RUSSIA'S POLICY IN CENTRAL ASIA DURING THE PUTIN ERA

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ABSTRACT

The period immediately after the end of the Cold War (1991–1999) is often viewed as post-imperial and marked by Russia's loss of the areas it once dominated. During Boris Yeltsin's presidency, Moscow's foreign policy was largely driven by a Euro-Atlanticist concept that put the post-Soviet countries, including those in Central Asia, on the periphery of its interests. In contrast, Vladimir Putin after his accession to power adopted a "multipolar world" concept of foreign policy, envisaging the Kremlin's dominance in the Eurasian heartland. This article employs empirical studies of cause-effect relationships that discuss the evolution of Russia's foreign policy orienteers. In particular, it looks into the question of what Vladimir Putin aimed to achieve in Central Asia and whether he managed to accomplish his goals. The article argues that the geopolitical considerations are the main determinants of Russia's approach to Central Asia, with other factors like security and policies towards the Russian community being distinctive to each state separately.

Key Words: Russia, Central Asia, multipolar world, foreign policy, Vladimir Putin.

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Eurasian Research Journal
July 2019
Vol. 1, No. 2.

INTRODUCTION

On May 7, 2018, Vladimir Putin was sworn in for the fourth term as president of the Russian Federation, and by the end of his new term in 2024, he will have ruled for 16 years, in effect making him one of the longest serving rulers of the world's largest country. Russian foreign policy during Putin's presidency, like any other aspect of life of the country, has gone through considerable changes. Although Central Asian states have always been of importance for Russia in terms of being the source of challenges (terrorism, drugs, and extremist ideas) and opportunities (an area of Russian integration initiatives), the way Russia approaches them have certainly changed under his rule. To illustrate, the period immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union was marked by the virtual neglect of Central Asia by Moscow, leading to the erosion of its influence and the subsequent geopolitical vacuum in this part of the world. However, this trend was reversed as a consequence of President Vladimir Putin's arrival to power in 2000. Under his rule, the Kremlin adopted a more active stance towards Central Asia which resulted in two policy shifts: (a) the reintegration of Central Asian states and Russia within the institutional context, and (b) the strengthening of bilateral arrangements with each state separately. Putin's tenure has seen a number of integrations launched and strengthened. The most important Russian initiatives cover areas of the economy (the Eurasian Economic Union), defense (the Collective Security Treaty Organization) and politics (Shanghai Cooperation Organization), thereby allowing Russia not only to regain its influence but also to expand it. The bilateral agreements include: the establishment of a military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, a series of bilateral 'friendship treaties' that Russia has signed with all the Central Asian republics and the establishment of a number of major joint projects (approx. 7,500), mainly in the energy sphere. Considering the fact that the political structure of Russia is largely personified in the president who has the ultimate decision-making power, it seems worth reviewing Russian policy towards Central Asia over the twenty years since Putin first came to power.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

Russia's foreign policy under Vladimir Putin's rule has been the subject of great interest for IR analysts and scholars alike, with special emphasis on its relations with the West. It is quite common to approach the subject through the lens of realist concepts of 'dominance' and 'hegemony'. However, since the annexation of Crimea, domestic and cultural-institutional factors have also started to come to the surface.

At the same time, a relatively small number of experts have studied the issue in the context of Central Asia. There is also hardly any literature that divides Russian foreign policy in Central Asia into periods. Although scholars agree that Russian foreign policy in Central Asia went through an evolution from indifference to intensive cooperation, the dynamics behind such changes are often overlooked. Therefore, this paper addresses the following core questions: What did Moscow under Vladimir Putin aim to achieve in Central Asia, and did it manage to accomplish these goals? To discuss these issues the article will be divided into two broad sections: 1) the place of Central Asia in Russian foreign policy, and

Eurasian Research Journal
July 2019
Vol. 1, No. 2

2) the main instruments in achieving Russia's strategic goals.

Since it is restricted to a certain period and is a case study requiring a multilevel interpretive analysis based on empirical studies of cause-effect relationships, the interpreted policy that forms the basis for this work is in the form of available published and online secondary sources such as books, journals, articles, research papers, etc. To answer the research question regarding the role of factor(s) leading to a policy shift, this research also employs a study of some primary sources which are available.

