

RUSSIA IN CENTRAL ASIA: A SHIFT TO POSITIVE FOREIGN POLICIES

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Evolution of Foreign Policy Ideas

Throughout the entire period of post-Soviet development, Russia has been harrowed by domestic problems: an entirely new distribution of political and economic power and the resultant reshuffling at the top; frantic efforts to bring remote regions, which imagined themselves “independent

principalities,” into line; the war in Chechnia, etc. Some of the ministries, too, thought they were free to pursue their own policies uncorrelated with the RF Foreign Ministry. The Ministry of Atomic Energy, for example, put forward the initiative of selling nuclear reactors to Iran. Politicians remained locked in a fierce struggle for and against democratic principles; some of them even wanted to restore the great-power approaches. For this reason, other states treated Russia with caution and resorted to preventive measures. On the other hand, this deprived Russia of a chance to pursue a more or less effective foreign policy.

The evolution of Russia’s foreign policy approaches within the CIS is best illustrated by the notorious paper “SNG: nachalo ili konets istorii”¹ (The CIS: the Beginning or End of History) and the recent statements by President Putin.

The paper, authored by prominent political scientists Konstantin Zatulin and Andranik Migranian and permeated with imperial arrogance, said in part: “Only active measures (up to and including destabilization of the domestic situation in the regions, where anti-Russian and anti-integration forces have become especially obvious) can stem the process of a slow (and inevitable in the context of the current policies of Russia’s leaders) drift of these states away from Russia, which will turn the CIS into a nonentity... The Russian leaders have to clearly demonstrate to all their far and near partner-rivals that Russia would sooner encourage a large-scale redivision of the entire post-Soviet expanse by tapping all possibilities and the political sentiments of the Russian diaspora than permit the appearance of numerous anti-Russian centers of power resolved to oust it from the new abroad.” With the naïve conviction that destabilization would bring Russia political dividends, the authors elaborated their theory as applied to Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Central Asia. They failed, however, to take account of the other side of the coin: political and economic isolation; unacceptable direct confrontation with the Western and Islamic worlds, an economic crisis, involvement in numerous ethnic and political conflicts along Russia’s frontiers, and stronger separatist trends inside the country.

Since the initial course chosen turned out to be unprofitable, Russia had to pursue a different strategy once more. The decline of the Yeltsin Era, which started with the financial, economic, and political crisis of 1998, ended the period of foreign policy arrogance. The time had come to revise Russia’s foreign policy; it could no longer remain indifferent to what was happening on its borders and could no longer distance itself from direct involvement. It had to take into account its economic, political, and defense interests in the neighboring countries.

Since that time, the Russian Federation has radically revised its foreign policy approaches within the CIS and concluded that Russia needed friendly and stable states for its neighbors. This changed the foreign policy principles Russia applied in Central Asia. In his book *Uzbekistan na poroge XXI veka: ugrozy bezopasnosti, uslovia i garantii progressa* (Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the 21st Century: Security Threats, Conditions, and Guarantees of Progress), President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov wrote: “It is very important to understand that the appearance of independent and fairly stable states able to serve as a regional buffer completely suits Russia’s interests; it will cost it next to nothing. A stable region with a stable economy does not challenge Russia or any other state. It opens vast economic and other perspectives. This guarantees that the region will never become the scene of a clash of civilizations; it will serve as an example of their interpenetration and mutual enrichment.”

When speaking about the foreign policy conflict that hit Ukraine in November-December 2004, President Putin described Russia’s new foreign policy strategy in the CIS: “We shall accept the choice of any nation in the post-Soviet expanse as absolutely adequate and shall cooperate with any elected leader.”² The Russian president added that his country was prepared to play a constructive role across the post-Soviet expanse and that it would limit itself to the role of an intermediary: “We are not ready, and we do not want to shoulder responsibility for the final settlement of any conflict. We do not agree with the attempts of any of the sides to shift responsibility onto Russia. We do not want to create the illusion that any decision was made under Russia’s pressure.”³

¹ “SNG: nachalo ili konets istorii,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 26 March, 1997.

