Russia's Strategy in Central Asia: An Analysis of Key Trends

BY ROMAN MUZALEVSKY

Geopolitical Trends and Russia’s Strategic Thought

The Great Game, played out in the nineteenth century between Russia and Great Britain in Central Asia (CA), is resurfacing, but now among different entities and in a dissimilar geostrategic setting. Its distinct feature is the pursuit of strategic cooperation and competition following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the region comprising Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan by four major powers: Russia, China, the United States, and the EU. The growing geostrategic importance of CA will increasingly define regional strategies of the great powers in the 21st century. As a major actor, Russia has viewed CA as a zone of its exclusive interests, where its objectives have supported its grand strategy of creating a multi-polar international system. Russia’s strategy in CA has been revitalized as a result of recent economic growth under Putin’s leadership, and while still lacking a regional doctrinal approach, has increasingly assumed the contours of one. Specifically, Russia’s policies have rested on the following regional objectives: securing CA as a buffer zone, restoring its regional and international influence, controlling CA’s diverse market, and providing regional security.

Until recent years, Russia was unable to wield considerable influence in CA. It worked to solidify its political structures and build mechanisms for integration into the world economy following the dissolution of the USSR. The legacy of Soviet strategic thought, as well as Russia’s incommensurable means to uphold it, have greatly influenced conceptualization of its grand strategy since the 1990s. Three forms of such conceptualization relating to Russia’s strategy in CA can be identified.

Roman Muzalevsky is completing his MA degree in International Relations at Yale, where he concentrates in Security and Strategy Studies. His regional research interests pertain to the former Soviet Union, West-Russia relations, and the Middle East.
The Primakov Doctrine of the mid-1990s accentuated the need for a weakened Russia to rely on international law and seek strategic ties with China and India to constrain the global reach of the United States. The idea of a ‘liberal empire’ voiced in 2003 by then Head of Russia’s ‘Unified Energy Systems’ consortium Anatoliy Chubais, is a second strategy, emphasizing the need for expansion of Russia’s influence in the post-Soviet space through promotion of liberal ideas. Finally, multi-polarity, related to the Primakov Doctrine and further reinforced by Putin, is the most recent and influential strategy, according to which Russia seeks to transform the global security architecture and create a multi-polar international system. Rising China, India, and Brazil are seen as complementary forces in this regard. Indeed, in 2007 Putin stated: “We are seeing a greater and greater disdain for the basic principles of international law. Moreover, separate norms, in essence almost the whole legal system of one state, first and foremost, of course, of the United States, overstepped its national boundaries, and in essence is imposed on other states in all spheres...”

Russia’s shifts in strategic thought over the last two decades suggest that the country’s economic growth has buttressed its political and military power. Chechen separatism has been silenced and economic and political stability has been achieved at the expense of human rights. Putin’s administration has been praised for these achievements as strongly as it has been criticized for its authoritarianism and imperialistic ambitions, including in CA.

With potential as a significant source of energy, and rising geostrategic importance, CA has received increasing attention from the great powers. As its significance has expanded, so too has Russia’s growing power in shaping its strategy in CA. The encroachment of the West and the ‘color’ revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan have intensified Russia’s fears of Western influence in CA, Eastern Europe, and the Caucasus. Furthermore, Russia has been threatened by terrorism, narcotics trafficking, and organized crime in CA. Nationalism and multi-vector foreign policies of the CA states have also challenged Russia’s regional presence.
Given Eurasia’s changing geostrategic environment, it therefore is prudent to analyze Russia’s strategy in CA. I first discuss the formulation of this strategy and identify Russia’s four main objectives in CA as evident until the mid-2008. I then present key trends with respect to Russia’s bilateral relations in the region in order to shed light on the workings of Russia’s strategy in each individual republic. I conclude by considering implications for Russia’s regional strategy.