THE PLACE OF CENTRAL ASIA IN RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY THINKING

Background Study: Russia's Central Asia Policy under Yeltsin

At the end of the Cold War, Russia as a successor state of the Soviet Union lost its superpower status and its direct rule over the former Soviet republics. The first years after the collapse of the Soviet Union saw Russia in the midst of turmoil making its foreign policy subordinate to domestic considerations. The new government of the Russian Federation led by President Boris Yeltsin and Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar embarked on a difficult process of transformation in the economic, political, and social realms. Yeltsin's initial years of the presidency (1990–1996) were driven by a Euro-Atlanticist concept of foreign policy declared by the Russian Foreign Minister, Andrei Kozyrev, who pursued the goal of making the country part of the Euro-Atlantic 'family' (membership in G7, CSCE, etc.) and creating an environment/relations that would make undertaking urgent reforms successful (Mesbahi, 1993). As a result of Russia turning westward, its leadership adopted an almost indifferent approach to the post-Soviet countries, including those in Central Asia.

There exist numerous, sometimes contradictory, explanations that look into the rationale behind this particular policy approach. One line of thought suggests that at that time a paternalistic belief prevailed among Russian authorities. According to it, Central Asia had no choice but to rely on Russia, and hence it did not have to make any effort to remain appealing to them since, in their view, Moscow still retained the right to interfere and oversee post-Soviet space at any point in time if needed (Bowker and Ross, 1999). Others, however, maintain that Russia in line with its Euro-Atlanticist concept viewed itself as an integral part of the civilized (Western) world while, in the words of Kozyrev, "immature" Central Asian states which "belong to another world" presented a hurdle in Moscow's plans to undertake urgent reforms. In other words, the newly established Russian technocratic government held an opinion that the implementation of liberal reforms might come under threat from newly established states of Central Asia whose leaders (Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan, Nursultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan, Saparmurat Niyazov in Turkmenistan) were all the first secretaries of their republics' respective Communist parties before 1991. Hence, they maintained strong linkages with the Soviet past that made them potential supporters of Communist retaliation (Zvyagelskaya, 2009). As a result, getting rid of the 'political ballast' was necessary. Whatever the reasons were, it is clear that Central Asian states were not the ones who did separate from Russia, and, in fact,

Eurasian Research Journal
July 2019
Vol. 1, No. 2.

Kazakh President Nazarbayev back then was seen as "the most enthusiastic defender of a revitalization of the USSR" and at first floated various initiatives to boost reintegration between Russia and the countries of the region (Olcott, 1996), but it was Moscow that did not show any activity in the region until the mid-1990s, leaving them to their fate.

As a result of Euro-Atlanticist foreign policy, the Russian hegemonic position in the region was undermined. The Russian neglect of Central Asia was perceived by the five states of the region and other regional and extra-regional players as a signal to act. These years were marked by the de-Sovietization/de-Russification in their domestic politics that put an end to Russia's role of being 'the only point of reference' with the process of re-Islamization gaining ground (Górecki, 2014). Turkey, Iran, and the United States were the most active players in responding to the so-called geopolitical vacuum left by Moscow, signing a number of agreements in various fields. As a result, apart from Russia, the region also inclined towards the West (e.g., signing the NATO Partnership for Peace Program in 1994 and a number of joint ventures exploring newly found significant hydrocarbon reserves particularly in the territories of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan), Muslim countries (Turkey, Iran), and China. The strengthening of these ties back then, however, was viewed by Russian authorities as a normal development within the rights of newly established sovereign states.

With the appointment of Yevgeny Primakov as Minister of Foreign Affairs in 1996, however, Russian foreign policy priorities shifted from West to East. This subsequently led Moscow to pay more attention to developing cooperation with the Central Asian states. It was Primakov who declared Russia as one center of the *multipolar world*, a center around which its neighbors should revolve. This shift is underpinned by the belief that Russia's interests are better served when the security and predominance within its traditional areas of influence are ensured. Change in attitude went hand in hand with the growing threat of Islamic radicals from within (Chechen War 1994–1996) and outside of Russia (Taliban seizure of control in Afghanistan in 1996, ongoing civil war in Tajikistan, etc.) making Russia realize the flaws of its previous approach. Moreover, the largely failed implementation of "shock therapy" advised by the IMF and the United States took a heavy toll on its economy, Russia's GDP between 1992–1996 fell by 37 percent; this fueled suspicion towards the West. Therefore, if the tactic of the Euro-Atlanticist was to rely on the West to attract its accumulated capital and experience for Russian transformation, Primakov's doctrine, in contrast, upheld the idea of reasserting Russian statehood and recovering lost economic ties with its neighboring countries, including Central Asia (the trade turnover between Russia and the region experienced a sharp decline in the period between 1992–1995 falling from $60 billion to $6.7 billion). More important was a paradigm shift away from considering foreign policy as a mere extension of domestic factors towards viewing it as an important element in continuing Russia's historical great power status. This marks the return of a realist approach to foreign policy where power and security play a central role away from a 'utopian' ideal in which Westernization is idealized. This shift in approach coupled with the growing presence of external players in post-Soviet space has led some researchers to consider this as the starting point for a "New Great Game" in Central Asia (Smith, 1996).