² RIA Novosti [http://www.rian.ru/rian/intro.cfm?trd_id=1761].

³ Ibidem.

Changing Priorities in Central Asia!?

The leaders of the CIS countries, who are fond of enthusiastically demonstrating their independence, run the risk of being excluded from real integration within this structure. This is demonstrated in particular by the concern with which certain states met Russia's decision adopted late in June 2003 to withdraw from several CIS treaties. They jumped to the conclusion that "Moscow has started dismantling the CIS." It turned out, however, that Russia had merely decided to leave the stillborn treaties and agreements.

At the same time, the sovereignty that certain CIS politicians and certain forces were seeking and bragging about did not bring the desired results. The resultant disunity among the CIS countries cost them economic ties, control over their borders, and their international prestige. It also showed that none of them was prepared to face the new threats and challenges.

The truth of this is gradually dawning in the Central Asian republics. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are Russia's loyal satellites, therefore, the recent foreign policy U-turn performed by Uzbekistan and the favorable agreements Russia reached in Tajikistan have given Moscow another chance to revive its influence in Central Asia. Uzbekistan signed a Treaty on Strategic Cooperation⁴ with Russia. There is a more or less widely accepted opinion that the present U-turn was caused by Tashkent's disenchantment with the West. Late in August 2003, President of Uzbekistan Karimov said at a press conference: "I regret to say that the hopes we pinned on certain influential Western countries were not justified."

The states that let NATO forces into their territories gained next to nothing: the financial support was too little to alter their economic basis. The Central Asian republics are gradually coming to the conclusion that their hope of exchanging military bases for security and economic guarantees is futile. The West is stepping up its criticism of the local leaders⁵ very much to the growing displeasure of the ruling circles. Russia, by contrast, shows much more political tolerance.

The failed hopes of winning the sympathy of the West, primarily the United States, for the sake of which some of the CIS countries moved away from Russia, has driven them into a kind of self-isolation. Little by little, they have all had to recognize an obvious fact: America will never invest in any country unless it is sure of high economic and political dividends. For example, on the eve of the counterterrorist operation in Afghanistan, the United States canceled Pakistan's foreign debt of \$1 billion: Washington badly needed Islamabad's military and political support.

Obviously, the West has its strategic interests in Central Asia, which cannot be fully realized for several reasons. First, the Russian factor is still preserved in the independent Central Asian countries due to the common information expanse; large Russian-speaking diasporas and pro-Russian elites; inertia of public thinking; cultural and economic ties with Russia, etc. Second, there is a host of urgent and overripe problems which demand immediate attention and do not tempt the West: the low level of social security, poverty, lack of a national idea, etc. Third, a certain amount of inertia in the local population's political thinking and its inadequately developed level coupled with tolerance and obedience. This makes it next to impossible to change the sluggish models of state administration and cultivate democracy, something

⁴ Presidents Karimov and Putin signed the treaty on 16 June, 2004, under which strategic cooperation between the two countries was designed to ensure mutual security, let them jointly oppose global threats and challenges, consolidate regional stability, and extend their cooperation in the political, economic, and humanitarian spheres. Under this treaty the sides will be cooperating in the U.N., OSCE and other multilateral intergovernmental structures. With the aim of creating a stable and efficient system of regional security in Central Asia, the sides will form bilateral consultative mechanisms involving the security councils, foreign ministries, and other related ministries and departments. The treaty also envisages military and military-technical cooperation on the basis of corresponding agreements. On the basis of special agreements, the sides may grant each other the right to use military objects on their territories to ensure security and maintain peace and stability.

⁵ "Secretary of State Colin Powell sent a powerful message to Uzbekistan this week: no more U.S. funding to the central government until progress is made on democratic reform and human rights" ("Powell: Uzbeks Need More Reforms," *The Washington Times*, 15 July, 2004).

which the people really want. Fourth, the West's experience in Afghanistan and Iraq can hardly be called successful: so far America has failed to set up democratic regimes there.