I. Russia’s Strategy in Central Asia

Formulation of Strategy Post 1990

There is no official doctrine outlining Russia’s strategy in CA. A number of reasons may account for this. Firstly, Russia has viewed the region through the prism of regional institutions, such as the Eurasian Economic Community (EEC), Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The CA states constitute the majority of the member-states in these institutions, except for the CIS. Secondly, a number of Russia’s strategic doctrines contain perfunctory references to CA, including the Foreign Policy Concept, National Security Concept, and Strategic Course of Russia with Member-states of the CIS. Russia also emphasized bilateral cooperation as the guiding principle for its foreign policy toward the CIS states. Not only has this new principle acknowledged the ineffectiveness of the CIS economic integration, but it has also pointed to the lack of any truly regional approach on behalf of Russia toward CA.

CA, moreover, has not evolved into a geopolitical unit despite the shared historical and ethnic ties among the regional states. Relations in the CA have occurred largely on a bilateral basis. Russia has exploited these fissures, obstructing evolution of CA as a geopolitical unit possibly aligned with an anti-Russian entity. Indeed, Russia would welcome such an evolution only if it paved the way for Russian dominance in CA. Although historic and geopolitical trends might make it an imperative for Russia to devise a regional strategy toward CA, its combined bilateral relations with the CA republics have highlighted Russia’s four regional strategic objectives: a need to have a stable buffer zone in the south, regain influence in CA, control CA’s diverse market, and provide regional security.

A Central Asian Buffer Zone: Still an Option

Geographically, CA is seen as Russia’s ‘underbelly,’ and, as such, Russia
has focused on the need for a stable buffer zone in the south to provide for its military and political security. The demise of the USSR left Russia vulnerable in terms of a lack of buffer zones along its border perimeter. Russia has also perceived the United States as undermining its influence in Europe, Transcaucasia and CA. West-oriented Baltic, East European and Caucasus states have created a cordon along Russia’s southwestern frontier. The U.S. secret bases revealed in Romania and Hungary and its Anti-missile Defense System plans in the Czech Republic and Poland have further antagonized Russia. Only CA as a region presents a cascade of countries whose leadership is absolutely anti-Russian or pro-democratic. Losing CA as its buffer zone would make Russia’s border line the only buffer zone separating it from perceived hostile forces. Russia has therefore signaled to other countries that the post-Soviet space lies within Russia’s zone of interests. The growing presence of the United States, EU, and China in the region and the ineffectiveness of the CIS, however, point to a different perspective.

Foreign military bases in CA pose a long-term threat to Russia’s security. Control over the junction of Tangshan and Pamir mountains and the Fergana Valley in CA has been of strategic importance for the major powers. Representing transportation routes, these junctions assume military significance as control over them would be crucial in a military confrontation. Russia’s uneasy acquiescence with the temporary U.S. military presence in CA in the framework of the War on Terror reflects Russia’s discomfort, on the one hand, and the need to stem terrorism and separatism within its own borders, on the other. Russia believes that its security is threatened by NATO’s expansion and strategy, which allows the use of force in the territories not under the Treaty and without UN Security Council authorization. NATO’s “Partnership for Peace” programs in CA, building security relationships between individual partner countries and NATO, do not meet Russia’s military security considerations. Although the 2008 Romania Summit delayed NATO’s expansion as Georgia and Ukraine were denied membership as a result of German, French, and Italian opposition, the process demonstrated just how close NATO could be to Russia’s borders. Russia has worked to ensure that the CIS states refrain from participation in hostile blocks. This is salient for Russia in light of the ‘Greater Central Asia’ scheme that seeks to sever CA from Russia’s influence, an idea echoed in the United States 2006 National Security Strategy.
China’s possible deployment of its bases in CA presents another threat. Russia’s SCO initiatives is not only a reflection of Russia’s goals to create a multi-polar world and block Western presence in the energy-rich CA, but also an indication of Russia’s understanding of a potential threat from China and the need to agree on all terms early on to assure stability in what is geographically already a Chinese buffer zone.

