



**FPC Briefing: Russia's changing role in Central Asia - the post-Ukraine context, and implications**  
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**Background**

Russia's place in the world is a critical factor in contemporary global affairs. The way in which Russia engages with its former Soviet neighbours and how they respond will shape the security landscape in Eurasia, and has wider ramifications for international relations and the balance of global power.<sup>1</sup> Russia's relations with Ukraine, and in particular its intervention in Ukraine in 2014 through the *de facto* annexation of Crimea and support for rebel fighters in eastern Ukraine, have dominated that landscape and the current strategic agenda, and will continue to do so. Central Asian states have looked on with close attention and concern as events have unfolded in and on Ukraine in 2014 and 2015. It remains to be seen whether the actions Moscow has taken there are indicators of future attempts to reassert its influence elsewhere in the neighbourhood, and notably in Central Asia, or whether they mark some kind of watershed and are signs of Moscow's weakening position - which of course poses its own set of challenges.<sup>2</sup>

A report highlighted by the Foreign Policy Centre in 2013, on Russia's role and interests in Central Asia (CA), provided some of the historical background on Moscow's approach towards the region and identified several features in Russia's current bilateral relations with the CA countries.<sup>3</sup> The first was that Moscow has found it hard to come to terms with its post-Soviet role – the perception and indeed reality of its diminished influence in neighbouring countries that were formerly part of the USSR. Over the past 25 years, relations between Russia and the five Central Asian states have fluctuated. Nevertheless, as emphasised in the 2013 report, obituaries about the demise of Russia's place in the region would be premature. And developments over the subsequent 18 months suggest that Russia's desire to strengthen its hand in Central Asia is intensifying.

The earlier report assessed that in what is a highly complex and changing context, Russia seemed likely to remain for now the most prominent external power in Central Asia, in terms both of its high-level political relationships and its security co-operation in the region. However, Moscow has slowly and reluctantly come to terms with its new role in the region, recognising that it is now one player among others. Above all, it is China's role and significance as an economic actor that continues to grow steadily and relentlessly throughout Central Asia. This is evident in the fact that, as of 2010, Russia was no longer the number one trading partner of the five Central Asia countries as a whole; and specifically in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, Russia has been overtaken by China.

The countries in Central Asia face a number of challenges. These include a range of internal threats to stability, whether through weak and corrupt governments, divided societies, drug-trafficking and its corrosive effects on state institutions, radicalised groups and widespread poverty. Added to this, Russia's moves on Ukraine and their repercussions are an important part of the backdrop when considering Russia's role in Central Asia, with ramifications for stability in the region. Given the reverberations from Ukraine and the damage done to Russia's standing in the international arena, as well as shifting attitudes in its

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper Russia is meant to denote not so much the Russian population as the people who make decisions in Russia.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) – Briefing Memo, 1 January 2015; and Stephen Blank, Russia's Waning Soft Power in Central Asia, *The Diplomat*, January 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/01/russias-waning-soft-power-in-central-asia/>

<sup>3</sup> See FPC briefing, Assessing Russia's role in Central Asia, September 2013, <http://fpc.org.uk/articles/630> and carried as part of a broader study by Saferworld, October 2013



neighbourhood, what are the implications specifically for Russia's engagement and strategy in Central Asia?

One reason for assessing these implications is to test whether Russia's approach to Central Asia in 2015 and beyond will mark a significant shift, with new factors coming into play. Or will it essentially remain in the mould of what has evolved during the period since 2000 when Vladimir Putin came to power? <sup>4</sup> That is to say, an approach towards Central Asia that has been characterised as navigating the murky waters of 'managed instability', preferring to deal with neighbouring states that are weak enough to be influenced but strong enough to stay afloat. <sup>5</sup> Others would argue that Russia's approach is changing and will continue to change and acquire a new intensity. Quite apart from factoring in the impact of Ukraine events, circumstances in and beyond Central Asia are arguably driving a more hands-on approach by Moscow towards the region.

In either case – 'business as usual' or a new focus driven by a shifting landscape - the fact remains that Central Asia is critical to President Putin's aim of establishing Russia as the leading player in the Eurasia heartland. However, it faces a number of challenges to this position, which include both internal and external factors. At home, a decade and a half after President Putin came to power, Russia finds itself in mid-2015 at a particularly challenging juncture: economically, as a result of the collapse in global oil prices and of Western sanctions; geopolitically, from the confrontation with the West over Russian actions in Ukraine; and politically, with President Putin - although still very popular in Russia - the focus of growing criticism. Meanwhile, there is the external prospect of China translating its powerful economic influence in Central Asia into a broader strategic presence in the region. <sup>6</sup>

### **The economic context**

The important place to start in updating any assessment of Russia's role in Central Asia – both in terms of how it is viewed and what its objectives are – is the economy. In short, the Russian economy is in a critical situation and that could all too easily worsen, despite some less downbeat assessments of how the economy might fare. The economic challenges stem from a combination of factors, including: accumulated problems from a failure to address structural reforms; the effects of the dramatic fall in oil prices; and the impact of Western sanctions. The problems are deep and rather suggest this is a narrative that has far from played out.

During 2014, the value of the Russian rouble depreciated by over 45% against the US dollar and other leading currencies. <sup>7</sup> Capital flight from Russia hit record levels in 2014, with a net outflow of \$151.5 billion. According to data released by the Central Bank in Moscow, more money left Russia on balance in the final quarter of 2014 than in the whole of 2013, as the rouble's collapse sucked Russia into its worst economic crisis since the 1990s. <sup>8</sup> That partly reflects the havoc wrought on the Russian economy by falling oil prices and western sanctions.

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<sup>4</sup> Foreign Policy Centre briefing, op cit; and Saferworld report "Russia's role and interests in Central Asia", Oct 2013, [Russia's role and interests in Central Asia\\_Saferworld](#)

<sup>5</sup> Jozef Lang, Nicu Popescu "Central Asia: the view from Russia", EUISS, Jan 2015, Issue Alert, <http://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/detail/article/central-asia-the-view-from-russia/>

<sup>6</sup> Bobo Lo, Frontiers New and Old: Russia's Policy in Central Asia, IFRI, January 2015, Russie.Nei.Visions No 82, <http://www.ifri.org/en/publications/enotes/russieneivisions/frontiers-new-and-old-russias-policy-central-asia>

<sup>7</sup> Howard Amos, Russia's Rouble Speeds Past 58 to U.S. Dollar as Devaluation Accelerates, The Moscow Times, December 2014, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/ruble-hits-yet-another-low-at-market-opening/513191.html>

<sup>8</sup> The Times, 19 January 2015.