Even though the Pentagon is talking about upgrading its military presence in Central Asia, it will not station more troops there. It will upgrade the quality of military cooperation and the bases. U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has pointed out that the bases in Central Asia would not "be permanent as a base would be permanent, but would be a place where the United States and the coalition countries could periodically and intermittently have access and support." Naturally enough, the West will completely ignore the socioeconomic problems of the countries that accepted "operating sites." This is what tipped the balance in favor of Moscow.

The West, however, is obviously willing to continue monitoring local developments. This is amply testified by its military and political activity in the region, which is frequented by high-ranking American and NATO officials. The recent Rubezh-2004 joint military exercises in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan within the Collective Security Treaty Organization were attended by General John Abizaid, Chief of the U.S. Central Command of the Armed Forces, who visited Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan to discuss broader military and military-technical cooperation. General Richard Myers, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the U.S. Army, visited Tashkent and Almaty with a similar mission. U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage visited Kazakhstan where he said that Astana was Washington's strategic partner in the defense and security sphere and that military cooperation between the two countries would ascend to a qualitatively new level. Indeed, international contacts, including those in the sphere of military training and education, received twice as much money as they did nearly two years ago. Other Western countries are also involved: a British infantry battalion participated in the Stepnoy orel-2004 peacekeeping exercises in Kazakhstan.

During his recent visit to Kyrgyzstan, James McDougall, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy, described the draft plan of military cooperation between his country and Kyrgyzstan for 2005-2010 as the best substantiated. This was confirmed by a monetary grant to be spent on Kyrgyzstan's military needs. Early in October 2004, the defense ministries of Kyrgyzstan and France signed a plan of bilateral cooperation for 2005. It envisaged French lessons for the officers and training exercises, including Alpine training for special detachments. France transferred \$60 thousand-worth of relevant equipment and service property to the Defense Ministry of Kyrgyzstan. Tajikistan is gradually becoming involved in Western countries' military and military-technical cooperation projects.

At the same time, the military-political and economic contacts between Russia and the Central Asian countries have recently been revived. In the military-political sphere, cooperation has been established in the following areas:

On 6 October, 2004, the lower chamber of the parliament of Kazakhstan ratified a protocol that extended the sphere of the Agreement on the Main Principles of Military-Technical Cooperation between the members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization.

Seven more Su-27 fighter-bombers and two Mi-8 helicopters will be moved to Russia's Kant airbase in Kyrgyzstan within the CSTO. In August 2004, RF Defense Minister Sergey Ivanov said that Russia's plans to develop the base had been approved by President Putin. The parliament of Kyrgyzstan recommended that the government sell the controlling block of shares of the Dastan plant to Russia, the only enterprise in the CIS that produces BA-111 "Shkval" missiles. Very soon they will be imported.

Tajikistan is another member of the CSTO with a Russian military base on its territory. During President Putin's visit to Dushanbe on 17 October, 2004, the sides signed documents which transformed the Russian 201st motor rifle division into a Russian military base with an aviation component based at the Ayni airdrome, 20 km from the capital. It is expected to include up to 20 combat elements, including ground-attack aircraft, fighters, and Mi-24 and Mi-8 helicopters. The base is expected to become an important security element. To repay its debt to the Russian Federation, Tajikistan gave it the Okno optical-fiber complex in Nurek. It was decided that the Rubezh-2005 joint military exercises within the CSTO would take place in Tajikistan.

Today Russia is more actively cooperating with Uzbekistan than ever before; though not a CSTO member this country is involved in an active dialog with Moscow on many aspects, including military-political issues.

There is noticeable progress in the economic sphere as well:

Russia became a full-fledged member of the Central Asian Economic Community (CAEC), which means that it recognizes this regional organization.

Russian businessmen have become actively involved in the Central Asian economy: the giants of Russian business (Gazprom, LUKoil, Vimm-Bil-Dan, and the Cherkizovo Meat Processing Plant, among others) are investing in Uzbekistan's economy on a large scale.

