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Russia in Central Asia: Old History , New Challenges?

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Introduction

Russia is a power unlike others in Central Asia, given its role as the region's former coloniser, which started in the 19th century and even in the 18th for some of the northern parts of Kazakhstan. This legacy has its positive and negative aspects: it has been positive insofar as it has involved a long period of Russo–Central Asian cohabitation that has given rise to a common feeling of belonging to the same 'civilisation'; it has been negative insofar as it has accrued all the political resentment and cultural misinterpretations of the coloniser–colonised relationship. Russian–Central Asian relations are therefore complex, with each of the actors having a highly emotional perception of its relation to the other.

While some observers have hoped that the economic crisis affecting Russia would work to weaken it geopolitically, it must be noted that the crisis, paradoxically, is actually helping Moscow to reinforce its control over its neighbouring countries, at least for time being. The Kremlin seems to have made up its mind to invest significant sums of money to consolidate its sphere of influence in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a stake it sees as crucial and therefore as independent of economic contingencies. Albeit less triumphant, today's Russia is no longer that of the beginning of the 1990s – even with revenues in decline, foreign policy objectives and strategies for domestic control are well defined and will be maintained. Despite the vertiginous fall of the national currencies in relation to the dollar, Russia has proposed to set up a stabilisation fund of \$10 billion, of which it will finance three-quarters. Kyrgyzstan hopes to get a promised \$2 billion to lift itself out of its current economic impasse: emergency aid of \$150 million, a credit of \$300 million at reduced interest rates, more than \$1.5 billion earmarked for the Kambarata hydroelectric station and the conversion of Kyrgyz public debt to Russia into a capital holding in Dastan, one of the Kyrgyz military-industrial complex's only enterprises. Russia thus continues to be a major player in the Central Asian game, regardless of the latter's growing strategic and economic uncertainty.

After analysing the historical evolution of the Russian presence in Central Asia, this paper moves on to focus on Moscow's two main concerns in the region, namely the economy, especially gas and oil exports from Central Asia, and security issues.¹ For the Kremlin, the region's growing strategic insecurity and the risks of destabilisation constitute the first motif of involvement.

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More specifically, Russia wants to avoid a situation whereby it will have no other choice but to intervene militarily; it wants to secure its own territory and regime, which is much weaker and more divided than Western observers conventionally think. Finally, this paper looks at the prospects for collaboration between the EU and Russia in this region: How can the currently competitive mindset be turned into the atmosphere of cooperation that the Central Asian states actively call for? As the EU does not seek to become a monopolistic actor in Central Asia, it is in its interest to develop areas of cooperation with Russia in the region. If the stakes are formulated in terms of exclusive choices, the EU, which is too distant a power, will not win Central Asian hearts; but it can increase its potential to attract Central Asia by showing its capacity for developing collective action with Russia.

The changing Russian presence in Central Asia

After the implosion of the Soviet Union, Russia's standing as a former colonial centre presented it with many difficulties, as in Central Asia, holding Moscow at bay was a top priority. Resounding critiques rang out about 'Russian colonialism', but these only lasted for a brief period. During the mid-1990s, the newly independent states began attenuating their criticisms of Moscow as they started experiencing social difficulties, a time when nostalgia for the Brezhnev years became an increasingly popular leitmotiv and Russians could no longer be blamed for all the evils.² Less than two decades has therefore sufficed for this common legacy to be more positively reshaped, that is, for Moscow to succeed in inverting the Soviet past and turning it into an asset of shared proximity. Since 2000, Russia has once again become a respected power in Central Asia, where its economic and geopolitical revival is widely admired.

Russian interests in Central Asia have significantly altered since the end of the cold war.³ The past two decades can be divided into three phases: in the first, which stretches from the fall of the Soviet Union to the first half of the 1990s, the Kremlin had no clear Central Asia policy or even one to deal with the rest of the former Soviet space. The CIS was construed as a mechanism to procure a 'civilised divorce', not as a means to maintain Russian leadership over the rest of its former empire. The reasons for Russia's sudden disinterest in Central Asia were multiple and of a nature that were at once ideological, political and economic. On the cultural level, Moscow was also rather absent, choosing not to defend its sizeable Russian minority in Central Asia, which, in 1989, included nearly 10 million persons. Neither did it invest much in the Russophone structures (schools, universities, the media, etc.) so crucial to preserving its cultural influence.⁴ Only on 14 September 1995 did Russia finally decree that the CIS was a space of vital interest, meaning that Moscow wanted to reserve a right of inspection over the external borders of the former Soviet Union. In the second half of the 1990s, rapid changes in Russia's domestic situation led to the birth of a second phase of Russian foreign policy. According to the 'Primakov doctrine', part of Russia's attempt to regain its international status involved recovering its role as a centre of influence over post-Soviet space. The formulation of this strategy, however, remained ambiguous, since official discourse continued to appeal for the creation of a Euro–Atlantic alliance that included Russia.⁵

