



Feature Article
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Russian Strategy Towards the Caucasus and Central Asia: a Dominant Power on Defense?

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In the thirty years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation has sought to reassert its regional dominance over its neighbors through both direct confrontation and soft power. Despite the country's progress with consolidating its sphere of influence, which includes the January 2022 CSTO deployment in Kazakhstan, Moscow's goal of regional hegemony is far from assured. The rise of China, radical trans-national Islam, the potential spill-over of Taliban ascendancy in Afghanistan, and maturing of post-Soviet nation-states present roadblocks to Russian ambitions. Moscow must carefully manage its interactions with Beijing, keep Turkey, Islamism and Taliban in check, and respect nationhood in the Caucasus and Central Asia. It is a tall order.

Since the dissolution of the USSR and the birth of the modern-day Russian Federation, Russia has gone to great lengths to reassert its post-imperial influence in the now independent post-Soviet Republics of Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus. The years immediately following the collapse of the Soviet system were defined by ethnic conflicts in Abkhazia, Chechnya, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Tajikistan, with Russian leadership seeking to play the role of either suppressor, mediator, or agitator – which ever suited its interests – to become the region's



*Vladimir Putin Analyzing the Map of Eurasia.
(Reuters-ITAR-TASS, used with permission)*

hegemon, at times in the guise of the guarantor of stability and security. The past 30 years have seen Russian regional power projection take many

shapes, including support of aggressive irredentism and limited wars in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Chechnya – and most recently, leading a Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) military deployment in Kazakhstan that saw the deployment of over 3,500 Russian troops. Pursuing an informal empire where possible, and direct intervention where necessary, over the past five years, Kremlin strategy has shifted away from direct confrontation with neighbors towards proxy involvement, producing asymmetric tactical advantages at low costs.

South Caucasus: Conflict Mountains

The armistice brokered by Russia in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was a demonstration of Russia's success in achieving geostrategic goals through deft diplomatic maneuvering. Despite Armenia's heavy economic and security dependence on Russia, the Kremlin wanted to punish Nikol Pashinyan, who came to power on the crest of the Velvet Revolution of 2018 and expressed the pro-European sentiment common to a part of the Armenian political elite.¹ The Kremlin further calculated that the geopolitical center of gravity was shifting away from its client state and towards Azerbaijan. One can only speculate about the private agreements between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Azerbaijani counterpart.

During the 2020 conflict, Russia held back support for its intransigent ally, knowing that Armenia had little choice in the matter and gambling that Azerbaijan would view its (in)action with gratitude. This allowed Russia to “have its geopolitical cake and eat it too.”² The ploy worked. Armenia's lack of alternatives combined with Azerbaijan's clear military advantage in the conflict ultimately allowed the Kremlin to broker a ceasefire that permitted the stationing of Russian peacekeeping troops in the region for the next five years – a geopolitical victory.

To Russia's South, as Georgia is commemorating the 13th anniversary of the August War of 2008, it is still recovering from the political and economic damage incurred by the conflict, which began with Russian support for secessionist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the early 1990s and culminated in a Russian invasion. Lack of security guarantees by the West, despite overtures from Tbilisi for NATO membership, emboldened the Kremlin to take military action. It did so successfully. To this day the war has displaced over 20,000 citizens³ and completely severed diplomatic relations. Russia pursues its long-term strategy of “borderization” with Georgia – turning occupied territories into Russian military bases and gradually pushing border markers into Georgian territory.⁴ While Russia fully considers Georgia a part of its “natural” sphere of influence, the Kremlin's actions have had

¹ Kendrick Foster, “Armenia's Velvet Revolution: Lessons from the Caucasus.” *Harvard International Review*, May 29, 2019. <https://hir.harvard.edu/armenias-velvet-revolution/>

² Nicu Popescu. “A captive ally: Why Russia isn't rushing to Armenia's aid.” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, October 8, 2020. https://ecfr.eu/article/a_captive_ally_why_russia_isnt_rushing_to_armenias_aid/

³ Ban Ki-moon. “Status of internally displaced persons and refugees from Abkhazia, Georgia, and the Tskhinvali

region/ South Ossetia, Georgia.” *United Nations General Assembly: Report of the Secretary-General*, May 7, 2014. https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/68/868

⁴ Natia Seskuria, “Russia's “Hybrid Aggression” against Georgia: The Use of Local and External Tools.” *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, September 21, 2021. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-hybrid-aggression-against-georgia-use-local-and-external-tools>

a galvanizing effect on the Georgian populace fanning pro-Euro Atlantic aspirations.