As one of the world's largest oil producers and with a poorly diversified economy, Russia is particularly exposed to the dramatic fall in the oil price. Having fallen to below US\$ 50 per barrel in March 2015, the actual oil price represents half the figure that was projected in Russia's budget forecast for 2015. Sanctions imposed by western nations as a result of Russian actions in Ukraine in 2014 have exacerbated the economic challenges; though they are not the chief cause of the downturn in the Russian economy, which stems from wider factors, as noted above. Adding to the overall pressures as both cause and effect, inflation in Russia has been running at around 17%.

The estimated figure for capital flight from Russia in 2014 was nearly three times higher than the \$61bn that Russia lost in 2013, and also surpassed the previous high set during the global crisis of 2008. Russia reportedly used more than one-fifth of the country's Central Bank reserves in 2014 in attempts to prop up the rouble on international markets, drawing heavily on its foreign currency reserves.<sup>9</sup> The Central Bank also raised its interest rates six times during 2014 in an attempt to halt or at least slow the decline in the rouble. In 2015, the ratings agencies Fitch, Standard & Poor's, and Moody's, all downgraded Russian sovereign debt to just above junk status, which is likely to further reduce foreign investment.<sup>10</sup>

These factors have combined to have a marked impact on projections for Russia's economic growth. In mid-January 2015, the World Bank downgraded its forecast for Russia's economy to a 2.9 per cent contraction in 2015 (having predicted in December 2014 that it would shrink by only 0.7 per cent).<sup>11</sup> The bleak reality is that in the first quarter of 2015 Russian GDP contracted by 4%, as a result of falling oil prices, economic and financial sanctions, flawed policies, and capital flight.

### **Economic impacts on Central Asia**

What does this changing economic context mean for relations between Russia and the Central Asian states? Although none has been immune to the effects, the sharp fall in the rouble in 2014 and early 2015 has hit Central Asian States in different ways. The states can be divided into hydrocarbon exporters (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan), and oil and gas importers (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan). Self-evidently, oil exporters like Kazakhstan - albeit with its middle-income and emerging market status - are also having to absorb the recent sharp drop in oil prices, which has slowed its own growth projections.

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<sup>9</sup> Andre Tartar and Anna Andrianova, Russia Seen Spending Further \$70 Billion to Fight Ruble Rout, Bloomberg, December 2014, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-12-16/russia-seen-spending-further-70-billion-to-fight-ruble-rout>, The Central Bank's foreign reserves include both reserves used to support the rouble and foreign currency assigned to the two sovereign wealth funds (the Reserve Fund and the National Wealth Fund). The reserves in the first category, which before the crisis stood at around \$510 billion, were estimated to have fallen to below \$400 billion by December 2014 (the first time the reserves had gone below that figure since August 2009). The Russian government did not spend much from the sovereign wealth funds in 2014, but that is changing in 2015 and the deficit will be partly covered by drawing down the Reserve Fund, which had \$88bn in it at the end of 2014. For comments on an earlier version of the report, the author is grateful to Alex Nice.

<sup>10</sup> Kira Zavyalova and Jason Bush, Russian central bank seen holding rates for now despite economic slump: Reuters poll, Reuters, January 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/01/29/us-russia-crisis-economy-idUSKBN0L21PV20150129> AFP, Russia's debt downgraded to junk by Moody's, The Guardian, February 2015,

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/21/russias-debt-downgraded-junk-moodys>

<sup>11</sup> Russia's downgrade deepens political crisis with Europe, Financial Times, January 2015, [http://www.ft.com/cms/s/e62dada8-a591-11e4-ad35-00144feab7de,Authorised=false.html?i\\_location=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ft.com%2Fcms%2Fs%2F0%2Fe62dada8-a591-11e4-ad35-00144feab7de.html%3Fsiteedition%3DUk&siteedition=uk&i\\_referer=#axzz3eOs6VWHI](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/e62dada8-a591-11e4-ad35-00144feab7de,Authorised=false.html?i_location=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ft.com%2Fcms%2Fs%2F0%2Fe62dada8-a591-11e4-ad35-00144feab7de.html%3Fsiteedition%3DUk&siteedition=uk&i_referer=#axzz3eOs6VWHI)



The region's two poorest countries, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, are already in dire financial straits.<sup>12</sup> Tajikistan's per capita GDP is less than one-tenth of that in Kazakhstan, and it is the poorest of all the former Soviet states, its already weak economy further undermined by poor financial management. Since Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan depend on Russia as a major source of investment and remittances, the impact of Russia's economic down-turn has been particularly hard on these two countries. Russia's slowdown is felt through the reduced volumes of cash remittances sent home by migrant workers. Tajikistan tops global tables for the highest dependence on remittances, which account for around 50 per cent of the country's GDP; while for Kyrgyzstan, the figure is 30 per cent of GDP. The fallout from the depreciation of the rouble is all too plain: it buys fewer dollars to send home. Moreover, the informal job opportunities available to Central Asian migrant workers in Russia have diminished considerably in a generally worsening economic climate.

The weakening of the Russian rouble is also putting pressure on local currencies across the region, feeding quickly into inflation. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have again been particularly hard hit, with the weakening rouble pushing down local currencies, sometimes by double-digit figures. Central banks in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have dipped into limited reserves to ease their currencies' slides. Nevertheless, local currencies have followed the rouble downward, and the costs of imported essentials have risen, providing a strong reminder of their dependence on Russia. As a consequence of these various pressures, food prices in Bishkek, for example, have risen by 20-25 per cent over the past year.<sup>13</sup>

Even in relatively strong and independent Kazakhstan, the effects of Russia's economic down-turn have been palpable. The Tenge was devalued by nearly 19-20% in February 2014. However, the more significant devaluation of the rouble is making Kazakh goods less affordable to Russian citizens, which reduces sales and manufacturing growth<sup>14</sup>.