In order to maintain its buffer zones Russia has sought military presence in strategic regions, including in CA. It has operated an air base within the CSTO in Kyrgyzstan, and maintained a Kazakh-leased ‘Baikanur’ spaceship launch facility in Kazakhstan. In Tajikistan, Russia has run space-related installations and a small number of troops to guard Tajik-Afghan border. Russia has also projected its military presence through the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorism center based in Uzbekistan. Neutral Turkmenistan does not have any Russian military presence. Russia’s military cooperation with the region’s authoritarian states has allowed Russia to secure CA as its military and political buffer zone.

Restoring Influence: Back to the USSR?

CA is a platform for Russia to reassert its lost strategic influence in Eurasia and to evolve as a strong pillar of the reshaped international system. No longer seeking Soviet-type territorial annexations, Russia’s objective of restoring its influence in CA has reflected a number of economic, cultural and political considerations.

Encroachment of the ‘West’ and ‘East’ into its ‘underbelly’ made Russia unable to wield full control over CA, while also revitalizing its policies in the region.

Russia faces a declining population and disruption of its labor resources. As a result, it has introduced lenient immigration laws for CA states and has sought access to the region’s energy resources to promote its economic development and influence in CA. Russia’s cultural presence in CA has also promoted Russia’s influence in the region. As of 2007, Russian minorities made up 30 percent of the population in Kazakhstan, 12.5 percent in Kyrgyzstan, 1.1 percent in Tajikistan, 5.5 percent in Uzbekistan, and 4 percent in Turkmenistan. Politically, Russia has aligned itself with these undemocratic regimes and, thus, has hindered Western intrusion into CA. The ineffectiveness of Russia-led regional institutions and the CA states’ multi-vector foreign policies have challenged Russia’s efforts to reassert its influence in
the region, however.

Encroachment of the ‘West’ and ‘East’ into its ‘underbelly’ made Russia unable to wield full control over CA, while also revitalizing its policies in the region. Since 9/11 CA has become a platform for the U.S. War on Terror. The United States declared CA an area of strategic interest and has worked to contain a rising China, on the one hand, and Russia, increasingly willing to reassert itself in the global arena, on the other. China has also established its influence in CA, working to stem what it labels as “regional terrorism” that has fed Uyghur separatism in the Northwestern Xinjiang Province, while ensuring energy markets for its booming economy.

Given the presence of other great powers in CA and a new geostrategic setting following the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia has not engaged in any Soviet-type territorial annexations in CA. It has worked to restore its influence in the region through economic and political means in the effort to emerge as a powerful pole of the international system.

**Controlling Central Asia’s Market: Deeper Than an Oil Field**

Russia has not only been interested in CA’s oil and gas, but also in its transportation and energy distribution systems, water, and uranium reserves used for nuclear weapons production. Furthermore, it has viewed the region as a source of manpower and market for its growing economy. But the presence of the great powers has challenged Russia’s efforts to fully control CA’s market.

Russia’s gas reserves are already in a state of depletion. As a result, Russia has secured energy deals with the CA states to ease pressure on these domestic reserves and obtain political leverage over transit and destination countries. Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan in total have 4.3 percent of the world’s proven gas reserves, while Kazakhstan ranks 13th for its oil reserves. For Russia, the world’s largest gas producer, it is imperative to retain a near-monopoly on CA gas exports to enhance its economic power, diversify its exports, and regain strategic influence in Eurasia, especially with respect to European countries that heavily depend on Russia for oil and gas.
The SCO has worked to link the energy producing states of Iran, Kazakhstan and Russia with the consumer states of India, Pakistan and Tajikistan. If the project is successful, Russia will become less dependent on the European market for its exports. Putin’s administration in 2007 aimed to block the EU and U.S.-supported Baku-Tbilisi-Djeyhan and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipelines that would circumvent Russia in the Caspian, and develop a joint energy system with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.

Russia has also been interested in CA’s uranium and water reserves. It has achieved deals with Uzbekistan, which has 250,000 ton of uranium reserves, and with Kazakhstan, which has 25 percent of the world’s proven uranium reserves. Oleg Deripaska, the owner of Russian Russkiy Alluminiy, has displayed an interest in the Kambarata Hydroelectric Station project in Kyrgyzstan. Besides gains from electricity exports, ownership of hydro stations in CA entails control over potable water, on which Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan depend.

