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Vladimir Putin's Central Asian Policy 2000-08: In Search of Security and Influence

Abstract

Russian policy towards Central Asia during Vladimir Putin's presidency (2000 – 2008) was largely driven by a desire to restore Russian influence and security concerns. The policy changed over time: In 1999-2001, Russia tried to integrate Central Asia by itself in order to guarantee regional security without the USA or EU. In 2001-2003, Russia grudgingly agreed to cooperate with the West in order to guarantee security. In the period from 2004-2008, Russia again decided to counterbalance US influence in Central Asia by pursuing a more active foreign policy and also through enhanced cooperation with non-Western players outside of the region.

Concerns about Security

Conceptually, Russian policy towards Central Asia (which includes the five post-Soviet states of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) derives from a strategy formulated in Boris Yeltsin's Presidential Decree of 14 September 1995 proclaiming the reintegration of Russia's post-Soviet neighbors as a key foreign policy objective. If the underlying notion of this decree was to restore Russian influence, the documents adopted in the early Putin period, such as the National Security Concept of 10 January 2000, the Military Doctrine of 21 April 2000, and the Foreign Policy Concept of 28 June 2000 were driven more explicitly by security concerns.

The Foreign Policy Concept, for example, puts Russian relations with post-Soviet countries in the context of guaranteeing national security; in the case of Central Asia, this is especially relevant in the field of fighting international terrorism and extremism. Guaranteeing security in Central Asia was seen as the way to stabilize the situation in Russia itself, especially, in the context of the spread of international terrorism, Islamic extremism and drug trafficking to Russia's own territory. Against the background of the chaotic years under Yeltsin, bringing some order into the Russian foreign policy process and prioritizing Russian foreign policy goals was seen in all these documents as a key for guaranteeing security.

In 1999 security problems in Central Asia became acute due to the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Until 2001, Russia's political class was convinced that increasing Russian influence in the region was the best way to counter this threat.

After the Taliban managed to capture most of Afghanistan's territory (some 90 percent in 1998), Central Asia became a front line region. Of the five Central Asian states, only Turkmenistan established friendly relations with Taliban. Besides the danger of military action spreading into neighboring Central Asian states, the combination of Islamic extremism and crime in Afghanistan posed an additional threat. Afghanistan in the 1990s had become a major producer of opium poppies and one of the key trade routes of Afghan heroin was organized by contraband groups through Central Asia and Russia into Western Europe.

The Central Asians widely believed at the time that the Taliban was linked to and supported by the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which had close ties to the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), a connection that went back to the time of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The notion of alleged “US support for the Taliban” was widely used to substantiate cooperation between anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan and Russia and between Central Asian countries and Russia. In other words, the Central Asian countries perceived Russia as the only really effective ally against the Taliban and the threat that it posed to the security and stability of their countries.

After the bombing of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, the USA drastically changed its position towards the Taliban, adopting a very negative attitude toward this and other Islamist movements in the region. The Central Asian political elites, however, doubted at the time whether the USA, due to its emphasis on democracy and human rights, would be an effective ally in their own struggles against the Islamic oppositions in their own countries, which they claimed were allied with the Taliban. Russia, on the other hand, appeared to be a far better partner since the country was confronted with an Islamist problem on its own territory. The *de facto* independent Chechen republic in the Northern Caucasus harbored terrorists and religious extremists from all over Russia. During this time, Chechnya and the Taliban even established official diplomatic relations and recognized each other’s independence. Russia was the natural partner as well, because unlike the US, Russia did not make assistance dependent on democratic development and adherence to human right standards.

The Taliban’s success in Afghanistan and its support and financial assistance to Al-Qaeda affected the Islamic extremist movements in Central Asia, which started to become much more active and aggressive. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), headed by Tahir Yuldashev and Juma Namangani, became the most powerful extremist force in the region. Its aim was to establish an Islamic emirate including all Central Asian states. In the autumn of 1999, IMU military forces invaded Kyrgyzstan from Tajik territory; in the autumn of 2000, an IMU force crossed over into Uzbekistan. These events alarmed the Central Asians and Russia alike. The raids showed that countries with weak state structures and where large parts of the population were alienated from politics (which was true at this time for all the Central Asian states as well as some of Russia’s republics in the Islamic North Caucasus) could be threatened even by relatively small armed groups, which carry the potential to spread rapidly to all parts of the region. In both instances, Kyrgyzstan, other Central Asian countries, and Russia had to send armed forces and other resources to repel the military aggression.