Overall, the economic slowdown in Russia has potentially long-term implications for investor confidence in Central Asia – although this trend may be less likely to affect China's approach towards the region. GDP growth projections have fallen markedly across Central Asia, albeit not yet to the levels seen during the 2008-9 financial crisis. However, this is where the Ukraine factor and how things develop in 2015 may have significant implications for the region, particularly if it turns into a worsening scenario in Ukraine.

### **The Eurasian Economic Union**

A key tool deployed by Russia to demonstrate its continuing influence in its neighbourhood, including Central Asia, is its flagship project, the Eurasian Union - also known as the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Some would say that 2014 was a transformative year for Eurasian integration and the EEU. While it is part of an expected development that stems from the tripartite Customs Union first implemented by Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus in 2010, the political and economic union that the EEU represents could have significant implications for relations in Russia's neighbourhood and regional dynamics. What started off as a relatively simple customs union in early 2014 has been transformed into a single economic space that includes Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia – and from May 2015 has added Kyrgyzstan into the fold (the agreement to include Kyrgyzstan in the EEU was signed in December 2014).

<sup>12</sup> International Crisis Group, Central Asia: Decay and Decline, March 2015, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/central-asia/201-central-asia-decay-and-decline.aspx>

<sup>13</sup> David Trilling and Timur Toktonaliev, Central Asia Hurting as Russia's Ruble Sinks, Eurasianet Blog, October 2014, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/70546>

<sup>14</sup> RFE/RL, Russia's Neighbors Scramble To Cope With Ruble's Tribulations, December 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-neighbors-scramble-after-ruble-drop/26751008.html>



Russia, for its part, has declared that it will allocate up to \$1.2 billion to the EEU over the next two years: a \$500 million fund, a \$500 million credit, and a further \$200 million, to enable quicker integration of the Central Asian states into the Union.

From another angle, the expansion of the EEU into Central Asia has arguably come at the cost of internal frictions, which have crept into relations between Russia and both of the other two core members, Belarus and Kazakhstan. Strains have been apparent in the Moscow-Minsk relationship for some time.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, Kazakh President Nazarbayev, one of Putin's key allies in the region, sought to dilute some of the political provisions of the EEU before agreeing the Treaty (signed by the leaders of Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus in May 2014). This stemmed in part from an early outcome of the Customs Union, which had the effect of flooding the Kazakh market with Russian goods, making it even harder for Kazakh producers to compete.

The EEU also means that Kazakhstan is more exposed to the knock-on effects of sanctions imposed on Russia by the EU, and Astana criticised the decision by Moscow to impose 'counter-sanctions' on Western produce into Russia. Although Kazakh food exports to Russia increased to replace some of the food imports from EU countries hit by the 'counter-sanctions', the sanctions have also caused damaging delays for various Kazakh oil projects. With frictions behind the scenes, there were also reports of 'tit-for-tat' import bans in March 2015 with Astana reportedly pulling Russian meat, cheese and dairy products from supermarket shelves over alleged health-code violations, which prompted media criticism in Moscow.<sup>16</sup>

Elsewhere within Central Asia there has also been waning enthusiasm for the Eurasian Economic Union. The concerns and nervousness about Russian aims and intentions behind the EEU need to be viewed in the context of Russian actions in Ukraine. President Nazarbayev warned in an August 2014 TV interview that "if the rules which were earlier established in the treaty are not fulfilled, then Kazakhstan has the complete right to end its membership in the Eurasian Economic Union. Astana will never be in an organisation which represents a threat to the independence of Kazakhstan".<sup>17</sup> These blunt comments that Kazakhstan would reserve the right to leave the EEU if the rules were not adhered to can be seen to reflect Kazakh concerns about Russia's actions in Ukraine. Especially as Nazarbayev's remarks came a day after President Putin made comments to the effect that Kazakhstan was an "artificial state" created and maintained by President Nazarbayev.<sup>18</sup>

Faced by these challenges, a main consideration is whether the EEU will amount to more than a façade or even survive in the medium- to long-term.<sup>19</sup> And although Russia was keen to affirm its financial support for the expansion and consolidation of the Union, questions remain over what impact the economic pressures in and on Russia will have for its commitment to the EEU project.

## The security context

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<sup>15</sup> Paul Coyer, 'Belarus – no longer Putin's dependable ally?', *Forbes*, January 2015,

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/paulcoyer/2015/01/24/belarus-quandary-no-longer-putins-dependable-ally/>

<sup>16</sup> *Kommersant*, 13 April 2015; *Moscow Times*, April 2015, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/trade-war-mounts-between-kazakhstan-and-russia/519042.html>

<sup>17</sup> Khabar TV interview, Kazakhstan may leave EEU if its interests are infringed: Nazarbayev, *Tengrinews* August 2014, [http://en.tengrinews.kz/politics\\_sub/Kazakhstan-may-leave-EEU-if-its-interests-are-infringed-255722/](http://en.tengrinews.kz/politics_sub/Kazakhstan-may-leave-EEU-if-its-interests-are-infringed-255722/)

<sup>18</sup> See later section in this report on Ukraine Effects, and also footnote 32.

<sup>19</sup> Nate Schenkkan, Why the Eurasian Union might not survive 2015 – Eurasian Disunion, *Foreign Affairs*, December 2014 [www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142745/nate-schenkkan/eurasian-disunion](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142745/nate-schenkkan/eurasian-disunion)



Russia's overriding concerns in its neighbourhood, including Central Asia, centre on four main areas: military security; regime consolidation; protection of the Russian language and ethnic Russians (arguably used as a convenient pretext); and the Eurasian Economic Union project. Russia remains the most powerful security actor in Central Asia. With significant military assets based in the region, Russia has the means to react to a crisis together with an assumed responsibility to manage security. This is borne out of bilateral relations with the Central Asian states rather than under the auspices of regional multilateral agreements, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) or Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have been and remain the main focus of Russia's security engagement in Central Asia. Moscow has committed to spending over \$1.5 billion to bolster the Kyrgyz and Tajik militaries,<sup>20</sup> with around two-thirds of this sum going to the Kyrgyz military. In the military sphere, Russia's bilateral security cooperation with Tajikistan involves the deployment of one of its largest military contingents abroad, the 201<sup>st</sup> Motorised Rifle Division. About 7,000 troops are deployed at the military base near Dushanbe, in three regiments. In October 2012, a bilateral agreement was concluded between Dushanbe and Moscow, which provides for rent-free basing for Russian forces until 2042.