Gaining access to CA’s market has been significant in another important respect. Building economic networks through the CIS, SCO, and EEC after the demise of the Soviet Union has been indicative of Russia’s efforts to integrate the CA states economically and incorporate itself into the wider international economy.

Russia has been CA’s major trading partner and has viewed the region as a source of migrants working to bolster Russia’s economy. Cheaper Chinese products, however, have increasingly diminished Russia’s trading positions, while Kazakhstan’s economic growth itself has attracted significant portions of the CA migrants. The presence of the EU, United States, and China in the region’s energy sector has further reduced Russia’s economic influence in CA.

Providing Regional Security in CA

Russia has provided security in CA through the CIS, CSTO, SCO and EEC. Peacekeeping, anti-missile defense and counterterrorism are Russia’s salient security issues within the CIS. However, as events in Chechnya, an apparent proliferation of terrorism within CA, and ‘frozen’ conflicts in the Caucuses...
have demonstrated, some of these organizations, most notably the CIS and EEC, have been ineffective in providing regional security and intended economic integration. Russia has thus also relied on bilateral relations with the CA states to deal with the regional threats.

Russia and CA states have adhered to the SCO and CSTO to counter religious extremism, organized crime, and drugs trafficking.\(^{27}\) The SCO, initially dealing with regional border demilitarization, has evolved into an economic, political, and security organization. Its anti-terrorism structure has benefited CA states. Similarly, the CSTO, created in 2002 in response to terrorist incursions into Kyrgyzstan, has further promoted regional security.\(^{28}\) A rising Muslim population in the federalist and largely Christian Russia poses concerns for the country as Chechnya demonstrated.\(^{29}\) Russia has therefore been interested in secular states in CA capable of curbing terrorism and protecting the regional borders. It has retained its military infrastructure in CA and supported the regional states as politically and economically stable entities with a pro-Russian policy line.\(^{30}\)

The EEC has aimed to integrate its members economically and reduce poverty in the region. Preponderance of political and military issues, however, has overshadowed EEC’s efforts, and its influence has been marginalized. Strengthening Russia’s regional economic role will be indispensible for economic security and suppression of fundamentalism in CA.

Regional tensions in the form of border and trade problems have challenged Russia’s security efforts. Sayfullo Safarov, deputy director of Tajikistan’s Strategic Research Center, believes that Russia’s entire approach to CA depends on friendly relations in the region.\(^{31}\) Uzbekistan’s hegemonic aspirations in CA, with Kazakhstan as a more likely leader, have further contributed to regional insecurity. Russia has therefore worked through regional organizations and on a bilateral level to prevent regional conflicts.\(^{32}\) As Russia’s strategy in CA has been shaped by bilateral relations with the regional states, it is imperative to analyze these relations from the point of view of individual republics in the context of other great powers in order to fully assess Russia’s strategy in the region.

II. Bilateral Relations: Key Points for Russia’s Strategy

**Kyrgyzstan**

Kyrgyzstan has pursued a multi-vector foreign policy since its independence.\(^{33}\) Its ability to play off the competing great powers has helped it
maintain a degree of independence with regard to Russia. However, the country’s military needs, an extensive trade sector, and up to half a million Kyrgyz migrants have made Kyrgyzstan pursue a special high-level collaboration with Russia.

Kyrgyzstan has depended on gas and oil imports from Russia, which, in 2007, became the country’s largest trading partner. Kyrgyzstan has also looked to Russia for military assistance. A Russian military base in the country is indicative of Kyrgyzstan’s security concerns and the need for strategic cooperation with Russia within the CSTO and SCO to address regional terrorism and promote regional economic development. Kyrgyzstan’s President Kurmanbek Bakiev stressed that “strengthening and further developing strategic partnership and ally relations [with Russia] has been and remains one of the main priorities of Kyrgyzstan’s foreign policy...”