Eurasian Research Journal
July 2019
Vol. 1, No. 2

Overall, Russia's foreign policy during Yeltsin's presidency (1991–1999), which encompassed almost a decade, was characterized as being inconsistent and contradictory, and so many consider it unsuccessful. On the one hand, it failed to achieve its initial aspiration to become an integral part of the Euro-Atlantic community, and on the other hand, Russia lost its dominant position in Central Asia. To illustrate, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan largely distanced themselves from Russia. Tashkent left the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Collective Security Treaty in 1999 and became a member of GUAM states (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova, hence transforming it to GUUAM), while Turkmenistan adopted a policy of neutrality that has successfully kept it separate from Moscow. At the same time, it should be noted that Moscow managed to restore peace in the Tajik Civil War (1992–1997) and retained its monopoly on the transit of hydrocarbons from the resource-rich Central Asian states.

Central Asia in Russia's foreign policy priorities (2000 to the present day)

Vladimir Putin's accession to power was a turning point for Russia's foreign policy in general and, in particular, towards Central Asia. The concept of the "multipolar world", introduced by Yevgeny Primakov, became a cornerstone of this. The period since the collapse of the Soviet Union till the beginning of Putin's arrival to power in 2000 is often viewed as post-imperial, marked by Russia's lost position in international relations. In contrast, throughout the entire following period under Putin and the years under Dmitri Medvedev as a president (2008-2012), during which Russia's foreign policy line has not changed significantly, the Kremlin arguably has been demonstrating neo-imperialistic tendencies marked by efforts to bind the countries near its borders (Central Asia and the Eastern European part of the Soviet Union) to Moscow with the ultimate goal of establishing a multipolar world, thereby reconstructing the unipolar domination of the U.S. in the 1990s, where Russia is one of the power centers (Korinman and Laughland, 2008). From Moscow's perspective there are three global centers—the United States, China, and Russia—with each exerting power in their respective 'spheres of influence' or 'spheres of interest'. This belief envisages the United States leading the West, China dominating the East, and Russia overseeing the Eurasian heartland. The assertiveness in international relations has been facilitated by an improving economic situation thanks to an incremental rise in world prices for the main Russian export products, particularly oil that went from $27 per barrel in 2000 to $94 at the end of Putin's second presidential term in 2008. Growing economic resources resolved numerous domestic problems which were the main focus of the Kremlin's attention in the early 1990s, thereby opening the way for a more proactive foreign policy.

Although Putin clearly regrets the collapse of the Soviet Union, calling it in 2005 "the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the century", it is argued that he has no intention of restoring the USSR but rather wishes to ensure the maximum influence possible over the foreign and security policies of the ex-Soviet republics (Lo, 2015). Foreign policy concepts (FPC) and the annual presidential address to the federal assembly over the past two decades have presented similar arguments that emphasize engaging

Eurasian Research Journal
July 2019
Vol. 1, No. 2.

in mutually beneficial cooperation with neighbouring states whilst taking into account Russia's 'legitimate interests'. At the same time the desire of West, according to the 2016 FPC, to regain their dominant position by imposing their views on others is leading to turbulence and instability in the world. Any perceived NATO expansion therefore in Russia's sphere of influence is seen as a blow to its interests. The fact that Georgia and Ukraine turned westward made Moscow wary of the same happening in Central Asia. Therefore, the main priority in the region is to prevent the Central Asian republics from aligning themselves with foreign powers and to integrate the maximum number of them into various Russian-led projects, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). This is also reflected in the every FPC since 2008 that placed emphasis on cooperation in the neighborhood through the Russian-led regional bodies (Frear and Mazepus, 2017). In this context, the integration is viewed as a way of maintaining Russia's position as a global power and preventing other actors from expanding their influence within its sphere of influence. Another important tactic used by the Kremlin is to avoid taking sides in sensitive regional issues (water and borders issues in Fergana Valley; ethnic tensions as illustrated by its hesitancy to settle inter-ethnic conflict in Kyrgyzstan during 2010) to maintain its role as a regional mediator (Cooley and Laruelle, 2013).