In Kyrgyzstan, an extension of the Russian military facilities at Kant has taken those arrangements through to 2032. The new agreement will run from 2017 and provide for an integrated Russian military base in Kyrgyzstan, combining all the various facilities at Kant and elsewhere in the country.<sup>21</sup> Russia has written off substantial Kyrgyz debts, amounting to \$489 million, and has done similar in the case of Tajikistan. Kyrgyz debts were also converted into a capital holding for Russia, in Dastan, one of Kyrgyzstan's only military-industrial enterprises. By such means, Russia has used debt cancellation and substantial aid (around \$2 billion to Kyrgyzstan) to leverage these military-security arrangements into place.

Another aspect related to these bilateral military arrangements is the issue of Russian military units drawing foreign personnel into their ranks. Significantly, a Russian Presidential decree, signed by President Putin in January 2015, granted foreigners the right to serve in the Russian military. It remains to be seen whether this will lead to a growing number of recruits from Central Asian states being hired into the Russian army. In principle, the recruits would be able to serve for at least five years without Russian citizenship. As of today, Russian forces already include about 300 foreign soldiers.<sup>22</sup>

In the multilateral security sphere, the loose organization and requirements of frameworks such as the CIS, CSTO, and SCO, allow for flexible security arrangements in which some members can choose deeper integration while others can opt out of initiatives. The drawback is that many of the arrangements nominally adopted by these multilateral structures do not end up being implemented, either because members do not ratify the necessary national legislation to bring them into force, or else because they do not provide adequate financing to operationalize them.

This set of affairs is partly borne out and reflected in Russia's attitude towards the China-dominated Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). For Russia, the SCO's inclusive aspect

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<sup>20</sup> *ibid*

<sup>21</sup> AFP, Russia To Keep Kyrgyzstan Military Base, Forgive Debt, Defence News, September 2012,

<http://archive.defensenews.com/article/20120920/DEFREG03/309200007/Russia-Keep-Kyrgyzstan-Military-Base-Forgive-Debt>

<sup>22</sup> See Alexander Golts, cited in [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk), World News, 'Russia to hire more foreign troops in forces shake-up', 5 January 2015



counts against it. It is sometimes viewed as useful by Russia for challenging the legitimacy of Western institutions and policies. However, Russia has little interest in seeing the SCO become an effective vehicle for regional integration because it would be integration on terms decided by others, notably China. China's influence, with the SCO under *de facto* Chinese leadership, is at odds with President Putin's vision for Eurasia. Thus, Moscow has obstructed Beijing's efforts both to establish a SCO Free Trade Zone<sup>23</sup> and to establish a SCO Development Bank, given the likely dominance of China within these arrangements. From Moscow's perspective, any efforts by Beijing to create a SCO Free Trade Zone would be a potential competitor to the Customs Union or EEU – and a threat to national markets given the lower price of Chinese goods.<sup>24</sup>

### The Ukraine effects

At a geopolitical level, events in Ukraine in 2014 and 2015 have raised important questions about Russia's future approach to Central Asia. According to some regional commentators, Central Asia is viewed as the 'next place' where the Kremlin might seek to use leverage, partly through the Russian diaspora, to exert its authority.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, with the advent of the Eurasian Economic Union, Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries are inevitably set to be focal points of the Russian-led initiative.

While Ukraine is not itself the focus of this paper, it is important to consider the implications of Ukraine events for Russia's role and interests elsewhere in its neighbourhood, including Central Asia. 2014 has been called a 'black year' for European and international security,<sup>26</sup> and it was certainly a moment of huge strategic significance. Furthermore, what has happened - and is happening - in Ukraine appears part of a long-term dynamic that is far from played out.

Russian moves at the root of the conflict in Ukraine have been in clear violation of international law.<sup>27</sup> Alluding to the challenges this poses, the British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond said in a 10 March 2015 speech, "we are now faced with a Russian leader bent not on joining the international rules-based system which keeps the peace between nations, but on subverting it. President Putin's actions (...) fundamentally undermine the security of sovereign nations" in the neighbourhood.<sup>28</sup> Seen in this light, recent events in Ukraine may be seen to reveal what kind of Russia faces its neighbours and the wider implications for international security. None of that is lost on Russia's close neighbours, especially in Central Asia.

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<sup>23</sup>H. Zhao, China-Russia Relations in Central Asia, The Asian Forum, November 2013, [www.theasianforum.org/china-russia-relations-in-central-asia/](http://www.theasianforum.org/china-russia-relations-in-central-asia/)

<sup>24</sup>Arthur Guschin, China, Russia and the Tussle for Influence in Kazakhstan, The Diplomat, March 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/03/china-russia-and-the-tussle-for-influence-in-kazakhstan/>

<sup>25</sup>Denis Corboy, William Courtney, and Hon. Kenneth S. Yalowitz, Russia opens a Pandora's box, Kennan Institute-Wilson Center, July 2014, <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/russia-opens-eurasian-pandoras-box>

<sup>26</sup>NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, Secretary General's Annual Report: Alliance adapts to changed security environment, NATO, January 2015, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_117019.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_117019.htm) in which he cited Russia's actions on Ukraine and violent extremism in the Middle East as the most serious threats,

<sup>27</sup> Those contraventions ranged from the non-intervention provisions of the UN Charter to the 1997 Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership between Russia and Ukraine. Specifically, in the course of the annexation of Crimea on 21 March 2014, Russian violations of international law include: non-intervention provisions in the UN Charter (peaceful settlement of disputes, refraining from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity of any state); the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 (and especially the principle of inviolability of borders; the 1990 Paris Charter (the tenets of which are that borders of countries are not rewritten by force and all states enjoy equal security and equal rights to choose their own alliances); the 1997 Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership between Russia and Ukraine (which requires Russia to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity).