Kyrgyzstan has strong partnerships with the United States and China, which significantly complicates Russia’s strategy in this country. Kyrgyzstan has agreed to the lease of its Manas airfield to the U.S.-led coalition after 9/11. Not only did Kyrgyzstan manage to strengthen its economy as a result, but it also bolstered its own defenses and obtained more leverage with regard to Russia. As a result, Russia has found it increasingly difficult to dictate its policies to Kyrgyzstan despite military presence in the country. China’s growing economic influence in Kyrgyzstan, including planned energy schemes involving Kyrgyzstan as a transit country, has further undermined Russia’s strategy that has traditionally rested on economic relations and energy cooperation with the small republic.

Kyrgyzstan’s dependence on energy supplies, military assistance, and emigrant remittances, along with the need to integrate into the world economy suggest that relations with Russia will remain a priority for the country. Russia’s rising influence and Kyrgyzstan’s need to diversify its economic and security ties might, however, push it closer to other powers in order to balance Russia. The United States and China’s efforts to secure a foothold in the area certainly play into Kyrgyzstan’s multi-vector foreign policy and its intentions to minimize Russia’s influence on its politics.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan’s President Nursultan Nazarbaev has highlighted priority relations with Russia. During Medvedev’s visit to Kazakhstan as Russia’s new president, Nazarbaev stressed that “nowhere in the world can we see such close and fraternal relations as those between Kazakhstan and Russia.” Both
presidents have also emphasized the need for adherence to the CSTO and joint defense. But Kazakhstan’s economic growth and skillful diplomacy have allowed it to pursue strategic partnerships with other powers as well despite the ‘color’ revolutions and Western criticism of its authoritarianism.

Russia’s energy cooperation with Kazakhstan appears to be simultaneously vulnerable and strong. Russia’s Rosneft, Lukoil, and Gazprom have significantly increased their presence in Kazakhstan’s energy sector. But while Russia has sought access to its energy resources and relied on Kazakhstan to make oil and gas exports via Russia, Kazakhstan has aimed to diversify its energy export routes and attract European, American, and Chinese investors. As the Minister of Foreign Affairs Kassymzhomart Tokaev stated, “the more pipelines are out there, the better it is for our country.” Russia’s remaining hope is best described by the words of Deputy Minister Erjan Kazyhanov, who stressed that the bilateral relations remain a priority: “The President in his address set the priorities: Russia, China, U.S., EU, Asia, and the Middle East. The chief principle here is an economic profit.”

Bigger and richer in resources, Kazakhstan enjoys a less dependent foreign policy than any of the other CA states. Nazarbaev even proposed CA integration, positioning rapidly developing Kazakhstan as a regional leader: “We witness a clear rivalry of great powers over economic domination of the region. We are now posed with a choice: we eternally remain the source of raw materials for the world economy and wait for the coming of the next empire, or engage in serious integration of Central Asia.” Nationalism, however, has made the CA states unwilling to integrate along the Kazakh lines.

Russia has kept Kazakhstan within its sphere of influence. However, guided by national security concerns and multi-vector foreign policy, Kazakhstan may slightly reverse its pro-Russian course if Russia fails to cultivate equally beneficial cooperative measures. Nazarbaev’s rhetoric points to the fact that Kazakhstan is not willing to tolerate a dominance of any country over its domestic affairs, and has worked with numerous countries to pursue a successful power balancing in the country. As it continues to develop economic

**Tajikistan’s economic dependence on Russia is significant. It has US$350 million in debt, and a substantial portion of its population works in Russia.**
relations with China, the EU and the United States, especially in the field of energy cooperation, Kazakhstan will be in a stronger position to reduce Russia’s current leverage over its foreign policy, making Russia’s economic strategy appear less ambitious, and with it, its grander design of creating a multi-polar system.

**Tajikistan**

Tajikistan’s President Imomali Rahmon has highlighted a strategic partnership with Russia. Tajikistan depends on Russia for military assistance, energy investments, and remittances of Tajik migrants in Russia. Speaking on the cooperation and joint hydroelectric project in 2008, Rahmon stated: “This is friendship...This is strategic partnership! This is an alliance.” From 1995 to 2000, Tajikistan was under control of Russia, which brought stability to a country torn by the civil war between United Tajik Opposition, representing Islamists, and the government-backed militias. Tajikistan has since cooperated with Russia within the CIS, SCO, and CSTO to combat terrorism and narcotics trafficking.