The Kremlin recognizes its inability to exclude any interactions altogether, and hence it aims to push cooperation with foreign powers towards economic cooperation rather than the realms of politics and security (Lo, 2015). That being said, Moscow largely favors seeing the predominance of Chinese economic investments over Western ones since Beijing demonstrates only limited ambition in the region while acknowledging Russia as a security provider (Lo, 2015). Moreover, until now Chinese investments have largely been made in the energy sphere (e.g., the Central Asian Gas Pipeline); this does not undermine Moscow's plan for keeping Central Asian countries dependent on the transit of their natural resources to the West (75% of the oil exported from Kazakhstan is transported via Russia). The flow of natural resources in an eastern direction does not compete with Russian energy supplies to Europe—a market Russia wants to dominate. However, Moscow's approach to prioritizing the oil and gas sector to ensure its own energy interests rather than establish full-fledged economic ties with the Central Asian states is often criticized by observers as it pushes countries to seek other economic partners (Paramonov and Strokov, 2008). In fact, the value of Central Asia's trade with China in 2010 exceeded the value of its trade with Russia.

Although the region's importance to Russia is frequently viewed in geopolitical terms in which it is argued to be an area of its relations (rivalry and limited co-operation) with major global players, other factors should not be overlooked, including security anxieties. This is because Central Asia serves as a kind of buffer zone against the Islamic threat emanating specifically from Afghanistan and the Middle East, and concerns related to the growth of ethno-nationalist ideas that may threaten Russia's cultural dominance. It can be argued that if the geopolitical considerations are principal determinants of Russia's approach to Central Asia, other factors like security and policies towards the Russian community are distinctive for each individual state depending on the factors on the ground.

To illustrate this, the policies towards Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are mainly

Eurasian Research Journal
July 2019
Vol. 1, No. 2

guided by a security rationale to contain the spread of religious extremism, as well as the smuggling of narcotics, weapons, and human trafficking from Afghanistan, part of which supplies terrorist organizations operating in North Caucasus. According to the statistics, Afghanistan is responsible for more than 90% of the world's illicit opium and heroin production, and 15% to 20% of drugs produced in Afghanistan are smuggled through the territory of Central Asia to Russia, Eastern Europe, and China. Russia's most important instrument is the military presence in the form of the Kant air base in Kyrgyzstan and the 201st ground troop base in Tajikistan with a total number of 9,000 military personnel.

This particular issue presents a dilemma for Putin who has to reconcile considerations related to security and geopolitics. Although there is a clear understanding that Russian security interests are served by the presence of U.S. troops within Afghanistan—since strengthening the borders with Afghanistan is not an answer, and something else must be done beyond the borders—it nevertheless pressured Kyrgyzstan to terminate the lease for the American base/transit center at Manas in 2014, even though Russia initially supported the coalition's intervention in Afghanistan. At the same time, Russian negotiated with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan the extension of its troop deployments in these countries by over ten years. This, in general, indicates that currently Moscow prioritizes geopolitical aims over security objectives since the presence of the U.S. military changes the geopolitical map in the Eurasian heartland (Lo, 2015).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, almost 25 million ethnic Russians suddenly found themselves effectively living abroad; this made them the second-biggest diaspora in the world after the Chinese. Although during the 1990s there was a mass migration of ethnic Russians to Russia, their presence in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan remains significant. The presence of these large communities provides Russia with the advantage of being able to exercise soft power, including dominance in the information space of Russian and local Russian-speaking media that influences domestic and foreign policies in these countries. This is in sharp contrast to Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, where Russians are only a small minority, thus allowing them to pursue foreign policy more independently from Russia. The Putin government therefore attaches great importance to the Russian diaspora in Russian foreign policy. The "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation" in 2013 declared that Russia would protect the rights and interests of Russian citizens and compatriots living abroad. The Russo-Georgian War in 2008, the conflict in the eastern part of Ukraine, and the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation indicates that the Kremlin will take a hostile attitude if an aggressive campaign is adopted in these states to promote the interests of the titular group at the expense of Russians and Russian-speaking people beyond its borders (Sencerman, 2018).