Central Asia: Between the Bear and the Dragon

Across the Caspian, Russia maintains generally positive relations with the Central Asian states, particularly in security matters. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan are co-members with Russia, Belarus, and Armenia in the recently deployed CSTO, as well as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) which also includes Uzbekistan.

Net Migration in Russia by Period, 1991–2015

Country or Region	1991-2000	2001-10	2011-15	Overall (1991-2015)
Former Soviet Union Total	4,280,000	1,816,800	1,366,100	7,462,800
Kazakhstan	1,497,400	347,400	182,700	2,027,400
Uzbekistan	605,000	349,000	202,000	1,155,900
Ukraine	341,600	261,500	341,800	944,900
Tajikistan	314,700	135,700	129,800	580,200
Kyrgyzstan	272,900	179,400	109,700	562,000
Armenia	200,000	188,700	140,400	529,200
Azerbaijan	298,900	120,500	79,400	498,800
Georgia	358,700	70,900	27,400	457,100
Moldova	78,500	106,100	93,000	277,600
Turkmenistan	116,100	43,200	17,000	176,300
Latvia	109,700	6,800	4,300	120,700
Estonia	66,400	2,400	3,600	72,400
Lithuania	46,600	2,900	2,000	51,500
Belarus	-26,500	2,200	33,200	8,900
United States	-100,200	-23,500	-2,900	-126,600
Israel	-176,400	-6,500	300	-182,600
Germany	-557,400	-178,300	-300	-736,000
Non-Former Soviet Union Total	-871,300	-217,300	59,900	-1,028,700

Source: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/russia-migration-system-soviet-roots>

Diplomatic relations with Kazakhstan have historically been strong, with recent events underscoring the depth of bilateral ties. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's demonstrated his trust in the Kremlin when he requested the deployment of Russian and CSTO peacekeepers following the New Year protests. It remains to be seen whether in the long term, Russia's involvement would trigger Kazakh nationalism, and if it solves more problems for Russia than it creates.

Prior to CSTO deployment, however, Russian-Kazakh relations were entering a period of cooling. Recent comments by the Russian Duma members that Kazakhstan's territory was a Russian "gift" and interference in Kazakhstan's language policy resulted in domestic backlash.⁵

Russia is a major economic player in the region, with relationships built on remittances, investment, and commodity trade. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members along with Russia in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) while Uzbekistan is an EEU observer, and Tajikistan's potential membership is being discussed. In addition to security cooperation, close economic ties support Russia's belief that Central Asia remains a part of its sphere of influence. Since the dissolution of the USSR a significant portion of Russia's labor force, especially in the blue-collar segment of construction, sanitation, agriculture, etc., has been shaped by net migration from Central Asia and the Caucasus. Particularly early on, temporary and permanent labor migration were difficult to distinguish, exacerbated by porous

⁵ Petr Trotsenko, "Controversial 'Russian Gift' Comments Spark Mixed Feelings in Northern Kazakhstan." *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 5, 2021.

<https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakh-russian-gift-comments/31035059.html>

borders and unresolved citizenship for those bearing Soviet-era passports. In the early 2000s, some experts estimated between 3 and 5 million illegal immigrants residing in Russia,⁶ with at least 1 million remaining today.⁷

Russia's greatest obstacle in Central Asia is China's Belt and Road Initiative, with Beijing's investment into infrastructure and energy projects dwarfing what Moscow can offer.⁸ The creation of a trading empire in and across Russia's geopolitical front yard has created an uneven relationship. Russia cannot compete with China economically and notably benefits from the development brought on by their investment, but allowing China too great an influence threatens to not only pull Russia's neighbors into its immense orbit but Russia as well.⁹

Russia's Geopolitical Challenges

Comparison between Russia's neo-imperial aspirations and reality expose a mixed picture. Russia is still strong security-wise, but the threats, especially from radical Islam, Afghanistan, and China, are rising – and Russia may be losing economic competition to China.