The third phase of Russian foreign policy is linked to Vladimir

Putin's coming to power. As soon as he took up office, Russia's new strongman went to Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, followed in May 2000 by another visit to Uzbekistan and one to Turkmenistan. On 28 June 2000, Putin formulated a new foreign policy for the Federation, which recognised its limited capacities and the need to make a certain number of geopolitical concessions. It gave priority to Russian investments in the CIS states⁶ and to developing active diplomatic relations with strategic partners such as India, Iran and China. Putin's Russia called for the CIS Collective Security Treaty to be strengthened in order to deal with Islamist threats in the Caucasus and Central Asia and it declared its desire to regain control of the region's energy resources, particularly those in the Caspian Sea.⁷ Relations with the two Central Asian states most resistant to Russian influence, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, slowly improved, and Putin's visit to the capitals of both countries in 2000 was hailed as a diplomatic success. The other three states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), whose policies were more balanced between the West and Russia, positively welcomed the signs of revival emanating from the Kremlin.⁸ The events of 11 September 2001 then had the effect of sharply reinforcing Moscow's desire to step up its involvement in Central Asia.⁹

During Vladimir Putin's two mandates (2000–08), Russia succeeded in returning to its status as the number one partner of the Central Asian states. On the multilateral level, the two Moscow-initiated organisations, the Eurasian Economic Community, created in 2000 on a Kazakhstani proposition, and the Collective Security Treaty, founded in 2002, today function as the major institutional frameworks of Russo–Central Asian cooperation. On the bilateral level, Moscow is again a first-order strategic and military ally. The Kremlin has made a show of its abiding political support for the Central Asian regimes, a rapprochement facilitated by the common struggle against the so-called 'Islamist threat'. In exchange for the Kremlin's backing of their fight against the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Hizb ut-Tahrir,¹⁰ and against political opposition more generally, the states of Central Asia have agreed to support Russia in its war in Chechnya. The 'coloured revolutions' in Georgia in 2003, in Ukraine in 2004 and in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 further strengthened this political rapprochement, compelling all the Central Asian presidents to fall into line behind Putin. All of them reiterated his accusations of unacceptable Western interference, argued for the need to have strong regimes to avoid destabilisation by Islamists and adopted stricter legislation concerning NGOs and 'civil society'. This alliance reached its apogee during the Andijan insurrection of 13 May 2005, which was repressed by the Uzbek authorities.¹¹

If, since the 1990s, Russia has been overwhelmed in the economic sector to such an extent that it will not be able to reconquer the markets it lost, on the political and geopolitical levels, things are quite different. Russia has held good on its promises by positively responding to the requests of Central Asian leaders. Although it was criticised by Tashkent for barely reacting to the incursions of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan into Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in the summers of 1999 and 2000, Russia's awareness of the Islamist danger in the region has enabled it to find a common language with the Central Asian states. Moscow has also deftly taken advantage of the deteriorating relations between Central Asia and Washington and has put in place strategies for the 'containment' of Western influence in the region. Indeed, what distinguishes Russia from

Western countries is that it does not link its assistance to political conditions, and the Central Asian regimes, which have become more and more authoritarian, have been particularly appreciative of this. Russia has thus played a crucial role in Central Asian state building by promoting a post-Soviet mode of governance that could be defined as authoritarian.

Since 2000, its influence on Central Asian policy-making has become more direct, notably after its statement that it considered the Western model of parliamentary democracy to be inapplicable in the region. This political rapprochement has had a significant political impact on Central Asian societies: political reforms for democratisation have been impeded; the activities of NGOs and civil society have been increasingly curtailed; and gaining access to new technologies and to media like the Internet has become more difficult.¹² Even Kyrgyzstan, generally considered the most democratic country in Central Asia, has attempted since 2007 to establish a 'vertical power' structure, which, while detrimental to democratic initiatives, is aimed at stabilising the country, fostering investments and reasserting state authority. In Kazakhstan, the power transfer between Vladimir Putin and Dmitri Medvedev was very closely followed by Astana, given that it is seeking to find a way to preserve the interests of the ruling elites if Nursultan Nazarbaev leaves office in 2012. Russia has once more become the primary political model for Central Asian regimes, which are attracted neither to Western parliamentary systems nor to Chinese monopartyism.

Russia's main economic involvement: Control over hydrocarbons

In the economic domain, Russia has also regained a dominant position.¹³ Russian–Central Asian trade bounced back at the start of the 2000s and tripled between 2003 and 2007, shooting up from \$7 billion to \$21 billion, a third of which comes from the hydrocarbon sector.¹⁴ In 2006, Russia again became Kazakhstan's main import partner (trade figures rose to over \$10 billion) and its third largest export partner after the EU and China. It is now once again Uzbekistan's premier commercial partner, accounting for more than a quarter of its total foreign exchange (more than \$3 billion in 2007). In addition, Moscow has become Kyrgyzstan's second largest trade partner after China, but remains Tajikistan's largest partner with China coming second. In Turkmenistan, to date Russia has trailed behind Ukraine, Iran and some European countries; however, Gazprom's growing role is likely to change this in 2009. Like the EU, Russia's trade with Central Asia is clearly dominated by energy questions.