All in all, it can be argued that Russia under Putin based its foreign policy towards Central Asia on implementing both "hard" and "soft" power mechanisms, and establishing Russian military bases in the region. These mechanisms included promoting the integration of these countries in Russian-led integration projects, energy cooperation with the Central Asian countries and cultural ties with the considerable Russian minorities in these states which largely consisted of the influence of Russia's mass media over their information space.

Eurasian Research Journal
July 2019
Vol. 1, No. 2.

INSTRUMENTS IN ACHIEVING RUSSIA'S STRATEGIC GOALS

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia needed to adjust to new geostrategic realities and to find new ways of promoting its interests in its immediate periphery. The previous section attempted to explore the question of why Central Asia matters, and it concluded that Russia's most important goal is to maintain its influence there and to restrict the influence of other actors. This part of the article will explore the main instruments at its disposal to project its dominance; these can be divided into fostering multilateral diplomacy and bilateral relationships.

Central Asian states participate in various supraregional structures that are created by the Russian Federation at the expense of intraregional integration. As a result, they all developed closer ties with Moscow than among themselves. For Russia, regional organizations have been about advancing its geopolitical and geoeconomic goals, a balancing act against American unilateralism. The integration of the post-Soviet area is a top priority issue in Russian foreign policy. Therefore, some have even argued that the CSTO and the EEU perform roughly analogous roles to the Warsaw Pact and COMECON (Council of Mutual Economic Assistance) during the Cold War (Lo, 2015). At present, when the conflict with the West is escalating, Moscow aims to break the isolation from the West by developing stronger ties with non-Western States. At the same time, despite its desire to cover the entire Central Asia, the outreach is limited to only three Central Asian countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are absent from organizations in which Russia's position is dominant.

Perhaps the main vehicle to reach this objective is the CSTO, established in 2003 that provides Russia with the legitimacy to be a regional power. Russia dominates the CSTO, whose members also include Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The Russian Foreign Policy Concept describes it as "one of the key elements of the current security framework in the post-Soviet space and in the adjoining regions". According to its statute, its member states consult and coordinate their positions on foreign policy issues and regional security problems. More importantly, in December 2011, the leaders of the organization's member states agreed that third-party military bases could only be deployed in their territories following consultations with the other partners. At present, taking into account recent military exercises that took place under the auspices of CSTO to increase the practical skills of the military contingents of CSTO member states in conducting peacekeeping operations, it has been speculated that Moscow is using these exercises to get some of its allies to deploy peacekeeping operations in Syria or Ukraine. However, both the leaders of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have denied these allegations.

During Putin's era the CIS transformed into a genuinely collective multinational entity. At the same time, there were several setbacks with Tashkent leaving the organization in 2009. Moreover, the unresolved border issues in the Ferghana Valley between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, members of the CSTO, from a purely legal perspective present a potential threat to the organization as there is no definite clause or article in the treaty that envisages a plan of action in the case of a conflict between its members (Baizakova, 2017).

In the economic sphere, Putin launched the Eurasian Economic Union

Eurasian Research Journal
July 2019
Vol. 1, No. 2

(EEU) on January 1, 2015, the final stage of an economic integration process which started in 2000. The establishment of the EEU was preceded by the establishment of the Customs Union (January 1, 2010) and the Common Economic Space (January 1, 2012). The new organization, which unlike its predecessor has legal personality, consists of Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan. Critics of the EEU argue that Russia is using it as a foreign policy tool. According to this proposition, Moscow will have the opportunity to shape the economic relations of its member states with outsiders and isolate them from other potential partners. As one expert put it, Russia uses the EEU to allegedly "strengthen its influence (in Central Asia)," avoid "the integration of the countries of the region with the West, and contain China's growing influence" (Duarte, 2017).

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is another tool to contain the intrusion of any global power, namely China. The SCO has grown from the Shanghai Five format, initiated in the 1990s to settle border and territorial disputes between China and its newly independent Central Asian neighbors. As it is often seen as a Chinese and Moscow led union, the SCO is a vehicle for Beijing and Moscow to jointly coordinate their interests in Central Asia. For China, the organization initially served as a tool to enter into the post-Soviet space without disrupting Russian political and military dominance. Since 2011, Russian policymakers, aware of a growing Chinese influence in Central Asia and the geopolitical balance shifting in favor of Beijing, have been actively advocating for the expansion of the SCO by way of inviting India, a country with which it has traditionally close ties. Therefore, it seems that from the Kremlin's point of view the accession of India as a full member to the SCO shall constrain Beijing by binding it to the institutional obligations while the presence of another great power and main Chinese geostrategic rival in the organization would restore the balance of power. Although China initially resisted the idea of enlargement, it has changed its position due to two factors. First, the current behavior of Beijing suggests its weak commitment to the multilateralism, i.e., in promoting its interests, China avoids multilateral forums where it can be constrained and instead prefers to use bilateral diplomacy. To illustrate, China's active engagement to revive the Silk Road project is arguably the result of Moscow's resistance to establish a free-trade area (FTA) under the SCO framework, an agenda that had been actively promoted by China in 2010. Second, the accession of Pakistan (its close ally) and India is likely to increase the clout of the organization, at least on paper, while allowing for the status quo between Moscow and Beijing to be maintained.