Increasingly, Russia and the Central Asian states felt they were confronted with essentially the same threats. On 16 February 1999, for example, a series of terrorist acts occurred in the Uzbek capital of Tashkent presumably carried out by Islamist militants. Russia, at the same time, also experienced several brutal terrorist attacks in Moscow. Just as the IMU sought to invade Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, in August 1999, a group of several thousand Chechen fighters under the leadership of Shamil Basayev and Amir Hattab invaded Dagestan, a republic loyal to Moscow, from Chechen territory. Not only did Russia and the Central Asian states hold similar views about the threats presented by militant Islamist extremist groups, they also used similar methods of repression, and at times brutal military force, in order to suppress them – Russia’s second invasion of Chechnya in September 1999 being the prime example.

Forming Alliances with Russia

The cooperation between Russia and Central Asian states against the IMU and the shared threat perception regarding the Taliban and Islamist extremist groups became the basis for the formation of

a Russian-centered security system. In 1999-2002, Russia made efforts to strengthen cooperation with the Central Asian states as well as other members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The basis for this broadened cooperation in the sphere of security was the Collective Security Treaty. This treaty was signed on 15 May 1992 by Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan; Azerbaijan, Georgia and Belarus signed the following year. Yet this treaty like other CIS treaties signed in the early 1990s was empty words on paper and Russia made vigorous attempts to strengthen and broaden the alliances by creating new international organizations including Russia and the CIS states.

On 10 October 2000 Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan signed “A Treaty on Establishing the Eurasian Economic Community.” Now, after Uzbekistan’s accession in 2005, the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) has a prevailing Central Asian character. After this new economic cooperation organization emerged, it became possible to build a new collective security organization on the basis of the old CIS Collective Security Treaty. On 7 October 2002 in Chisinau (Moldova) Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan signed “The Charter of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)” and “Agreement on the Legal Status of the CSTO.” Within the framework of the CSTO, Russia offered its partners arms and military training in Russia at subsidized prices. In addition, 4000-strong Collective Rapid Response Force was created for Central Asia. The CSTO as well as the EurAsEC, especially after Uzbekistan’s return to Collective Security Treaty in 2006, have a specific Central Asian character: four out of its seven members are situated in this region. The creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) on 15 June 2001 meant the establishment of another Central Asian-focused organization. Simultaneously, members of the SCO also signed the Shanghai Convention on combating terrorism, separatism and extremism. At present, Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are members of the SCO. However, the SCO is different from the EurAsEC and the CSCTO. The SCO is not an organization designed to reintegrate post-Soviet Central Asia around Russia. The SCO has two main sponsors that finance the lion’s share of the organizations’ activities: Russia and China. The Secretariat of the SCO is situated in Beijing, and the security arm – the Regional Antiterrorist Center – is in Tashkent (Uzbekistan). The two main powers within the SCO, Russia and China, frequently differ over the nature and future direction of the organization. While China would like to see the organization form a large common economic market, Russia fears increased Chinese competition in Central Asia and a reduction of the region to a supplier of raw material for China.

The Impact of 9/11

The terrorist attacks on 9/11 abruptly changed the strategic balances in Central Asia. After this event, the Russian leadership decided that sharing influence with the USA and its allies actually served the national security interests of Russia and Central Asia.

On 7 October 2001, the US launched operations against the Taliban. These attacks included extensive bombing accompanied by special operations and support for the “Northern Alliance,” which Russia supported long before the US invasion. Connections were established through Russia’s Central Asian allies ethnically linked to “Northern Alliance” factions, especially, through United Tajik Opposition, and former mujaheddin Ahmed Shah Masud was portrayed in Russian official press as the most important ally. Russian assistance to the Northern Alliance was of great importance in enabling the USA to establish contacts with Tajik and Uzbek forces in Afghanistan opposed to the Taliban. In fact, Russia “shared” its Afghan allies with the USA. Russia’s motivation

to help the USA was very simple: it had a unique opportunity to destroy its worst enemies with American help.