Russia's presence in the Central Asian energy sector has steadily grown since the 1990s. Its activities were initially limited to Kazakhstan, but around 2000 Gazprom also began to make significant inroads into Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, and since 2005, into Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as well. Reflecting Russia's energy interests, there has been an increase in the relative proportion of gas and oil exchanges in Russo–Central Asian trade, which went from 23% of total trade in 2003 to 36% in 2006 or from \$2 billion to \$4.6 billion.¹⁵ This increase principally stems from growth in the gas sector trade with Uzbekistan, since the gas trade with Turkmenistan has remained more or less stable and oil exchanges with Kazakhstan have grown only modestly. Russia's share in Kazakhstan's and Uzbekistan's oil sales remains weak. Despite a rapid rise since 2003, trade in

the hydrocarbon sector is still below its Soviet-era levels: Central Asian imports of Russian oil and intra-Central Asian trade remain largely inferior to 1990 levels; only in the area of Central Asian gas exports to Russia do trade figures look likely to exceed Soviet levels by 2010.

These energy flows are on the whole unidirectional, going from Central Asia to Russia. Russia itself only consumes a small quantity of Central Asian hydrocarbons and then re-exports them to Ukraine and Western Europe. In comparison with other international actors, Moscow's investment in the hydrocarbon sector in Central Asia in 2006 was a modest \$4-5 billion, 80% of which was invested in Kazakhstan and 10% in Uzbekistan. Yet Russian companies are now looking to augment their financial involvement in the region, and are planning to invest about \$15 billion by 2012, principally in developing the infrastructure for transport and deposits. Moscow's aim in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is to gain a firm hold over the sale of highly profitable oil products, while Gazprom is undertaking the exploration of Tajik gas deposits in Sargazon (in the Khatlon region) and in Rengan (close to Dushanbe), as well as of Kyrgyz gas deposits in the country's south. Gazprom is also hoping to acquire a share of the state-run companies Kyrgyzgaz and Kyrgyzneftegaz as they enter the privatisation phase.

Russia is involved in numerous energy projects in Kazakhstan. It is undertaking the geological study and development of gas deposits in Karachaganak (in western Kazakhstan) and Imashevskoe (Atyrau region), of oil deposits in North Buzachi and in Karakuduk (Mangystau region), of both gas and oil deposits in North Kumkol (Kzyl-Orda region) and in Alibekmola and Kozhasay (Aktobe region), and of offshore sites in the Kazakh part of the Caspian Sea. Russian companies are also involved in the construction of a gas refinery in Orenburg and a gas chemical complex close to Khvalinskoe. Rosneft is part of a project to upgrade the capacity of the Atyrau–Samara pipeline, which is set to increase from 15 to 25 million tonnes annually. Lastly, the Caspian Pipeline Consortium, 24% of which is controlled by the Russian state and 20% by Russian companies, is planning to increase the capacity of the Tengiz–Novorossiisk site from 32 to 67 million tonnes annually. Other collaborative projects on the Centre–Central Asia and the Bukhara–Ural gas pipelines are also underway to develop the capacity to transit Uzbek and Turkmen gas.¹⁶

In Turkmenistan, only the gas sector interests Russia. ITERA is the only Russian company directly involved in the exploitation of hydrocarbons, although Lukoil and a TNK–BP joint venture are presently trying to enter the Turkmen market. Russia's presence remains rather limited, as Ashgabat only permits foreign companies to invest in offshore deposits, which are the most costly and challenging on a technical level. Because the status of the Caspian Sea remains unresolved, such deposits are also the most complex geopolitically since they are often close to the Iranian border. Russo–Turkmen cooperation is therefore limited in the main to exporting Turkmen gas to Russia via the Centre–Central Asia gas pipeline, which Gazprom plans to pour more than \$2 billion into renovating. In Uzbekistan, Russian companies are involved in developing gas deposits in Shakhpakhty and Kungrad (in Karakalpakstan), in Kandym, Khauzak and Shady (in the Bukhara region), along with gas and petrol deposits in Zhambay (in the Uzbek part of the Aral Sea), some situated in the Gissar region (near Karshi) and in Urga, Kuanysh and Akhchalak (on the Ustyurt Plateau). Moscow has also invested

in transit infrastructure, such as the Centre–Central Asia and Bukhara–Ural gas pipelines, which Uztransgaz and Gazprom are planning to modernise and develop.

More so than other international actors, Moscow plays a structuring role in the development of the Central Asian hydrocarbon market. Always on the lookout for possibilities to export resources and collect transit rights, Russia is contributing to the increases in export levels of Central Asian resources out of the region (85% of Kazakh oil products are exported out of the CIS, while the figure for Turkmenistan is 78%). Russia is also helping to reduce internal trade among the five states: Uzbekistan exports five times less gas to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan than it did in 1990, and imports very small quantities of oil from Kazakhstan, while Turkmenistan no longer plays any part in the regional energy game at all.¹⁷ With domestic consumption rising, however, the increasing emphasis on exporting energy is aggravating the recurrent energy crises in the two weakest states, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, while South Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan also experience regular but less severe energy shortfalls.