The RF government approved the draft agreement on complete repayment of the Tajikistan's state debt. It is expected that \$242 million will be repaid by means of the Nurek Communication Center, which will be transferred to Russia; \$50 million will be converted into Russia's packet of shares of the Sangtundinskaya Hydropower Station now under construction; and \$12 million will be cancelled by the central banks through offsetting. It is expected that in the next two to four years, Russian investments in Tajikistan will reach a figure close to \$2 billion.

Russian Policy in Central Asia

I have already mentioned that Russia continues to exert direct influence on some of the Central Asian countries. In Tajikistan, for example, it uses its military-political trump card supporting Emomali Rakhmonov; in Kyrgyzstan, which does not have any industrial or raw material basis to speak of, it uses an economic trump card; while in Kazakhstan, it relies on the ethnic factor represented by the large Russian diaspora.

At the same time, in the face of the obvious penetration of third countries into the region and the unfolding geopolitical struggle there, Russia must step up its activity and increase its involvement in dealing with common urgent problems. For example, by force of its special geopolitical and geographic context, Uzbekistan needs reliable geopolitical partners: a land-locked republic located in the very heart of a fairly unstable region, it is unable to pursue an independent foreign policy and foreign economic course. It should be noted that its far from simple relations with neighbors undermine the efficiency of its foreign policy efforts.

No important economic decisions can be adopted in the Central Asian republics without the direct involvement of their presidents, therefore the question of strategic partnership and economic integration with Russia belongs to the realm of politics. The regular periods of cooling off and warming in Russian-Uzbek relations are caused by their foreign policy stances rather than by the obvious need for economic cooperation.

There is a lot of talk in Russia that the ruling Central Asian regimes should be supported; this coincides with the position of the Russian leadership. Russian experts are convinced that the statehood of the Central Asian republics should be developed gradually to preserve stability in the region. They are convinced that the efforts of external forces to launch accelerated liberalization and democratization campaigns there are dangerous. When saying this, experts have in mind the Georgian events.⁶ Moscow had not yet openly recognized its foreign policy defeat when Mikhail Saakashvili came to power in Georgia. Russia is prepared to balance its foreign policy losses in the west of the CIS and the Southern Caucasus by increasing its influence in Central Asia: there is no strong opposition there, while the local countries depend on it to a greater extent than the other CIS countries. Its threatened southern borders are another

⁶ From contributions by representatives of the International Center for Strategic and Political Research (Moscow) at the International Conference "Prevention of Regional Conflicts and Promoting Stability in Central Asia and Afghanistan" (Tashkent, 22-23 November, 2004).

important factor forcing Russia to consolidate its presence in the region. Former Minister of the Interior Army General Anatoli Kulikov, who is now Deputy Chairman of the State Duma Committee for Security, had to admit: "Russia is surrounded by independent states which cannot boast domestic stability; they are open to external influences... Russia's perception of Central Asia is qualitatively different than that of the West. The RF is tied to the Central Asian states by hundreds of thousands of different threads."⁷

There is the opinion in the Russian expert community that the Central Asian states are disunited and that their foreign policy steps are not coordinated. From this it follows that Russia aspires to play an integrating role in the region and correlate its development with its interests. This explains why it pays particular attention to intergovernmental structures: the CSTO, SCO, and Central Asian Economic Community, recently renamed the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO), probably to extend its functions to the military-political sphere; and the CIS. Some Russian military experts believe that military-political cooperation within these structures should be improved to consolidate domination of the RF military standards in the CIS, something that the West finds unprofitable. It seems that the Central Asian countries, which have to oppose real threats, terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking, and other types of transnational crime, are prepared to accept this cooperation.