At this time, however, Washington lacked sufficient military infrastructure in Central Asia to conduct operations in Afghanistan effectively. The American desire to establish military bases in Central Asia directly collided with Russian interests there. A substantial part of Russia's political elite feared that the stationing of American forces in the region would lead to the erosion of Russian influence. Moreover, Uzbekistan gave the US permission to use its territory for American military bases even before Russia agreed to this. This incident showed Moscow that it could not, even if it wanted, prevent an US military presence in Central Asia.

Since Russia's opposition to the stationing of US troops would only have led to tensions with its Central Asian allies, President Putin grudgingly decided to support the stationing of Western military forces. As a whole, however, Russia's political class viewed the arrival of US troops very negatively. Russia was afraid that the USA would try to "encircle" Russia with its military bases and to create a "cordon sanitaire" around Russian territory. Moreover, the majority of Russian experts believed that the Americans would stay in the region even after the end of the military operation.

Nevertheless, the US-led "anti-terrorist coalition" received permission from Russia (which was necessary according to the mechanism of Collective Security Treaty of the CIS) and from Central Asian countries to establish bases on the territories of four Central Asian countries (Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan). Only Turkmenistan, which had good relations with the Taliban, but otherwise maintained neutrality, did not take any part in assisting the US. Especially important for the US anti-terrorist operation were two countries: Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. In Kyrgyzstan, Washington established a military airbase at Ganci near Bishkek's international airport Manas. In Uzbekistan, the Americans established their airbase at Karshi-Khanabad (K2) in the Kashkadarya region in the south of the country.

With the stationing of American forces in Central Asia, Moscow's worst fears materialized. In Moscow's view, Russia's readiness to share influence with the USA did not serve its national interests in any tangible way. In fact, Russia saw its political influence in the region quickly eroding. Parallel to the stationing of US troops and growing Western influence in the region, some of the Central Asian states also sought to shake off their dependency on Russia. Uzbekistan, for example, whose leadership aspired to a leading political role in Central Asia, came forward with an initiative to reform the Central Asian Economic Community and to turn it into a major regional political organization without Russian participation. A respective treaty on establishing a new international body, the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO), was signed on 28 February 2002 in Almaty (Kazakhstan).

At the same time, Russia saw its interests also threatened in Turkmenistan. After an unsuccessful attempt on the life of Turkmen president Saparmurat Niyazov, all Russian-speakers were practically expelled from the country. Tajikistan, which was up to this point fully dependent on Russia for its security, also sought to lessen its dependency when it allowed the stationing of US military troops. In April 2003, Russia-Tajik talks started on the modalities of the withdrawal of Russian border guards from the Tajik-Afghan border. By 2005, Russian borderguards transferred the responsibility for securing Tajik-Afghan border to Tajik authorities and left the country. Only small groups of advisors from Russian border-guard service and FSB remain in the country (as well as Russian military base situated far from border). The absence of Russian border guards resulted in a rapid increase of drug trafficking along the route Afghanistan-Tajikistan-Russia-Western Europe.

Russia Reasserts its Influence

The hopes of Russian and Central Asian political elites for a new stability did not materialize. Already in 2003-04 the Taliban regrouped its forces and started a partisan war in the south of Afghanistan and the north-west section of Pakistan. Warlords actively involved in the drug trade controlled North Afghanistan. The aspirations of Central Asian countries to secure substantial Western assistance turned out to be unrealistic since the USA was preoccupied with Iraq. Moreover, the United States government, through various NGOs and independent foundations, actively supported political opposition groups in the individual Central Asian countries. Moreover, they continued their criticism of Central Asian regimes' human rights policies. Central Asian political elites perceived these actions as "undermining stability" and once again shifted their sympathies towards Russia.

This shift was supported by the negative reaction of Central Asian and Russian leaders to the series of "color revolutions," which several CIS states experienced during 2003–2005. The Russian political class saw in these revolutions a "Western assault" on Russian interests. Moreover, all post-Soviet political elites, including Central Asian ones, feared that they would lose power as a result of possible "color revolutions" in their respective countries. In this situation, Central Asian leaders decided that good relations with Russia would be a guarantee for preventing "color revolutions" in their countries.