Russia is reinforcing Central Asia in its role as an exporter of primary resources by neglecting to develop its hydrocarbon refining capacity, especially the manufacture of products with high added value. This is ultimately an inefficient, and even dangerous, trade pattern from the point of view of Central Asia's long-term economic interests. But it seems likely that Moscow will lose its control over this regional market. Not only have new actors emerged, especially China, but also the development of shipping in the Caspian Sea and rail transport has reduced the importance of land pipelines. Moreover, because Russo–Central Asian energy exchanges are mainly run by state-owned companies involved in government-directed activities, cooperation entails a certain political will, which sometimes runs counter to the commercial interests of each state.

In the energy domain, Moscow realises that it can no longer control Central Asian gas and oil prices, which are in the process of rising to world prices thanks to the energy needs of Iran, the West and above all China – all of whom are ready to pay high prices to strip Gazprom, Lukoil and Rosneft of their quasi-monopoly. The export routes are now no longer exclusively in Russia's hands either: Turkmen gas is already exported directly to Iran and soon will be to China, while Kazakh oil is exported to China and the West via the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceylan pipeline. Trying to capture markets, large Russian companies have implemented aggressive trade offensives, which, similar to the situation of other great world powers, are also instruments of official political interests. Although in the 1990s the major Russian companies pursued their own policies, often in contradiction with those decided by the Kremlin, under Putin state interests and those of the major companies have reunified. This seems to have provided Russia with a single solution for its multiple objectives: first, to maintain political influence over the Central Asian regimes through the control of resources; second, to continue collecting considerable transit revenues from these landlocked countries; third, to slow down – but not stop – the emergence of competing export routes to China, Iran and Turkey; and finally, to meet growing European energy demands.

Despite the predominance of the energy issue, Russia's trade with Central Asia also extends to other important sectors of cooperation:

- uranium (the reinforcement of nuclear integration between Moscow and Astana, and the creation of joint ventures for extraction and the building of reactors);
- electricity (the maintenance of the Soviet grid facilitates common projects);
- hydroelectricity (Russia finances Sangtuda in Tajikistan and Kambarata in Kyrgyzstan);
- construction (mainly in Kazakhstan);
- telecommunications (above all mobile telephony);
- transport (particularly the freight services);
- railways (but not the automobile market);
- banks (the Russo–Kazakhstani partnerships are multiplying);
- the military-industrial complex; and lastly
- certain agribusiness sectors (Russia and Kazakhstan are strengthening their cooperation on cereals).

The simplification of customs procedures with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, thanks to the Eurasian Economic Community, also enables Russian food products to enter the Central Asian market. Meanwhile, in the opposite direction, the Central Asian space is ever more utilised as a transit zone for Chinese commodities bound for central Siberia and the Altay. In all likelihood, however, Russia will be overtaken by China as the main trade partner of the Central Asian states, if that is not already the case in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.¹⁸

So Russia remains a dominant economic actor in Central Asia, if energy is taken into account. It is an important actor in heavy industry and infrastructure, both of which are old Soviet specialisations. But it is a relatively modest and rather uncompetitive actor in terms of small and medium-sized enterprises, new technologies, etc. This stratification offers a more general reflection of the Russian economy as a whole, which is still in a logic of rent and is having problems diversifying itself. At the same time, it is also explained by the state of the Central Asian economies, in which small and medium-sized firms and new technologies struggle to find a place. These economies, it seems, are destined to serve above all as transit zones for Russo–Chinese trade, hence the emphasis on infrastructure and all the freight-related services.

The security issue: Are the dangers coming from the south?

The second key domain of Russian presence in Central Asia is that of regional security. Since the early 1990s, this domain has been the primary driving force behind Moscow's continued presence in the region; yet from 2000 onwards, the mechanisms of this collaboration have profoundly transformed. The key security challenges for Russia in Central Asia are multiple and complex: any destabilisation in the weakest (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) or the most dangerous (Uzbekistan) states will have immediate repercussions in Russia, including effects such as

- Islamist infiltration in the Volga-Ural region and the north Caucasus, indeed in the whole of the country;
- an increase in the inflow of drugs reaching the Russian

population, which is already widely targeted by drug traffickers;

- a loss of control over the export networks of hydrocarbons, as well as over uranium sites, strategic sites in the military-industrial complex and electricity power stations;
- a drop in trade exchanges;
- a loss of direct access to Afghanistan; and
- an uncontrollable surge in flows of migrants, especially of refugees.

For Moscow, the security of the southern borders of Central Asia is seen as a question of domestic security, not out of 'imperialism', but of pragmatism: the 7,000 km stretch of Russo–Kazakhstani border, in the heart of the steppes, is nearly impossible to securitise. The situation requires that the clandestine flows are better controlled downstream, as it were, which confirms Central Asia's role as a buffer zone for Russia.