Russia's Foreign Policy Potential in the Region

To preserve and increase its influence in Central Asia, Russia will not only develop bilateral relations with the local states, but will also cooperate with them within the CIS. It also wants to create a fully-fledged free trade zone as quickly as possible on the basis of internationally accepted principles. The fact that the CIS member states sometimes have to sacrifice their immediate national advantages for the sake of increased mutual trade is interfering with the process. It is possible that in the near future, when setting up a single economic expanse, Russia will use certain elements of state regulation and will try to fully tap the scientific and technical potential of the CIS members. (They estimate their annual demand for new industrial equipment at \$150 billion, which can be covered by supplies from other CIS members.) The RF political elite is concentrating on the integration of four countries—Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine—with the expectation that other countries will also be tempted.

Turkmenistan will be left outside the integration process (yet it will join the Eurasian Gas Consortium now being set up) along with Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan. The latter two will probably join in the integration process. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, two EurAsEC members, will surely join the single economic expanse. Moldova and Armenia are still thinking about it.

The steps designed to create an efficient integration mechanism will revive interest in cooperation within the CIS and create centripetal trends. Russia, however, has not yet acquired a comprehensive and well-substantiated policy toward the CIS countries. This happened for several serious reasons:

There are strong centrifugal trends; it is practically impossible to use a uniform pattern to build relations with countries which have already traveled far away from one another. This is why RF has placed its stakes on bilateral ties.⁸

The Russian political elite has so far failed to reach an agreement on Russia's foreign policy in the CIS. Its military establishment wants to restore Russia's domination within the CIS and, in so doing, taps all legitimate means—from wider military-technical contacts to placing stakes on national security threats

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ The Foreign Ministry of Russia repeatedly declares: "We do not reject cooperation in the 12-member format, yet bilateral relations form the cornerstone of relations within the CIS through which multilateral cooperation can be developed" (RIA Novosti, 10 December, 2001 [<http://www.strana.ru/stories/01/11/27/2101/92340.html>]).

to Central Asia posed by international terrorism, extremism, and drug trafficking. Other political forces suggest that Russia should get rid of the “Central Asian soft underbelly.”

The active penetration of third countries and foreign capital into the CIS expanse makes it hard to predict the future of Moscow’s official policies in the CIS.

There are serious domestic factors: Chechnia, relations with the RF Muslim regions, and threats to the country’s national security.

Russia will probably try to address some of the most urgent Central Asian problems with the help of other influential states (China, Iran, and others).⁹ Involvement of countries tied to one another and to other neighboring CIS states by shared regional interests will probably be highly effective.

Regional security, the struggle against international terrorism, separatism and drug-related crime, and ecological issues (the urgent problem of the Aral Sea) are problems which Russia may be willing to settle with the help of other countries. The Aral problem could probably be resolved if Russia showed more interest in channeling part of the runoff of the Siberian rivers to Central Asia; and an increased supply of fresh water would help avoid “water-related conflicts” that might flare up in the future. At the same time, the RF can help the Central Asia countries resolve the problem of illegal labor migration and shadow capital; it can also help local countries join foreign markets, and develop transport and fuel transit. When realized, this will help the Central Asian countries acquire a worthy place in the international hierarchy; they can become fully involved in integration inside the CIS and will be better able to cope with their domestic problems.

On the whole, Russia has enough common interests with the Central Asian countries; it can tap that potential which requires almost no funding:

- (1) A common information space. This has not been tapped yet; in some cases, it even plays a negative role: Russia’s so-called “independent media,” which serve the interests of certain Russian business and political circles, carry negative publications about the situation in the Central Asian states, which does nothing to increase Russia’s credibility in the region. This naturally is not conducive to Russia’s state interests.
- (2) The potential of the pro-Russian part of the national elite. It should be borne in mind that this is a temporary factor: so far, most people still remember our shared Soviet past, while the new generation is looking to the West.
- (3) Technical and humanitarian aid to the Central Asian republics. For example, Uzbekistan needs to modernize its hydropower stations and other facilities built by Russian specialists and inherited from Soviet times. This will create more jobs locally and allow Russian enterprises to fully tap their production capacities, some of which are still idling. Russia’s involvement in privatizing Uzbek enterprises will increase their profitability. Today, America, Japan, and other countries are more active than Russia in this sphere; this cannot but affect Russia’s popularity in the region. (It should be added that the RF does extend technical and humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, Iraq, and other countries.)
- (4) More active cooperation with the Central Asian republics in the humanitarian and cultural spheres. This will improve mutual understanding and consolidate political and economic ties between Russia and the local countries.
- (5) Involvement of the Central Asian countries in all Russia-sponsored cultural and economic events. More frequent communication at various levels will create a background for drawing national interests closer together.
- (6) More active tapping of the still common mentality, traditions, and customs and the still large Russian and Russian-speaking diaspora.

