



Expert Comment

Facing in more directions that one would think. Art installation in Astana, Kazakhstan.
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Central Asia: Multivectorness as a foreign policy imperative

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Central Asia: Multivectorness as a foreign policy imperative

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Over the past decades, Central Asia – once the periphery of the Soviet Union – has become an action field for key international actors, primarily China, Russia, the US, and the EU. It is a sign of good manners today to discuss the importance of this region in terms of economic and international security. Yet few can answer the question of whether the five former Central Asian republics of the USSR – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – can truly be considered an entity apart from their geographical proximity and common Soviet past.

The following observation remains relevant today: “Central Asia can only be spoken of as a conglomerate of national states, where each has its own national interests and foreign policy vectors. Consolidated regional interests are virtually absent. They are replaced by discussions on recreating the ‘silk road’, the need to solve an important water problem, common threats that each country is actually fighting alone. Relations between the countries of the region remain strained and occasionally are aggravated by accidents” (Malashenko, 2012). The boundaries issue adds to the complex picture of this relationship amongst neighbours. Throughout history, the borders in this part of Eurasia have changed repeatedly. Their present condition is the result of ‘national delimitation’ carried out in the USSR that frequently ignores the region’s historical and cultural nuances. The consequence of such events is persistent potential for conflict in the region. Some experts have even spoken of the artificial character of state borders, which can turn territories on both sides into trouble spots (Malashenko & Olcott, 2000). This state of affairs greatly hinders development of full-fledged economic and social cooperation.

This problem is particularly relevant for Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, in whose relations the border issue is especially prominent because of Fergana Valley, a multi-ethnic region divided between the three states. Thus, the conflict that erupted between the Kyrgyz and Tajiks in early 2019 in one of the border areas is rather typical (Reuters, 2019). For the time being, these tensions retain a local character, but under unfavourable circumstances they could easily escalate into a larger conflict.

In perspective, the interaction that is currently missing could be stimulated from the outside. One strategy could involve implementation of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, as a part of the Belt and Road crosses this region. At this point, however, the initiative remains rather abstract; it is still unclear how exactly it will be implemented and how its implementation (if it actually happens) will affect the countries of Central Asia. Thus far, the initiative has been first and foremost a manifestation of China's growing ambitions.

Being a neighbour to China has become a major external factor as of late. Beijing is now a key investor in the economy and the largest trading partner of Central Asian countries, displacing Russia from first place: in 2016, China's trade volume with the region amounted to \$30 billion, whereas Russia's accounted for \$18.5 billion (Syroezhkin, 2018). Ongoing economic changes have naturally led to a tangible increase in political clout, although China continues to use it more carefully than other global actors.

Concomitant to this growing Chinese investment is increasing dependence on China, which has become a cause for concern amongst regional elites as well as ordinary citizens (Grigorenko, 2018). Dissatisfaction has arisen – amongst other reactions – because China involves its own labour force while implementing its projects in countries experiencing their own employment-related problems (Malysheva, 2018).

Tension has also been provoked by the Chinese government's policy towards national minorities in western provinces of the People's Republic of China – namely the Uyghurs but also the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz. The governments of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

hence find themselves in a difficult situation (Bunin, 2018), afraid to take a stand in defence of their congeners living on their powerful eastern neighbour's territory.

India could also become an influential economic actor in the region (Nezhdanov, 2019). For example, negotiations are underway to enact a preferential trade agreement between Uzbekistan and India (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2018). For Central Asian countries, establishing cooperation with New Delhi could be beneficial for diversifying economic and political ties as well as balancing China's increasing influence. India, which is warily observing China's growth, is also interested in expanding regionally, but what the country could suggest as a counterbalance remains to be seen.

Located to the west of Central Asia, Turkey is another significant actor and may well claim to be a model for Central Asian Turkic states; Turkey has enjoyed a fairly solid economic base and strong stance in the international arena, especially in recent years, when Ankara has been pursuing assertive policy in the Middle East and in relation to the US and EU. However, the same activity may raise concerns about possible domination of Turkey over weaker partners.

The long-term challenge to the region's security is its proximity to unstable Afghanistan. Here, Central Asian states need external assistance, which is provided primarily by Russia and in part by the EU (Vasilenko, 2019). In this case, the continued presence of US troops in Afghanistan has somewhat diminished the threat of large-scale destabilisation. However, the Afghan factor has occasionally been exploited in building relationships with international actors to obtain help from them.