Of the CIS institutions, only the Anti-Terrorist Centre is properly functional, inasmuch as it continues to provide the Central Asian security services with training and offers joint exercises called "South Anti-Terror", administered by the Russian FSB. Russo–Central Asian multilateral collaborations are actually geared towards the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), which includes Russia, the Central Asian states (except Turkmenistan), Byelorussia and Armenia.¹⁹ Apart from its role in the elaboration of collective strategies of struggle against terrorism, transnational dangers and drug trafficking, the CSTO is the only regional institution with a genuine military dimension.²⁰ The Collective Rapid Deployment Force for Central Asia, comprised of Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Russian and Tajik units, totalling around 4,000 men, is the only one with trained armed forces capable of intervening in real time and will probably be upgraded to 15,000 soldiers. Common military exercises, carried out annually in one of the member countries, simulate terrorist attacks ('Rubezh') or anti-narcotics operations ('Kanal'). Since 2005, the CSTO has also revived cooperation between the Russian and Central Asian military-industrial complexes. The Intergovernmental Committee for Military and Economic Cooperation allows for the preferential sale of Russian military material to Central Asian states at domestic Russian market prices and for the closer integration of national military industries.

Nevertheless, bilateralism dominates in the domain of security. From the early 1990s, Russia has held joint military exercises with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, in particular at Ashuluk in the Astrakhan region; however, exercises with Uzbekistan only began in 2005 and none have been organised with the Turkmen army. From the outset, Russia was clear about what it saw as the main concern of bilateral cooperation: the protection of the international borders of the former USSR. Although there are no longer any Russian troops in Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan or Tajikistan, bilateral consultations are still conducted on the securitisation of borders and operations are organised that focus on drug trafficking and illegal migration, such as those that have been undertaken with Kazakhstan on the Caspian Sea and along the length of the Chinese border. The FSB border service plays an advisory role and provides technical assistance in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Russian troops, who helped both countries create their own air defence systems in the 1990s, continue to train their air force personnel. The second largest domain of cooperation, which assures Russia its supremacy in the military sector, is

personnel training. The Soviet legacy and Russian dynamism in this sector have enabled Moscow to help train a majority of Central Asian military personnel, including more than 2,500 from Kazakhstan, more than 800 from Kyrgyzstan, more than 500 from Tajikistan and more than 250 from Uzbekistan. Several hundred high-level Central Asians have gained their diplomas at Russian military academies, which also serve as models for the Central Asian military schools, and the two Russian military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan additionally offer specialised on-site training.

The Russian authorities have succeeded in keeping or in regaining a number of military and research facilities in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The most important ones from the entire former Soviet Union are those in Kazakhstan, which therefore constitute a major element of the Russian defence system. Since the 1990s, Astana has given Russia the use of several firing ranges in exchange for military material, specialised maintenance and officer training. Moscow, for instance, rents the famous Baikonur spatial complex from Astana (70% of Russian rocket launches occur there), as well as weapons and missile launch centres in the regions of Atyrau and western Kazakhstan. Russia also rents ballistic missile test firing ranges in the regions of Karaganda, Zhambul, Aktobe and Kzyl-Orda, and the Gulchad site in the region of Lake Balkhash, which monitors ballistic missiles and spatial objects circulating above Asia as far as 3,000 km away.

In Kyrgyzstan, Russia has the Kant base at its disposal, which opened in 2003 and can accommodate close to 800 men, and has recently announced plans to open a second one in the south of the country. The Kant base controls several sites, such as the seismic control station of the Russian defence ministry in the Tian Shan mountain range, the Kara-Balta station at Chaldovar in the Chui region (which depends on the Russian military fleet) and the anti-submarine weapons test zone of the Russian army in Karakol on the shores of Lake Issyk Kul. Since the signing of a 2004 treaty with Tajikistan, Moscow has opened its largest military base outside the Federation's borders, where it stations the 201st armed division. Russia has been allowed to deploy other troop units at Kurgan-Tiube and Kuliab. And it occupies the Aini air base close to Dushanbe that stations Russian helicopter squadrons as well as the Okno spatial surveillance centre near the Chinese border (located at an altitude of 2,200 metres), which is home to an electronic and optic monitoring station of the Russian spatial forces. Russia does not have any military facilities in either Turkmenistan or Uzbekistan, but since the latter joined the CSTO, it hopes that Tashkent will allow it to access to the Ustyurt Plateau for ballistic missile tests.²¹

The two other major sectors of Russo–Central Asian military collaboration are first, the provision of military equipment, and second, cooperation between military-industrial complexes. Since the start of the 2000s, Russia has supplied the Central Asian states with large quantities of military equipment, either by selling it at preferential prices, notably to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (the only two states in the region able to finance their armies) or by supplying the material in return for the rental of sites (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan). Russia therefore equips the Central Asian armies with weapons, munitions and night-vision equipment, along with planes, helicopters, anti-missile defence apparatus and tanks (including ships for the Kazakhstani Caspian Sea Fleet), and also provides after-sales service and repairs. From

2005 onwards, Moscow's influence, bolstered by the importance of its Soviet legacy, has further been enhanced by the relaunch of the Central Asian military-industrial complex. In Kazakhstan, for example, there are five Russo–Kazakh joint ventures in various military sectors (anti-missile defence systems, torpedo construction, anti-ship mines and naval material), not to mention joint spatial activities, which have broadened in scope since the launch of the Baiterek Space Rocket Complex. Kyrgyzstan itself also hopes to revitalise its joint ventures – which specialise in torpedoes, weapons and radars – with the support of the state-run Russian company Rosoboronexport. Uzbekistan has tried to revive its cooperation with Russia in the aeronautical domain, with the signing of agreements between Moscow and the TAPO aviation factory, and the creation of the joint venture UzRosAvia to produce aircraft; it also hopes to take advantage of Russian advances in spatial equipment for the Maidanak observatory.