BILATERAL RELATIONS

For most of the time since their independence, the Central Asian countries have been ruled by presidents who were former communist leaders. As rightly pointed out, the present leaders were born and raised between the 1950s and 1970s, educated in the Russian language, and have strong ties with Russia (economic, cultural, interpersonal, etc.), which affect their political preferences (Górecki, 2014). This serves as Russia's most important instrument. For example, without the personal involvement of Nazarbayev, the Eurasian Economic Union (and its predecessor, the Cus-

Eurasian Research Journal
July 2019
Vol. 1, No. 2.

toms Union) would not have got off the ground, while Putin's personal support for President Almazbek Atambayev, and the latter's dependence on it, is "the single most important factor in Moscow's resurgent influence in that country" (Lo, 2015).

This is Russia's greatest advantage over the other players active in the region. However, over time, this advantage will naturally weaken. Taking into account the fact that Nazarbayev, who will not remain in office forever, is central to maintaining good relations with Russia represents a source of vulnerability for Moscow. It is predicted that any successor of Nazarbayev is likely to be more "Kazakh", and thus Kazakh nationalism may gain solid ground. Currently, Russians have an exceptionally high desire to emigrate; in 2013, 60% of ethnic Russians declared they would be willing to leave the country if, in their opinion, the situation deteriorated, for example, due to intensifying Kazakh nationalism and a change in government (Jarosiewicz, 2016). Some even provide examples of worst-case scenarios like the Tajik civil war and the more recent violence in Southern Kyrgyzstan (Bechain and Kevlihan, 2013). The Russian president's argument at the time of the youth forum by Lake Seliger in August 2014 was that it is Nazarbayev who set up the state of Kazakhstan who is alarming and may signal a threat to the state's functioning if in a post-Nazarbayev era an aggressive campaign to promote the interests of the titular group is implemented. Therefore, one might expect Russia to follow closely any power transitions and ethnonationalistic policies in these republics.

Eurasian
Research
Journal
July 2019
Vol. 1, No. 2

CONCLUSION

This paper has divided post-Soviet Russian foreign policy in Central Asia into two stages: the period of indifference (1991–1999) and the period of return (1999–present). Russia's influence has strongly eroded during the first years since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The trend has been largely reversed as a result of Putin's arrival to power upon which a number of integrations have been launched and strengthened. Each stage has been discussed in detail in order to portray the characteristics and focuses of Russian foreign policy during these periods.

As the paper has illustrated, dominance in this region is important for Putin from a geopolitical perspective as Russia's position as a major power depends on this. However, the author argues that Russia under his rule has been successful only in expelling Western powers; securing its sphere over all of Central Asia proved to be a more difficult task. In Central Asia, Russia's relations are the strongest in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan who are members of the organizations supported by Moscow. At the same time, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are geopolitically removed from Russia. Turkmenistan declared a strategy of 'permanent neutrality' in 1994 that was recognized by the United Nations in 1995. Under Karimov's rule, Uzbekistan pursued a self-reliance policy in international affairs, going back and forth from Russia, rejoining the CSTO, and leaving it again in 2012. Uzbekistan did not join EAEU or sign any free-trade agreement. Largely with the arrival of Mirziyoyev, it is likely that Uzbekistan will continue to adhere to the policy of remaining free of any politico-military coalitions.

In the short-run Russia seems likely to remain the most prominent external power in Central Asia given its record of intensive bilateral and multilateral engagement in the region in the form of security cooperation and variety of investment projects. However, as China's role and significance grows steadily throughout Central Asia, the question arises how Russia would react if Beijing's engagement shifts from largely an economic sphere to encompass political and even security realms.

Eurasian Research Journal
July 2019
Vol. 1, No. 2.

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