Tajikistan’s economic dependence on Russia is significant. It has US$350 million in debt, and a substantial portion of its population works in Russia. Underscoring the importance of remittances from Russia, Rahmon requested 800,000 work permits for Tajik nationals alone from the Russian government in 2008. Unfortunately for Russia, it has little to offer in terms of diversified economic incentives in Tajikistan, apart from its traditional reliance on energy investments and leniency on immigration and granting of work permits. Tajikistan’s poor economic conditions dictate the necessity for the country to reach out to other great powers as well. Tajikistan has sought aid from the United States and China, both of which seek to secure strategic partnerships with Tajikistan as a state concealing a huge energy potential and bordering Afghanistan. The $1 billion received in U.S. aid in 2007 alone was 1.5 times bigger than the country’s overall budget.

Tajikistan can seriously constrain Russia’s regional strategy on a military level as well should it successfully promote its previously unmet proposal to host a U.S. military base. China’s concerns of instability in Central Asia emanating from regional terrorism and shaky Central Asian regimes dictates its involvement in Tajikistan, providing the poor country with additional economic incentives to lessen its political reliance on Russia.
Turkmenistan

Western criticism of Turkmenistan’s human rights abuses has helped Russia build solid relations with the authoritarian regime, especially in the field of energy exports. However, Turkmenistan’s multi-vector foreign policy and the great powers’ presence in the country have challenged Russia’s policies.

Turkmenistan has strong economic ties with Russia, with bilateral trade hitting US$453 million in 2007, a 46.9 percent increase from 2006. A recent agreement to construct a Caspian gas pipeline by 2014 will further bind Turkmenistan’s energy system to Russia. As a result, Russia will solidify its influence on the European energy market. But Russia’s plans go against Turkmenistan’s economic diversification policy that goes hand in hand with the import diversification policies of the EU, United States, and China. President Berdymuhamedov declared: “Turkmenistan will not join any military blocks and will steer its neutrality to solidify the climate of trust and mutual understanding in the region...will develop its huge energy resources and pursue multiple export routes.” Turkmenistan and China have already pledged to build a gas pipeline connecting the two countries. Discussions have also been held to construct the EU-supported gas pipeline linking Turkmenistan with the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipeline, thus reinvigorating the Nabucco conduit that transfers gas from Turkey to Austria. While still relying on Russia for most of its gas exports to Europe, Turkmenistan is well positioned to decrease Russia’s influence on the country. The EU, having experienced occasional gas shutdowns, and China, looking for news sources of energy imports to feed its growing economy, are extremely keen on developing joint projects with Turkmenistan that would circumvent Russia and, thus, cause schism in Russia’s energy-dependent regional economic strategy.

Russia will find it difficult to secure Turkmenistan as an irrefutably pro-Russian state. Turkmenistan enjoys flexibility to diversify its energy exports. Dependence on Russia for its gas exports and the lack of readily available energy investments from other states will provide Russia with a strategic advantage in Turkmenistan. However, given the active efforts of the Europeans, Americans, and the Chinese to secure their share of the energy pie and undermine Russia’s strong regional positions, this advantage may not last too long.

Uzbekistan

Russia’s relations with Uzbekistan have not been stable. In 1998, Uzbekistan discontinued its CSTO membership and in 1999 joined GUAM (Georgia,
Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova), viewed to be an anti-Russian alliance supported by the West. Authoritarian Uzbekistan dramatically shifted course in 2004 following the democratic ‘color’ revolutions in Georgia and the Ukraine, reestablishing its strategic partnership with Russia that was seen to be a reliable ally against subversive Western influence in the region.