⁹ Deputy Director of the Institute of Oriental Studies, Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Sanat Kushkumbaev has pointed out: “Since the Russian Federation has not enough economic resources to maintain its geopolitical influence in Central Asia, it has to share some of its responsibility for regional stability with Beijing” (quoted from: E. Karin, “ShOS i ee znachenie dlia Tsentral’noy Azii. Gosudarstva TsA posle 11 sentiabria” [<http://www.kub.kz/print.php?sid=6234>], 25 June, 2004).

- (7) Active political and organizational support of the preserved economic ties with the Central Asian countries.
- (8) More active involvement of the Central Asian integration structures across the CIS.
- (9) Russia's indirect influence on the Central Asian countries by extending its cooperation with neighboring states (China, Iran, Pakistan, etc.) and making use of their influence in the region. These large states are aware of their common regional problems.
- (10) Active development of Russia's military-technical cooperation with Malaysia, India, China, Vietnam, the UAE, and other states of Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Russia should create a zone of Russian armament standards there; this zone, which encloses the Central Asian republics in a semicircle, will make it much harder for the West to promote its armament standards there.
- (11) Encouragement of labor migration to Russia. Labor migrants from the southern CIS countries are prepared to do any work for moderate payment, which Russians normally reject. There is a considerable political component there: those who come to earn money tend to be loyal to the host country.

It is worth noting that the above mechanisms should be used positively, which means that the national interests of the partner-countries should be taken into account. The local elites will frown at any unilateral steps taken by Russia.

Russia is oriented toward continued cooperation with the Central Asian leaders and supports their institutions of state power. At the same time, it is trying to prevent democratization and liberalization of the local regimes along Western patterns. It argues that active liberal processes of the Western type carried out in the region with zones of instability and poor understanding of civilized democratic norms may worsen the situation and create a broad belt of instability along Russia's southern borders.

Today, Moscow no longer looks at Washington as a geopolitical rival—this is a fundamentally new foreign policy approach. This has allowed Russia to take a fresh look at the Central Asian prospects.

The recent events have convincingly demonstrated that even the United States, the world's mightiest power, cannot cope with regional security problems (for instance, in Afghanistan and Iraq) single-handedly.

C o n c l u s i o n s

Moscow has acquired a unique chance to restore its geopolitical influence in Central Asia. The regional ruling elites have realized that they need Russia as a partner. In Russia too, the political elite is gradually coming to the conclusion that cooperation with Central Asia should be more dynamic. President Putin has described cooperation within the CIS, mainly on a bilateral basis, as his country's foreign policy priority.

After joining the CACO, Russia recognized the need for Central Asian integration; it probably plans to control cooperation among the Central Asian countries and to encourage cooperation within the CACO along the lines it finds beneficial.

In the context of China's economic expansion in the region, Russia will do its best to extend its trade and economic cooperation with the local countries.

The problems within the CIS have piled up high; Russia can no longer ignore the CIS members. Today, there is a lot of talk about further integration in the political, trade and economic, cultural, scientific, technical, military spheres, as well as fighting international terrorism and religious extremism, drug trafficking, etc. It should be said that Moscow will be able to successfully develop its contacts with the Central Asian countries under two conditions: the local political elites' favorable attitude toward Russia and political, social, and economic stability in the Russian Federation itself.