia's Central Asia policy will consolidate local regimes and reduce their potential for democratisation, which will weaken the EU's ability to cooperate with them. In areas important for the stabilisation of the region, such as border control, migration processes, or combating terrorism, the EU remains an attractive partner. Strengthening existing and well-functioning forms of cooperation, such as the EU Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA), is in line with the Union's strategic security interests.