The 2005 March Events in Kyrgyzstan, bringing new leadership to power after mass protests, and the Andijan Events in Uzbekistan, leading to killings of protesters allegedly connected to terrorist organizations of Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Hizb ut-Tahrir, also caused a reversal of Uzbekistan’s political orientation. The events in the Uzbek city of Andijan triggered criticism of the West, and shortly after Uzbekistan’s eviction of the U.S. base, leading President Karimov to reaffirm its relationship with Russia. The U.S. strategy in Afghanistan and Central Asia has suffered as a result of broken military relations with Uzbekistan, providing Russia additional political leverage over Tashkent and making the United States more dependent on the whims of Kyrgyzstan, the only remaining state in Central Asia with a U.S. base.

In 2004 Putin and President Islam Karimov signed a Strategic Partnership Treaty.\textsuperscript{53} part of the partnership, Uzbekistan secured US$3 billion in energy investments from Russia; since then it has become a major trade partner with Russia within the CIS.\textsuperscript{54} Uzbekistan also renewed its EEC and CSTO membership, signaling to the United States its preferences for stable relations with authoritarian regimes elsewhere. China’s intensified efforts to penetrate the country’s energy sector has undermined the U.S. political influence and Russia’s traditional energy cooperation with Uzbekistan, making Karimov’s regime more successful in managing great power politics in the region.

Despite Russia’s emphasis on bilateral relations in the region, its strategy in CA fits its grand vision of creating a multipolar world.\textsuperscript{55} Bilateral relations have been unsteady. Russia overlooked Uzbekistan’s previous policy shifts in return for energy deals and strategic partnership. Uzbekistan is likely to remain Russia’s strategic ally, especially if the West continues its criticism of Uzbekistan’s authoritarianism and fails to develop stronger economic ties with the country.
Conclusion

Russia’s relations with the CA states have not always been stable. Regional disparities in wealth and resources positioned some states to pursue a more diverse foreign policy. While Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan managed the latter in some instances, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan increasingly looked to Russia for their political orientation. Poverty, a need to integrate into the world economy, Russia’s growing economy, and Western pro-democratic rhetoric have increasingly pushed the CA states into Russia’s sphere of influence.

At the same time, the relatively successful foreign policies of the Central Asian states to lessen their dependence on Russia would not have been possible without the presence of other major powers in the region. Revitalization of American, European and Chinese plans to solidify their influence in Central Asia present Russia with fierce competition over the region’s energy resources and strategic locations. The U.S. military relations with Kyrgyzstan and economic cooperation with Tajikistan have made it possible for the United States to pursue its strategy in Afghanistan, while undermining long-term Russian influence and China’s growing clout in the area. China, which is a traditional partner and an evolving competitor to Russia in Central Asia, has extensively looked for anti-terrorism and energy cooperation in the region, especially with Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, undermining Russia’s energy and trade policies in these countries. The EU’s energy cooperation with Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan has aimed to diversify the economic links between the EU and Turkmenistan, thereby seeking to break their excessive dependence on Russia for energy imports and exports respectively.

The regional struggle for influence in Central Asia is not only waged on the economic front. Military cooperation with the regional states has also assumed an important dimension, significantly easing Russia’s immediate security concerns in the form of counterterrorism efforts of the Americans and Chinese, but also weakening Russia’s long-term strategic position in the region and its objective of restoring influence in Central Asia and securing its traditional buffer zone. The U.S. air base in Kyrgyzstan, expansion of NATO activities through “Partnership for Peace Programs,” and looming Chinese military involvement in the region does not only go against Russia’s traditional perception of long-term strategic interests, but also provides more room for Central Asian states to balance Russia’s attempts to project its regional dominance. But while the policies of other powers have strained Russia’s regional strategy of restoring its influence in Central Asia, they have also triggered a revitalization of Russia’s policies in the region. Russia
is seeking to undermine the influence of new contestants in its traditional sphere of interests.

Although Central Asia has not evolved into a geopolitical unit from either the perspective of regional trends or Russia’s strategic conceptualization, it has been a part of Russia’s wider strategy within the CIS, SCO, EEC and CSTO. The presence of other great powers, Kazakhstan’s CA integration initiatives, and the growing geostrategic importance of CA as a geopolitical base increasingly require a doctrinal regional approach on the part of Russia. Despite Russia’s emphasis on bilateral relations in the region, its strategy in CA fits its grand vision of creating a multi-polar world and pursues the following regional objectives.