<sup>28</sup>The Rt Hon Philip Hammond MP, Foreign Secretary Intelligence and Security speech to RUSI, FCO March 2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretary-intelligence-and-security-speech>



It would be a mistake to overstate the Ukraine effects on the Central Asia context – but, by the same token, the fallout should not be underestimated. The main factors affecting peace and stability in the region remain the internal dynamics within and between Central Asian states, and the range of internal conflict issues that confront them, as described above. However, that is not to deny a new disquiet or level of concern that will have crept into perceptions about Russia’s role and intentions in the broader region. This includes nervousness over Russian intentions generally; deep concerns over the economic fallout from the crisis hitting the Russian economy and its wider effects; questions about what this means for Russian-led projects in the region such as the Eurasian Economic Union; and the specific issues of remittances.

Perhaps the greatest impact of Ukraine events on perceptions of Russia – both within Central Asia and more widely - is to make Russia unpredictable. President Nazarbayev, traditionally a close ally of Moscow and with whom President Putin has forged a close working relationship, made no attempt to disguise his disquiet over the steps taken by Russia in Crimea in early 2014. In March 2014, the Kazakh Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that it was deeply concerned about the current situation in Ukraine. The carefully-worded statement urged all sides to renounce the use of force and to resolve the crisis through negotiations ‘based on respect towards the fundamental principles of international law’. To this coded criticism, the Kazakh Ministry added that ‘further escalation of tensions may lead to unpredictable consequences at both regional and global levels’.<sup>29</sup>

Tensions in the Moscow-Astana relationship were compounded in August 2014 when President Putin made remarks on 29 August about Kazakhstan being an ‘artificial State’. He said “Kazakhs had no statehood” previously, and - although he went on to eulogise President Nazarbayev as Russia’s “closest strategic ally and partner” - he referred to his ability to “create... and maintain” a state on a territory that had never had a state before.<sup>30</sup> At best, the reported remarks were unwise, given the uncomfortable parallels and echoes that Ukraine has with Kazakhstan, where ethnic Russians account for an estimated 23 per cent of the Kazakh population.

President Putin’s remarks certainly appeared to cause offence in Kazakhstan,<sup>31</sup> and subsequent attempts in both Moscow and Astana to smooth over the situation left little doubt about the dim view taken by the Kazakh leadership. The day after Putin’s comment, President Nazarbayev made the above-mentioned statement about Astana reserving the right to end its membership in the Eurasian Economic Union “if the rules which were earlier established in the treaty are not fulfilled,(...) Astana will never be in an organisation which represents a threat to the independence of Kazakhstan”.<sup>32</sup>

Broader regional disquiet with Russia’s actions in Ukraine was further evident when in September 2014 President Putin failed to win consensus at the SCO Summit in Dushanbe for

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<sup>29</sup> mfa.kz 3 March 2014; also, the Uzbekistan MFA put out a similar statement on its website a day later, on 4 March, noting that the events in Ukraine create “real threats to sovereignty and territorial integrity (which) cannot but arouse deep alarm and concern in Uzbekistan” (mfa.uz, 4 March 2014).

<sup>30</sup> Tengri News, RF President Vladimir Putin on Kazakhstan and its future, August 2014,

[http://en.tengrinews.kz/politics\\_sub/President-Vladimir-Putin-of-Russia-on-Kazakhstan-and-its-future-255793/](http://en.tengrinews.kz/politics_sub/President-Vladimir-Putin-of-Russia-on-Kazakhstan-and-its-future-255793/).

<sup>31</sup> One parallel drawn is that 23.7 percent of Kazakhstan’s population are Russian compared with 17 percent in Ukraine. Around 40% of Kazakhstan’s population are Russian-speakers.

<sup>32</sup> President Nazarbayev interview to Khabar TV, broadcast on 31 August 2014. A presidential staffer said he had actually recorded the interview on 24 August, apparently ‘before’ President Putin made his comments on 29 August about Kazakhstan being an ‘artificial state’.



a supportive statement on Ukraine.<sup>33</sup> And earlier in the UN General Assembly vote in March 2014 that condemned the annexation of Crimea it was notable that Kazakhstan conspicuously abstained rather than supported Russia.<sup>34</sup>

### **Relations between Russia and Central Asian states**

A recent report by the Russian International Affairs Council noted that Moscow's policy towards Central Asia, given the lack of cohesion in the region, should be largely based on designing Russian strategies on a country-by-country basis.<sup>35</sup> The most important, though not straightforward, relationship for Moscow in Central Asia is with Kazakhstan, given the country's core role and importance in the region – and specifically the strong personal relationship between Presidents Putin and Nazarbayev. It is not only a critical bilateral relationship but also the cornerstone of Putin's larger vision for Central Asia and the wider Eurasian continent. Kazakhstan is the core state in any integration project in the region. Put another way, how Kazakhstan manages its relations with Russia over the next 5-10 years is going to be one of the defining regional issues.<sup>36</sup>

Driving Russian policy in Kazakhstan are the activities of four major Russian energy companies: Lukoil, Gazprom, Rosneft, and Transneft. These companies allow Moscow to keep Astana within Russia's sphere of interests and help prevent Beijing from dominating Kazakhstan's economy. The leading Russian investor in Kazakhstan is Lukoil, which operates seven projects and has a stake in the cross-country pipeline, the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC).<sup>37</sup>

Kazakhstan, for its part, looks to steer a careful course between Moscow and Beijing. Nevertheless, as the Foreign Policy Concept of the Republic of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2014-2020 makes clear, under the Treaty on Good-Neighbourliness and Alliance in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Russia will remain Kazakhstan's primary partner.<sup>38</sup>

As noted earlier, notwithstanding the heading of official documents, there is an increasingly acrimonious undertone to the Russia-Kazakhstan relationship, as a result of ill-advised public statements in 2014. At a political level, there is dismay and even anger felt in Astana at the resonance of a range of bullish statements made in 2014 by President Putin. One example is Putin's remarks to Russian ambassadors and government officials at a 1 July 2014 meeting at the Kremlin when he stated: "I would like to make it clear to all: our country will continue to actively defend the rights of Russians, our compatriots abroad, using the entire range of available means – from political and economic to operations under international