Russia's current challenges in the region are twofold: 1) the need to both provide the security and

stability it promises within its claimed sphere; and 2) the task of warding off the economic incursions of rival powers such as the United States and China. Within its own borders, Russia faces a significant threat from Islamist ideology and radical terrorist cells, among them Chechen Islamists whose calls for "holy war" in the North Caucasus helped trigger the Second Chechen War. In the 1990s, the Taliban and Al Qaeda recognized the Chechen state to the Kremlin's chagrin.¹⁰ Moscow is aware of the Islamic threat emanating from Central Asia including Afghanistan, but resists creating a "hard" border between itself and the region.

Presently, the Head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, whose cult of personality manifests itself in the ubiquitous portraits found throughout Chechnya, rules with an iron grip – like his father before him, the assassinated President Hajj Akhmad Kadyrov.

Ostensibly a Putin loyalist in a de-jure Russian territory, Kadyrov has tremendous sway over his territory and has had his own territorial ambitions rooted in the messy 1992 split of the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Republic into two Muslim-majority republics. In 2018, Kadyrov orchestrated an unbalanced land exchange with Ingushetia, where

⁶ Natalia Vlasova, "Есть ли альтернатива гастарбайтерам?" - Yes' li al'ternativa gastarbaiteram ("Is there an alternative to Gastarbeiters?") International Labour Organization, 2016. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---europe/---ro-geneva/---sro-moscow/documents/publication/wcms_308948.pdf

⁷ Elena Teslova, "Russia demands 1M illegal migrants to leave country." *Anadolu Agency*, April 17, 2021. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/russia-demands-1m-illegal-migrants-to-leave-country/2211717>

⁸ Reid Standish, "China's Central Asian Plans Are Unnerving Moscow." *Foreign Policy*, December 23, 2019.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/12/23/china-russia-central-asia-competition/>

⁹ Paul Stronski and Nicole, "Cooperation and Competition: Russia and China in Central Asia, the Russian Far East, and the Arctic." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, Feb. 28, 2018. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/02/28/cooperation-and-competition-russia-and-china-in-central-asia-russian-far-east-and-arctic-pub-75673>

¹⁰ Thomas D. Grant, "Current Development: Afghanistan Recognizes Chechnya." *American University International Law Review*, vol. 15 no. 4, 2000. <https://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1276&context=auilr>

the unpopular deal and perception of Kremlin favoritism resulting in considerable discontent.¹¹ The region continues to see sporadic fighting in its more mountainous areas, due to a practical lack of security control, and remains Russia's poorest region. Protecting its interests over the North Caucasus will be necessary if the Kremlin wishes to portray itself as the regional hegemon and a viable protector of its constituent republics and allies. Similarly, Russia's work to prevent spillover violence from Taliban-ruled Afghanistan into Central Asia will be another test of its regional dominance.

Islamists also penetrate Russia's aspirational sphere of influence that is quite porous, which raises questions about security, smuggling, contraband, and exports of extremism. Since the Islamic State's terrorist threat against the 2018 FIFA Games, Russia has carefully watched for spread of Islamist ideals and threats from abroad.¹² Still, considerable investment opportunities exist in Central Asia and the North Caucasus, particularly in terms of infrastructure, energy trade, manufacturing, and services. Beijing and Moscow have benefited from a near-lack of American competition in Central Asia due a historically scattered foreign policy and development approach, exacerbated by geographic distance. U.S.-Kazakhstan trade totaled \$2.25 billion in 2019 compared to \$19.67 billion for Russia in the

same year.¹³ Comparatively, China's total trade with Kazakhstan in the same year accounted for \$14.39 billion.¹⁴

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a multi-trillion-dollar infrastructural framework for a 21st century Silk Road trading empire, represents a long-term and real threat to Russian imperial aspirations. Initially announced in 2013 at the Nazarbayev University in Astana, a \$2 trillion, it is a 30-year program plans to "reformat" all of the Eastern Hemisphere. Beijing has long been providing ready access to credit lines for the funding of national and transnational transportation and energy projects across Central Asia, with a particular interest in funding renewable energy projects, and acquiring fossil fuels, uranium, and critical minerals – the backbone of 21st century economic development.¹⁵ Several regional oil and gas pipelines have been built in the last two decades to meet China's ever-increasing thirst for energy.¹⁶ Kazakhstan, Central Asia's largest economy and often referred to as the "buckle" of the BRI, is embracing the connectivity and prosperity of closer ties to China.¹⁷ The Central Asian states benefit greatly from their exports of fuels, minerals, agricultural goods and other products to China, presenting an obstacle to Russia insofar as their interests those of the rising great power are aligned.