The eternal question: Is Russia losing its influence in Central Asia?

Any consideration of Russia's successes in Central Asia proves complex. Indeed, despite its return in the 2000s, Moscow has well and truly lost its stranglehold over the region. And yet the Kremlin itself seems never to have envisaged returning to a Soviet-style situation, nor has it tried to reintegrate the Central Asian states politically by including them in the Russian Federation. While Moscow hopes to remain Central Asia's leading partner, it no longer imagines its presence will be exclusive. The Kremlin has hence learned, to its detriment early on, to compromise with other international actors, as evidenced by Vladimir Putin's post-11 September acceptance of the opening of American bases and its cooperation with China in the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. The Russian elites are clear-sighted and pragmatic: they know that the Central Asian states are prepared to exploit the international competition factor in their own national interests and that the latter will not give them any preferential policies on grounds of sympathy alone. The conclusion therefore seems to be that Russia's return has been a partial success insofar as it has again become an important partner and a legitimate ally in a no-longer-monopolistic Central Asian market.

Although Russia has succeeded rather well in its return to Central Asia, it is also in the process of becoming a power 'like the others' in the region – its positions are by no means guaranteed and they remain subject to global geopolitical hazards. It is true that neighbouring regional powers, such as India, Iran and Turkey, lack the means to dethrone Russian supremacy; however, this is not the case with China, which is going to prove problematic for Russia in the long term.²² Thus far, both powers have managed to realise their objectives without clashing head-on, but in all likelihood this situation will change rather quickly, especially since the competition for control over Central Asia's subsoil resources is likely to become more acute. Up to now, the Russo–Chinese alliance in Central Asia has been possible because Beijing has an interest in keeping Central Asia under Russia's political and security shelter. But if the Chinese authorities were to consider, for whatever reason, that they ought to modify their activities in Central Asia, and become involved in political, military and cultural issues, and not just in economic ones, then Chinese interests would come into conflict with Moscow's. Central Asian–Russian relations are also affected by the global cooperation/

competition between Moscow and Washington. For example, the reorientation of American foreign policy towards Afghanistan and the more-than-uncertain future of Pakistan might re-imbue Russia and the US with the will to work together on stabilising Central Asia. The Russian presence in Central Asia is also dependent on economic stakes. Since 2000, oil- and gas-related income has provided Russia with influence it did not previously have, but which it could lose were the global financial crisis, combined with lower world prices for hydrocarbons, to continue. Russia's capacity to invest in Central Asia might then run into difficulties and this would have a direct impact on its political influence.

Russia's weight in Central Asia does not depend solely upon global geopolitical and financial redistributions – it also relies on domestic factors. As part of a broader historical movement, the current demographic crisis, the depopulation of Siberia and the general 're-centring' of Russia around the European regions of the country signal a historic retreat for Moscow that will inevitably affect its presence in Central Asia. The Russian state also has difficulties in conceiving of the impact that a massive intake of Central Asian workers might have on Russia, and moreover of how the rise of xenophobia and Islamophobia in Russian society might change its relationship with Central Asia.²³ The way Russia sees it, the region has only three choices: remain in Russia's fold, sink into a state of chronic instability – whether owing to Islamism or the criminalisation of the state by mafia networks – or fall under Chinese domination.²⁴

Policy-oriented debates about Russia's use of soft power in Central Asia confirm that the five states are viewed as an intrinsic and natural part of the Russian sphere of influence. More specifically, political submission and economic control are desired, but not cultural proximity, since this provokes anxiety. In Russian public opinion, Central Asia is usually associated with notions of Islamism, terrorism and the mafia, while positive references emphasising the historical and cultural ties to Central Asian peoples are extremely rare. This generalised disdain for Central Asia provides the negative context in which the intellectual and political elites envisage the economic, geopolitical yet also social utility of the region. Moscow, for instance, no longer produces any real expert knowledge about this region. Despite its old Orientalist traditions, knowledge on Central Asia is drying up and reflection on the future of Central Asia in Russian think tanks is minimal. This situation can partly be explained by Moscow's general view of Central Asia as part of its *de jure* sphere of influence in Eurasia.