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<sup>33</sup> Joanna Lillis, Putin Fails to Win Ukraine Consensus at SCO Summit, Eurasianet.org, Sept 2014, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/69961>

<sup>34</sup> Somini Sengupta, Vote by U.N. General Assembly Isolates Russia, New York Times, March 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/28/world/europe/General-Assembly-Vote-on-Crimea.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/28/world/europe/General-Assembly-Vote-on-Crimea.html?_r=0)

<sup>35</sup> Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), Russia's interests in Central Asia, No 10, June 2013, [http://russiancouncil.ru/en/inner/?id\\_4=2025#top-content](http://russiancouncil.ru/en/inner/?id_4=2025#top-content)

<sup>36</sup> Kazakhstan Foreign Minister Yerlan Idrisov said in early March 2015 that Astana is preparing a bilateral Russia-Kazakhstan border delimitation document to submit to the UN. He said the step is being taken because of the situation in Ukraine: "One of the most painful points in the Ukraine crisis is the fact that there was no delimitation agreement between Russia and Ukraine. Therefore, we think that we are making a very important step in ensuring that we finish this process with Russia and then submit the document to the UN so that in any situation we can appeal to them". Via Kseniya Bondal, Kazakhstan Worried It Will Become Another Ukraine, Silk Road Reporters, March 2015, <http://www.silkroadreporters.com/2015/03/07/kazakhstan-worried-it-will-become-another-ukraine/>

<sup>37</sup> China, Russia and the tussle for influence in Kazakhstan, The Diplomat, March 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/03/china-russia-and-the-tussle-for-influence-in-kazakhstan/>

<sup>38</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Foreign Policy Concept for 2014 – 2020 Republic of Kazakhstan, <http://www.mfa.kz/index.php/en/foreign-policy/foreign-policy-concept-for-2014-2020-republic-of-kazakhstan>



humanitarian law and the right [of compatriots abroad] to self-defence”.<sup>39</sup> Given the sizeable ethnic Russian minority in Kazakhstan, President Nazarbayev is determined to dispel any notion that ethnic Russians are unwelcome in the country, especially to pre-empt any suggestion that a ‘Ukraine scenario’ could happen in his country.

On the diaspora issue, the counter to this - some would argue – is that Russian populations in Central Asian countries are declining and that the cultural context is changing.<sup>40</sup> However, more broadly, the legacy of the Soviet Union remains strong both in terms of the attachments people have formed to Soviet culture and the continuing socialisation of Central Asians in the post-Soviet Russian cultural sphere.<sup>41</sup> By way of example, Russian TV stations continue to be widely watched across the region, and this inevitably influences Central Asian attitudes and perceptions. As one Central Asian interlocutor remarked, “I think [Russia and Central Asia] cannot escape from each other: we are here, Russia is next door, we still speak Russian, everyone watches Channel One, because we have got a very poor TV... And what’s most interesting is that they will listen to Putin instead of Atambayev on New Year’s night”.<sup>42</sup>

While the cultural dimension is important in terms of local perceptions, it is the security dimension, and its interface with commercial opportunities, that continues to be Moscow’s main concern and focus in Central Asia. It is no surprise therefore to see Moscow redoubling its efforts through military sales to underline its importance and relevance to states in the region.

In the traditional mix of bilateral and multilateral relations, Moscow continues to prioritise differentiated bilateral approaches. Russia-Uzbekistan relations have been mixed or even tense at times since the end of the Soviet Union. The regime of Uzbek President Islam Karimov has always been a difficult partner for Russia, but the Kremlin has more recently been looking to forge closer ties again with Uzbekistan. This is illustrated by President Putin’s visit to Uzbekistan in December 2014. Putin’s one-day visit to Tashkent on 10 December was partly a show of support for Karimov ahead of parliamentary and presidential elections in Uzbekistan, scheduled for late December 2014 and March 2015 respectively. President Karimov who turned 77 in January 2015 duly won the presidential elections on 29 March 2015 with over 90% of votes cast, from a reported turnout of 91.08%, giving him his fourth consecutive term as president.<sup>43</sup>

Kyrgyzstan, in the period since the election of President Almaz Atambayev in 2011, has developed increasingly close relations with Russia in the political, security and economic spheres. As noted above, Russia significantly upgraded its military and security links through a new basing agreement, and increased funding, equipment and training for the Kyrgyz military and security forces. Russia has also increased its influence through investments in strategic sectors of the Kyrgyz economy. In April 2014, Gazprom took over Kyrgyzstan’s ailing

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<sup>39</sup> Russian Federation MFA website, President Putin speech to RF Ambassadors, July 2014: [http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/brp\\_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b4325699005bcbb3/6328ab19489b523b44257d09001c3de6!OpenDocument](http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b4325699005bcbb3/6328ab19489b523b44257d09001c3de6!OpenDocument)

<sup>40</sup> Muhammad Tahir, RFE/RL, September 2011, [http://www.rferl.org/content/in\\_post\\_soviet\\_central\\_asia\\_russian\\_takes\\_a\\_back\\_seat/24342710.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/in_post_soviet_central_asia_russian_takes_a_back_seat/24342710.html); and The Diplomat, January 2015

<sup>41</sup> The Myth of ‘Rising Powers’ and the prospects for Post-Western IR: the case of Russia in Central Asia; John Heathershaw and Catherine Owen, University of Exeter; Paper presented at the ASN World Convention Columbia University, 23-25 April 2015.

<sup>42</sup> Background research and regional visits carried out in 2014 in preparation for this article.

<sup>43</sup> Joanna Lillis, Uzbekistan’s Dictator Grabs Fourth Term in Opposition-Free Poll, EurasiaNet.org, March 2015, <http://www.eurasianet.org/taxonomy/term/3337>



gas distribution network and has committed to some \$500m in investments in energy infrastructure in 2015-17. Russian state companies have also promised major investments in hydroelectric projects, with the long-term potential for energy exports. While China remains Kyrgyzstan's key trading partner, these strategic investments provide the basis for a long-term institutionalised economic relationship with Russia.