The dynamics of the development of Central Asian societies facilitate prediction of the strengthening of the Islamic factor in the future. Today, all governments in the region are stressing the secular nature of their respective states, which was made possible primarily due to the legacy of the Soviet period. At the same time, the region's population is rapidly becoming younger, and young people are often more religious than representatives of older

generations. In the less than 30 years since the USSR's collapse, Central Asian states have largely re-Islamised (particularly Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), and no signs of reversing this trend are in sight. With the disappearance of the Soviet order supported by force, traditional norms of socialization began to recover quickly, while the ideological vacuum was filled with Islam and nationalism. Subsequently, one can expect further growth of the religious factor in Central Asian states' foreign and internal policies. Risks related to activities of radical Islamists have increased significantly, especially with the prospect of ISIS members from Central Asia returning to their countries of origin: in Central Asia, an estimated 2000–4000 individuals are thought to have left for Syria and Iraq (Lemon, Mironova, & Tobey, 2018).

In building its Central Asian policy, the EU has traditionally focused on such goals as strengthening human rights and the rule of law. This course is first of all determined by the political–ideological agenda (Boonstra, Laruelle, Marazis, & Tsertsvadze, 2019) and then by economic and other motives, including Central Asian hydrocarbons. On July 7, 2019 in Bishkek, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini presented a new EU strategy on Central Asia; however, modifications from the prior version were not substantial.

The ideological component is also evidenced by EU strategists' emphasis that, in this region, the EU should be careful with respect to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and the Eurasian Economic Union, as these projects were launched in Moscow and Beijing (Boonstra et al., 2019). Although it is not entirely clear how these organisations contradict the goals of developing democratic institutions in Central Asia, such considerations may reflect the EU's broader ambitions and goal of consistently strengthening its position in Central Asia. Thus, in early July, an agreement was signed in Ashgabat regarding establishment of the European Union Delegation in Turkmenistan (European External Action Service, 2019). The EU now has offices in all five regional capitals, and the EU's importance in the corresponding countries

is steadily increasing. This particularly applies to Central Asia's largest economy, Kazakhstan, where the EU accounts for more than 50% of foreign trade turnover and 48% of foreign capital invested in the country's economy (Vasilenko, 2019). In addition, Kazakhstan became the first state in Central Asia to establish an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU.

For the US, Central Asia has been important – mainly geo-strategically as a neighbouring area of Afghanistan and a region with strong Chinese and Russian influence. If one day the Americans leave Afghanistan, one can expect a decline in the region's significance to Washington. In the case of the US, the geostrategic factor extends to the economic sphere. Thus, one can meet in the American expert community calls for the early implementation of the Trans-Caspian gas project, which would reduce the dependence of Washington's European allies on Russian gas (Sobhani, 2019).

In the opinion of Frederick Starr, a prominent American expert on Central Asia, the most promising developmental trajectory for the area would be regionalism (i.e., cooperation within the region) (Baisalov, 2019) – not integration but rather cooperation of sovereign states. Starr also believes that all external actors should avoid interfering with processes emerging in the Central Asian states. Such a suggestion hints at China and Russia, but in fact, the withdrawal of these two countries from what is happening in the region would adversely affect US interests, mainly in terms of security maintenance.

Russia's influence in the region rests mainly on a common past within the Russian Empire and the USSR. Besides bilateral relations, Russia's power is exerted through institutions such as the Commonwealth of Independent States, which includes all Central Asian countries (Turkmenistan is an associated member); and the Collective Security Treaty Organization, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. However, participation in these organisations does not greatly limit member countries' abilities to make foreign policy choices. A major factor for several countries in the region is labour migration to the Russian

Federation. For instance, in 2017, official (traditionally conservative) data estimated that about two million labour migrants had arrived to Russia from Uzbekistan, a little less than a million from Tajikistan, and about 400,000 from Kyrgyzstan (Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2018).

Interactions with Russia also occur within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, whose multilateral character contributes to enhanced self-sufficiency of Central Asian states in the international arena and to a certain extent guarantees their independence from excessive influence of the strongest actors.

For Central Asian states, the multivectorness of foreign policy in the emerging polycentric architecture of international relations appears to be the best strategy. In this context, multivectorness is understood as participation in multilateral economic and political associations along with the establishment of bilateral ties with influential intra- and extra-regional actors. It should be effective – rather than a declared multivectorness – when strong and balanced liaisons are constructed in politics and economics without over-reliance on any single partner, no matter how attractive or indispensable it may seem.

Much will depend on whether the Central Asian states succeed in establishing a full-fledged dialogue with each other and building productive neighbourly relations. This task is fairly intricate, and its realisation is complicated by several obstacles, of which the aforementioned border issue is most noticeable coupled with the water problem that escalates from time to time and has no clear solution. Nevertheless, one of the most logical trajectories for development seems to be the strengthening and expansion of intraregional ties with greater economic and humanitarian cooperation. Demand for this developmental trajectory will only increase with gradual erosion of the Soviet legacy in culture, politics, and economy, for this legacy largely still unites these states and societies. The current leadership of Central Asian states consists of people who grew up in the same country, and it is much easier for them to find a common language. With the arrival of new generations of the

political elite, relationships will nearly inevitably be made more complicated. Under these circumstances, building a regional community could be a smart preventive response to the challenges of the future.

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