For the moment, therefore, Russia has almost no long-term vision of the relations it would like to entertain with its 'south', nor any strategy to propose that would offer Central Asia any status other than that of being Moscow's geographical and political appendix. The Kremlin is still inclined to think of Central Asia as an acquired zone of influence, and the Central Asian governments feel this is disrespectful. Aware of Russia's incapacity to formulate a coherent plan for its partnership with the region, the Central Asian elites are somewhat resentful. They denounce Russia for simply riding on the inertia of its historical legacy, incapable of innovation. Still, Moscow ought to reflect upon issues such as the renewal of the political elite currently taking shape in Central Asia. Once the Soviet generations have disappeared, what relation will the new ones have to Russia? Is the Kremlin sufficiently prepared for the upcoming power transfers, in particular in states like Uzbekistan, where the question of

political alternation is used as justification for authoritarianism? Does Moscow have the ability to measure accurately the West's influence on the younger political generations? What role will China come to have as a cultural power in Central Asia in future years? And should radical Islam start to destabilise Uzbekistan or Kyrgyzstan, what measures does the Kremlin have up its sleeve other than violence in the name of the anti-terrorist struggle? It does not seem as if the Russian elites have a response to propose to any of these questions.

Russia does have arguments working in its favour, of which it might not be aware. Indeed, despite the likelihood that the young generation of Central Asian politicians (particularly in Kazakhstan and in Kyrgyzstan), who were partly educated outside of the CIS, will have a more critical view of Russia, this does not necessarily entail that Russophobe circles are about to occupy positions of power. On the contrary, the pacification of memory relating to the Soviet past, the idea that the USSR was instrumental in achieving independence, that Russia continues to be the path to Europeanness and that there is a specific 'Soviet' or 'Eurasian' civilisation, are pro-Russian arguments that bear much weight among the Central Asian upper and middle classes. Yet, to date the Kremlin has not developed any coherent or expansive cultural diplomacy for the post-Soviet space. Indeed, it has no real suggestions to offer about how to sustain the role of the Russian language and Russian-speaking culture in Central Asia, although this is now starting to become an important question in decision-making circles. Russia could conserve its key role in Central Asia were it to give itself the means to do so, including

- complying with the Central Asian states' wishes for investments in economic sectors other than those of hydrocarbons;
- continuing to train Central Asian political and military cadres;
- promoting the Russian language among the local populations;
- creating a more secure working environment for the millions of Central Asian migrants settled in Russia, not to mention reviving the intellectual exchanges between Russia and Central Asia, which have practically ceased; and
- becoming involved in the politics of lobby-formation and building influence networks among the young generations who stand to inherit the reigns of power.

Recommendations for the EU

Despite recent tense relations and basic disagreements over some issues such as Georgia, NATO enlargement and the Eastern Partnership, the EU and Russia could cooperate with one another in many domains in Central Asia. Rather than speak in terms of competition for spheres of influence, which may be the case between Russia and the US, the EU essentially tends to look at matters in terms of synergies with the other actors in the Central Asian game.

Trying to promote common interest on the energy issue

With the onset of the economic crisis, the Russian elite (in particular the more reformist circles close to Dmitri Medvedev)

sought to extract Russia from its deadlock by promoting economic diversification and by discretely criticising the decisions previously taken in favour of hydrocarbons and the extraction industries. It is in the EU's interest to steer Russia in the direction of diversification and to encourage it to apply this principle in Central Asia. The predominance of Gazprom and the large Russian companies in raw materials is detrimental to Russian influence in the region, especially with respect to its Kazakhstani neighbour, which is asking all its partners to assist in its economic restructuring. In addition, the EU must maintain dialogue with Moscow concerning the positive character of diversifying Central Asian export routes, which, although contrary to short-term Russian interests, can only contribute to stabilising Central Asia and therefore to preserving Russia's long-term interests.

Enhancing EU–Russian interaction on Afghanistan

Russian leaders are extremely divided about the right position to take with regard to Afghanistan. Moscow has continually criticised NATO's decision, but at the same time many Russian politicians recognise that the coalition's failure to stabilise Afghanistan would place Russia in great danger. The EU has every interest in promoting cooperation with Moscow on the Afghan issue, since their security interests overlap. Despite the legacy of the Soviet invasion, Russia, paradoxically, enjoys a relatively positive image among the Afghan elites.²⁵ Moscow's symbolic re-evaluation in Western negotiations with the Afghan government would be appreciated by Kabul as it would by Moscow. It would also work to disarm discourses critical of American interventionism and unwillingness to engage in dialogue with neighbouring regional powers. In addition, Russia still has many specific networks of influence in Afghanistan among the Tajik and Uzbek minorities as well as the former communist movements, a point of leverage that could be used when the time comes to seat all the actors of the Afghan game around the negotiating table. Concrete measures of cooperation can also be considered: common reconstruction of electricity cables, of hydroelectric stations, the restoration of roads and factories, the construction of wheat depots, the reopening of schools, etc. Potentially, Russia can still benefit from the major role that it played in the modernisation of Afghanistan from the 1950s to 1970s, prior to the invasion, and might be better associated with the development projects that the international community wants to set up in Afghanistan.

Promoting cooperation on the formation of elites and the reform of higher education

Russia remains the first-choice destination for Central Asian students, and since Moscow has become aware of its cultural potential, it has tried to set up branches of its universities in Central Asian states. As the EU has set itself the goal of promoting higher education in the region, three-way partnerships between the EU, Russia and Central Asia might be envisaged. Thus, Central Asians studying in Russia might be encouraged to take advantage of the exchange programmes with Western countries that are taking place in the major Russian universities. This kind of project would be particularly well received in Central Asia, where Russia continues to be thought of as a cultural power at the interface with Europe.