Economic ties have been further cemented by Kyrgyzstan's recent accession as a member of the EEU, which has been supported by \$1bn of Russian funding to help Kyrgyzstan meet entrance requirements and restructure its economy.<sup>44</sup> There was some local opposition to joining the EEU, particularly from Kyrgyz businesses concerned about the impact of the EEU on trade with China; however, local opinion polls suggest that there remains strong popular support for closer ties with Russia. According to a 2014 poll, 71% of Kyrgyz favoured joining the EEU, and 87% favoured retaining a Russian military base in the country.<sup>45</sup>

Meanwhile, in Turkmenistan, reports suggest that the leadership in Ashgabat has been particularly worried about the worsening security situation on the other side of the country's 744-kilometre border with Afghanistan.<sup>46</sup> And in a measure of precisely how concerned Ashgabat has become that Afghan radical forces might carry out an incursion into Turkmenistan, it has reportedly allowed Russian and now Uzbekistani military personnel to provide assistance in fortifying Turkmenistan's border.<sup>47</sup> The same report also suggests that Ashgabat has approached Washington for military assistance. If this is the case, that would represent a significant departure from Turkmenistan's constitutionally-established neutrality and its 'go-it-alone' practice over the past two decades. It also prompts questions about Russia's future intentions in this regard.

### **Russia-China interface**

The evolving relationship between Russia and China is obviously a critical dynamic in shaping the future of Central Asia. Although traditional competitors in the region, Russia and China have sought to avoid treading on each other's toes and have found a *modus vivendi* thus far, both in that region and in more general respects.<sup>48</sup> Moscow and Beijing share a common concern over insecurity emanating from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Central Asian states, especially the perceived threats posed by Islamic extremists. And they have a common interest in reducing Western influence in the region, although (as noted earlier) with the drawdown of US military from Afghanistan the dynamics are clearly changing in that regard.

Points of convergence and divergence between China and Russia on the region are not hard to identify. China's main role is through the huge economic leverage it retains through investment projects and trade in all countries of the region, while Beijing is prepared to cede on security issues to Russia. This, however, will be an important space to watch. The two countries do have different priorities and strategies in Central Asia and, as China's role and

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<sup>44</sup> David Lewis, "Reasserting Hegemony in Central Asia: Russian Policy in Post-2010 Kyrgyzstan", Paper presented at the ASN Convention, Columbia University, New York, 23-25 April 2015

<sup>45</sup> David Trilling, "Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan Full of Putin Fans, New Poll Says", August 2014, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/69471>

<sup>46</sup> Paul Goble, Russian and Uzbek Soldiers Reportedly Now in Turkmenistan to Counter Afghan Threat, The Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor, Vol 12, issue 59, March 2015, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=43725&cHash=b52e1e856b71de8ff1a5f396a80bb9f3](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43725&cHash=b52e1e856b71de8ff1a5f396a80bb9f3)

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> As a sign of closer ties, it was notable, for example, at the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary VE military parade in Moscow on 9 May 2015 - the largest through Red Square in the post-Soviet period involving over 16,000 troops and new military equipment - President Xi Jinping had pride of place beside President Putin on the podium. Most western leaders had avoided the ceremony because of Russia's role in the Ukraine crisis.



influence expands, it is doubtful whether the current tacit acceptance of each other's spheres of dominance (Russia in the security sphere, China in the economic) is sustainable.

More generally, Moscow is in two minds about whether China represents predominantly an opportunity or a risk – or even a threat to Russia. In the Central Asian context, both powers have thus far managed to achieve their goals without clashing abrasively with one another. However, Russian concerns are barely disguised about China's economic rise and its military modernisation programme that will allow it to develop and project new capabilities in China's border areas, including Central Asia. While it cannot counter Beijing's economic expansion, Moscow's aim to reassert its role in the region by expanding the Eurasian Economic Union is at odds with Beijing's plans to strengthen the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and does not envisage any significant Chinese security presence.

Thus far, to reiterate, Russo-China cooperation in Central Asia has been workable partly because Beijing seems to have regarded keeping Central Asia under Russia's security and political umbrella as being in China's interest. However, in the longer-term, China could well prove problematic for Russia's traditional role and future vision for Central Asia.<sup>49</sup> If China's leadership were to expand the range of its engagements in Central Asia so that it became more involved in the political and military spheres - and not just in the economic one - then Beijing's interests would clearly come into conflict with Moscow's.

What could trigger such an alteration of the current relatively harmonious dynamics between Russia and China? Competition between the two powers for control over Central Asia's natural resources is likely to intensify, and unless dexterously managed this could have an adverse effect on relations, especially given the risk of Central Asian leaderships playing one power off against the other. Another issue, as noted earlier, that could expose differences between the two is the question of succession politics in the region. Given the old age and reportedly poor health of some of the region's leaders, the presidential successions in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are potential crisis-points. The sudden demise of either president could trigger significant instability.<sup>50</sup>

It is also worth noting the different strategies adopted by Russia and China towards their neighbourhoods, including Central Asia. To support China's growth and modernisation, President Xi Jinping appears concerned to promote a stable and prosperous regional environment.<sup>51</sup> While competing territorial claims in the South China Sea have caused tensions, and relations with Japan remain fraught, for the most part China has sought to bolster neighbouring countries, on the basis that their economic growth is in China's interests. In contrast, President Putin's notion of national security is to surround Russia with what Karel de Gucht, the EU Trade Commissioner, described as a string of economic 'black holes' (such as Ukraine and Belarus) and 'frozen conflicts' (including in Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia).<sup>52</sup> Where China's strategy is premised on the necessity of a stable neighbourhood, Putin according to this view seeks to manufacture a compliant and dependent one.