Thus, there was again a change of paradigm in Russia's approach towards the region. Russia decided that preserving its interests in the region and maintaining security and stability meant increasing Russian influence and containing US influence. In order to minimize Western influence, Russia favored the increase of China's or even Iran's influence in order to counterbalance the US.

"Color revolutions" indeed reached some of the Central Asian and Caspian states, yet the outcome of these revolutions was different than in Georgia or Ukraine. In March 2005 Kyrgyz president Askar Akaev, who had earned a reputation as the most pro-Western and liberal leader in the region, was ousted during the so-called "tulip revolution." The government which replaced Akaev turned out to be much less liberal and more pro-Russian than the previous one, however.

In May 2005 there was a mass rebellion under Islamic slogans in the Uzbek city of Andijan, situated in the Ferghana valley. The Uzbek government used force against the demonstrators, which led to the killing of several hundred people. The Uzbek authorities accused US NGOs and, indirectly, the US government of organizing and supporting the rebellion. The Uzbek leadership immediately stopped its cooperation with the USA and closed down the US military base at Karshi-Khanabad. In order to put pressure on the US to withdraw their troops, Uzbekistan sought assistance from Russia and China. On 5 July 2005 during the SCO Summit in Astana a declaration calling on the USA to define the terms of their withdrawal from Uzbekistan was adopted. In response, the US House of Representatives adopted a resolution expressing concern with the attempts of Russia and China to force the USA out of the region.

In order to underline its foreign policy change, Uzbekistan in May 2005 formally cancelled its membership in GUUAM, a pro-Western regional organization which up to this point included Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Moldova, and was meant to form a counter-balance to the Russia-dominated CIS. The reshuffling of regional balances of power also affected the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO), which, as we have already mentioned, was created as an alternative to pro-Russian integration structures. During the CACO summit on 18 October 2004 in Dushanbe (Tajikistan), Russia was officially included in the organization. Later, on 7 October 2005 during the CACO's Saint-Petersburg summit, the organization merged with EurAsEC. On 25

January 2006, Uzbekistan joined EurAsEC. Finally, on 16 August 2006 Uzbekistan became also a member of the CSTO.

By the middle of 2006, Russia had achieved its key objective in the region: namely to formally include the Central Asian countries (with the exception of Turkmenistan) in Russian-dominated organizations. At the same time, it also managed to contain Western influence and efforts to establish regionally independent or pro-Western organizations.

Prospects for the Future

It is unclear to what extent Russia will manage to preserve its interests in the region. The ties in the energy sphere are still strong, but there is relatively little economic cooperation outside energy. Also, frictions between Russia and Central Asian countries continue to persist, particularly because of the uncontrolled labor inflow of Central Asians into Russia. The overall strategic situation in the region is also still very fluid. The Central Asians maintain their partnership with Russia, but they have indicated that they want to leave their foreign policy options open and are not categorically against cooperation with the West. Ideas to form regional organizations have also reemerged. In order to underline its claim for regional leadership, it was Kazakhstan which recently came forward with the idea to form such an organization – and Kyrgyzstan has already indicated it would be ready to join. Askar Akaev supported the idea before the ‘tulip revolution’ and new Kyrgyz authorities continue to follow this policy since oil-rich Kazakhstan is now perceived as a major potential investor.

About the author

Andrei A. Kazantsev was born in Turkmenistan in 1974, and was a citizen of this country until 1996. Finished Russian State University for the Humanities (RGGU) (Moscow) as a historian and philologist. In 1999 defended PhD in political science at the same University. Worked as a lecturer in RGGU, and, simultaneously, as a researcher in Vyacheslav Igrunov’s Institute for the Humanities and Political Studies. Also was an analyst in liberal party ‘Yabloko’. Present position – senior research fellow (the Center for Euro-Atlantic Security) and lecturer at Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) of Russian Foreign Ministry. Spheres of interest - Central Asian and Russian politics, energy and security aspects.