Promoting cooperation on the management of migration flows

The migration flows from Central Asia to Russia are growing ever larger (at least 3 million persons), but the state organs are ill adapted to managing the social difficulties associated with this phenomenon. This does a disservice to the Central Asian migrants, who are marginalised from Russian public life and subject to growing xenophobia. The EU states have had lengthy experience in such matters, not only in framing public policies, but also in dialoguing with the states from which migrants originate in the Middle East and in Africa. In addition, Russia's role as a transit country for migrants from Central Asia for whom the EU is the final destination is bound to grow. The EU is therefore directly concerned by Russia's ability to manage its migration flows. Tripartite mechanisms (EU–Russia–Central Asia), accompanied by commissions entrusted with formulating long-term strategies, might be implemented in domains such as the legalisation of illegal migrants, the fight against work exploitation, the guarantee of social rights for migrants, assistance with cultural integration (education for children, Russian language courses for adults, etc.) and negotiations with countries of origin about the regulation of migrants and remittances.

Promoting cooperation on securitising the borders

Russia is directly threatened by the porosity of its borders with Central Asia and Russian society is increasingly sensitive to the social risks inherent in drug trafficking. In this, Moscow and Brussels share the same concerns: both would like to see the Central Asian states avoid plunging into an Afghan scenario. As such, Russia could be invited to participate in some of the Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA) initiatives to establish regional border assistance centres in Central Asia.

Promoting cooperation on human security and development issues

Russia is also worried about the risks of long-term destabilisation in Central Asian societies. While Moscow supports the established regimes as a rampart against destabilisation, the EU tends to think that the refusal of electoral alternation creates political risks. Moscow and Brussels could nonetheless collaborate on more specific projects by trying to remedy the dearth of future prospects for development in Central Asia, in particular concerning the water–hydro–energy–food crisis. Such projects could include financing small capacity hydro-electric stations, restoring roads to open up isolated regions, and preparing for natural disasters and the possible arrival of ecological refugees (from Karakalpakstan, for example), as well as programmes for managing potable water, etc.

Other timely measures could be added to these principled ones, for instance in relation to mitigating the world economic crisis. Russia and the EU have every interest in making sure that the states of Central Asia are not too drastically affected by it. Measures in this regard might include the coordination of bank support programmes for the weakest states, thereby guaranteeing the payment of salaries and pensions, the coordination of deliveries of humanitarian aid (notably food aid, especially cereals) and medication, etc.

Conclusions

Moscow continues broadly to influence the authoritarian political logics of the Central Asian regimes and to orient their economies

towards specialising in the exportation of primary resources, which in the long term will prove a detrimental strategy. In this region of the post-Soviet space, Moscow has proven its capacity to desist from issuing military threats and applying direct political pressure, and instead uses more complex tactics. In this way, it has been able to turn the continuity of processes of Soviet integration to its advantage, as much at the level of economic infrastructure and institutional mechanisms as at that of the long-standing human relations between Russia and Central Asia. Even so, the Russian ability to seduce the Central Asian states is limited: the recognition of South Ossetia's and Abkhazia's independence, tensions with Byelorussia within the CSTO, Uzbekistan's increased autonomy and the underlying conflicts between Moscow and Tashkent are confirmation that Russian control over the zone has far from stabilised. If Russian discourses are often marked by references to the imperial legacy, in practice Russia's behaviour in Central Asia is based on a much more pragmatic approach relating to its immediate economic and security interests. Its ability to co-opt rather than coerce elites, its political legitimacy and its cultural values are significant factors that work in favour of its continued dominance in Central Asia. Nevertheless, despite its large presence in the domains of strategy and the military, Russia is without a miracle solution for the potential risks of destabilisation facing Central Asia, whether such risks are related to Afghanistan (Islamism and drug trafficking) or to internal issues in Central Asian societies, which have to do with their widespread pauperisation.

After having practically vanished from Central Asia's line of sight at the beginning of the 1990s, Moscow has returned to the region as a legitimate strategic and political ally, even if the future of Russia's presence in Central Asia remains uncertain. For the present, the Kremlin is resting on the laurels of its Soviet legacy, content to exercise its influence on the political, economic, cultural and individual levels, but seemingly unaware of the need to renew its strategies of influence so that it can shore up its place as Central Asia's premier partner in the coming decades. Russia therefore risks being forced, in the more or less near future, to seek out partners in the region, all the more so as China's growing presence in Central Asia will result in further problems for Moscow. On paper, the possibilities for cooperation between Russia and the EU in this region are multiple. But they require that the Kremlin begin to open itself to cooperation without seeing this step as undermining its would-be right to oversee Central Asia. The evolution of EU–Russian cooperation in Central Asia is therefore less linked to EU–Central Asian relations than it is to EU–Russian relations: the ambiguous combination of partnership and competition, even expansionist endeavours, constitutes the first obstacle to the development of this cooperation.

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