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<sup>49</sup> Laruelle M. Peyrouse S, *China as a neighbour: Central Asian perspectives and strategies*, Silk Road Monograph, CACI, Washington DC, April 2009, [http://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/Monographs/2009\\_BOOK\\_Laruelle-Peyrouse\\_China-Central-Asia.pdf](http://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/Monographs/2009_BOOK_Laruelle-Peyrouse_China-Central-Asia.pdf)

<sup>50</sup> Naubet Bisenov, *The Great Succession Game*, BNE, January 2015, <http://www.bne.eu/content/story/great-succession-game>

<sup>51</sup> Robin Niblett, *The West must not blame itself for Putin's revanchism*, CNN, April 2014, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/04/12/opinion/ukraine-putin-niblett/>

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*



Against this backdrop, a key consideration looking ahead is the 30-year gas deal, signed between Russia and China on 21 May 2014, worth an estimated \$400 billion, and starting in 2018 – part of the so-called ‘Eastern Vector’ trade focus for Russia.<sup>53</sup> Both countries will be responsible for building new infrastructure to enable the transport of the natural gas: Russia will spend an estimated \$55 billion to build a pipeline from Siberia (the ‘Power of Siberia’ pipeline), while China will spend about \$20 billion on infrastructure within its borders.

The gas deal reflects in part President Putin’s determination to show the US and Europe that Russia has ‘other options’. In the agreement, signed between Russia’s Gazprom and China’s National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) after a decade of negotiations, 38 bcm of Russian gas will be delivered to China annually. The gas price that Beijing secured in the deal was not disclosed, though it is speculated that China managed to obtain a favourable price. Russian representatives insisted that the price would vary according to the global market price of oil, making the deal closer to what Moscow wanted than to what Beijing had been asking for, though those claims have not been corroborated.<sup>54</sup> However, if correct, the dramatic slump in global oil prices will obviously be to Russia’s disadvantage.

### **Some conclusions**

From Russia’s evolving role in Central Asia, as outlined, some implications can be identified for security and other dynamics in the region:

#### **A shifting balance of power**

Russia has historically been the predominant actor in Central Asian politics. Its access to the leadership of the Central Asian states is unparalleled. However, Central Asians often grumble about being treated patronisingly by Moscow, in contrast to the fanfare and ceremony with which they are received in Beijing. Russia does not invest in soft power in Central Asia to the extent that it could, relying instead on the legacy of the Soviet past.

A key question here is whether, and (if so) to what extent China seeks to translate its growing economic presence into political influence. For the time being, China regards Central Asia as a second-tier foreign policy priority, and has thus far shown less interest than might be expected to capitalise on its economic power in the region for increased political leverage.

Moscow continues to view China’s growing presence in Central Asia as both opportunity and risk - and it is unclear which outweighs the other in Russian eyes at present. The relative success of the Russia-China interface thus far should be acknowledged. Moscow, however, is closely watching the development of the Silk Road Economic Belt, which would strengthen China’s role in the region and threaten the greater influence that Russia seeks through the EEU.

#### **An ambiguous security role**

Reflecting a paradox at the heart of its role in the region, Russia’s marked reluctance to intervene proactively, for example under CSTO auspices, during or after the Osh events in June 2010, underscored the view that caution and self-interest are Moscow’s watch-words

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<sup>53</sup> Jane Perlez, ‘China and Russia Reach 30-Year Gas Deal’, *New York Times*, May 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/22/world/asia/china-russia-gas-deal.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/22/world/asia/china-russia-gas-deal.html?_r=1)

<sup>54</sup> William Wan and Abigail Hauslohner, ‘China, Russia sign \$400 billion gas deal’, *Washington Post*, May 2014, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/china-russia-sign-400-billion-gas-deal/2014/05/21/364e9e74-e0de-11e3-8dcc-d6b7fede081a\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/china-russia-sign-400-billion-gas-deal/2014/05/21/364e9e74-e0de-11e3-8dcc-d6b7fede081a_story.html)



in Central Asia.<sup>55</sup> Even if there had been an appetite for intervention in Kyrgyzstan, Moscow's assessment seems to have been that it would almost certainly have been misinterpreted; and the Russian calculation was probably that non-intervention had no direct political cost. A similar pattern or stance was in evidence over Andijan, Uzbekistan (2005), Rasht, Tajikistan (2010), Khorog, Tajikistan (2012), or in border incidents in and around Isfara, Tajikistan (2014).<sup>56</sup>

### **Multilateral formats and facades**

In some ways, Russia sees Central Asia as a collective construct with identified common features. However, the emphasis of Russian diplomacy and security engagement is on bilateralism, and is likely to retain that focus, with a patchwork of individual bilateral relationships of varying importance. That shapes in turn the way it views and uses the various multilateral mechanisms in the region.

There are still more questions than answers about the viability of the EEU. Some internal misgivings are already evident among those states that have signed up to the Russian-led project. Given the range of economic challenges Russia is currently going through, it is not yet clear whether the benefits of EEU membership for Central Asian states will outweigh the costs.

### **The risks of succession**

The recent presidential elections in Uzbekistan (March 2015) and in Kazakhstan (April 2015) each resulted in the expected resounding victories for the incumbents, Presidents Islam Karimov and Nursultan Nazarbayev (a 97.7% winning margin, in the latter case). Nevertheless, those outcomes also prompt questions as to whether these might be the last occasions when the two elderly Heads of State are in a position to contest the leadership in Tashkent and Astana respectively, with the next elections due in 2019 or 2020. The issue of succession politics in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan will become ever more pressing, and could well expose rivalries, not just within those countries but also reflected in key differences of interest between Moscow and Beijing.

### **The Ukraine crisis fallout**

The repercussions for Central Asia of Russia's actions in Ukraine - still very much an ongoing and unresolved situation - should not be over-stated nor downplayed. However, as strains in the Kazakhstan-Russia relationship illustrate, they have the potential to undermine the current balance of power in the region. Russia's apparent prioritisation of geopolitical aims over diplomatic and security relations with Central Asia states suggests that the latter have been given less focus. It is somewhat easier to discern a series of ad hoc actions and reactions, rather than a clear long-term Russian strategy in respect of Central Asia.<sup>57</sup> What is certain from this is a complex, uncertain outlook.

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<sup>55</sup> For a fuller discussion of these issues, see Ana Matveeva A, Russia's changing security role in Central Asia, European Security, February 2013, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09662839.2013.775121>

<sup>56</sup> Background research and regional visits carried out in 2014 in preparation for this article.

<sup>57</sup> Bobo Lo, Frontiers New and Old: Russia's Policy in Central Asia, IFRI, January 2015, <http://www.ifri.org/en/publications/enotes/russieneivisions/frontiers-new-and-old-russias-policy-central-asia>