Russia has aimed to secure a political and military buffer zone in CA. Containing NATO’s expansion by reinvigorating the regional security institutions has been and will remain a priority in this regard. China, which is emerging as a partner in Russia’s envisioned multi-polar world, is increasingly becoming Russia’s strategic competitor in CA. As it combats domestic unrest, it will afford a more dynamic strategy in CA, limiting Russia’s designs, including through potential regional military presence within the SCO. Regaining authority in Eurasia and reducing the influence of the United States, EU, and China in CA has been Russia’s priority. Cultivating strong economic, cultural, and political ties has historically helped Russia exert its influence over the CA states.

Securing control over CA’s energy markets has also influenced Russia’s strategy. Gazprom investments have ensured that Russia retains its near-monopoly on gas exports to Europe and diversifies its sources of energy production and clientele by possibly reaching out to China, India and Pakistan through the envisioned SCO energy scheme. Finally, providing regional security in CA has been paramount for Russia. Russia’s growing Muslim population, separatist trends, and terrorism in CA have threatened domestic security. Russia, therefore, has promoted regional security through the CSTO, SCO, SIS, and EEC. Containing regional rivalries and combating poverty have been a priority for Russia, interested in having a stable ‘underbelly.’ The EEC and, in particular, the SCO, will be vital in promoting economic development and curbing extremism and nationalism in CA.

Russia’s regional objectives, however, have met resistance from growing economic and military influence of the EU, United States, and China. The perceived U.S. motivation to encircle Russia with military bases and democratic regimes, as well as the EU’s efforts to break the region’s reliance on
Russia for energy exports has presented a significant challenge for Russia’s goal of restoring its influence in the Central Asian buffer zone. China, its SCO partner and the country immediately bordering Central Asia, is especially threatening to Russia’s economic and political clout, and will most likely occupy Russia’s military strategy in the near future. Thus far, Russia has been fairly successful in maintaining a political and military buffer zone in Central Asia, providing it with an opportunity to pursue its grand strategy of multi-polarity in international affairs. Russia’s strategy will continue to depend on its ability to sustain its economic growth and compete politically and militarily with outside powers vying for influence in Central Asia and seeking to contain Russia. A lot, obviously, depends on the policies of individual Central Asian states.

The CA states’ ability to pursue a diverse foreign policy will vary as a result of each state’s different power characteristics, level of dependency on Russia for vital necessities, and ability to build solid relations with other powers. Any attempt to force Russian policy expectations on the CA states will entail a distancing of the latter to the advantage of China, the United States and the EU. Amidst latent nationalism and intensified regional competition, Russia will likely treat the CA states as partners, while discouraging any radical policy shifts.

-Alexandra Kendall served as lead editor for this article.

NOTES

10 Ibid., Russia’s National Security Concept.
11 Ibid., Russia’s Strategic Course with Member-states of the CIS.
12 Ibid., M.N. Omarov.
13 Ibid., Russia’s National Security Concept.
14 A. Lichininov, “Russia’s Military Window on Space,” Russia Today, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k_C9fdT_Ay0&feature=user
17 Ibid., Russia’s National Security Concept.
19 Ibid., M.N. Omarov.
20 Ibid., M.N. Omarov.
24 Ibid., N. Ziyadullaev.
26 Ibid., A. Sobyanin, V. Misnik.
27 Ibid., Russia’s National Security Concept.
28 Ibid., I.A. Safranchuk.
30 Ibid., Russia’s Strategic Course with Member-states of the CIS.
32 Ibid., Russia’s Foreign Policy Concept, 2008.
40 Ibid., M. Kalishevsky.
41 Ibid., A.V. Vlasov.
42 Ibid., M. Kalishevsky.
44 Ibid., R. McDermott.
49 Ibid., A. Grozin.
51 Ibid., A. Grozin.
52 Ibid., A. Grozin.
53 Ibid., D. Kimmage.