¹¹ Morgan Henson, "Chechen-Ingush Land Dispute: A Policy Primer." *Geohistory*, Dec. 8, 2018. <https://geohistory.today/chechen-ingush-land-dispute/>

¹² Mariya Omelicheva, "The Nature and Sources of Terrorist Threat in Russia: An "Armed Underground" or ISIL?." *Ponnars Eurasia*, Nov. 26, 2018. <https://www.ponnarseurasia.org/the-nature-and-sources-of-terrorist-threat-in-russian-armed-underground-or-isil/>

¹³ "Kazakhstan: Trade Statistics." *Global Edge*. <https://globaledge.msu.edu/countries/kazakhstan/tradestats>

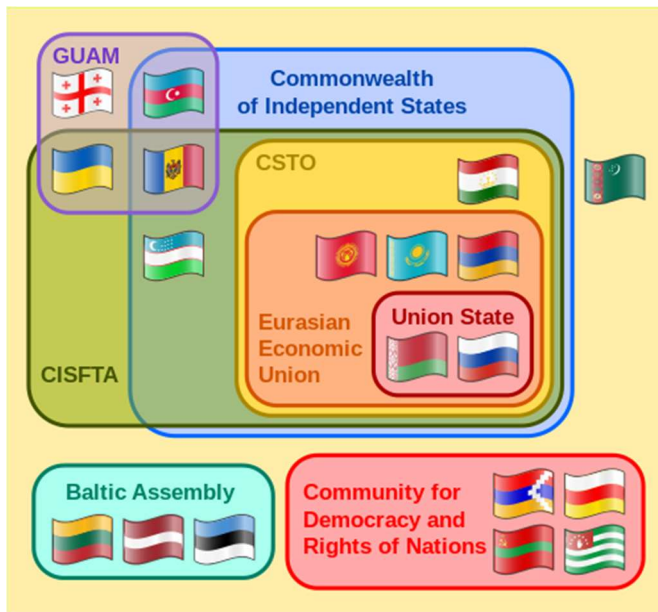
¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Lea Melnikovová, "China's interests in Central Asian economies" *Human Affairs*, vol. 30 no. 2, 2020. www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/humaff-2020-0022/html

¹⁶ VNBK. "Central Asia-China Gas Pipeline - 10 Years." *National Oil and Gas Service Association*, Jn. 7, 2020. <https://nangs.org/news/world/gazoprovodu-tsentralynaya-aziya-kitay-10-let>

¹⁷ Bolat Nurgaliev, "China's Belt Road: Kazakhstan and Geopolitics." *Kazinform*, June 2, 2020. https://www.kazinform.kz/ru/kitayskiy-poyas-put-kazahstan-i-geopolitika_a3656882

Eurasian Cooperation Infographic



Source: cisstat.com/eng/cis.html

Russian Lens: Geopolitical Aspirations

In opposing foreign influence and bolstering its own from a position of financial disadvantage, Russia must rely on its preexisting relations to regional leaders. In publications issued by pro-Kremlin think tanks, Russia alleges to approach diplomacy on a bilateral basis, and as a collective bound by the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Treaty.¹⁸ The CIS was organized in the early days of the post-Soviet era in an attempt to recoup some regional unity and confirm Russian leadership. In the three decades since, the importance of the alliance has waned in comparison to direct diplomacy, though it remains closely bound to Russia, as well

as the foundation of multiple economic and military agreements.

As Russia determines its geopolitical priorities, security and economic issues are at the forefront, with a willingness to re-evaluate priorities and relations, should they cease to make strategic sense. This can be observed in the case of the Nagorno-Karabakh War, where the longstanding relationship with Armenia was set aside in favor of accommodating Azerbaijan. While it is commonly argued that the change was a political response to Putin's frustration with Armenia's 2018 Velvet Revolution that saw pro-Russian President Serzh Sargsyan removed – undeniably a factor – equally as significant was Azerbaijan's straightforward superior economic and military power, despite Baku's alignment with Russia's regional rival Turkey. Were Russia inflexible in its perception and handling of its alliances, any hopes of regional leadership would likely be dead in the water.

The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) remains a key framework for post-Soviet Eurasian military cooperation, and a tool for the exercise of Russian power with the consent of other signatories. Unlike NATO, the CSTO until January 2022 had never deployed peacekeepers to a conflict zone, even when requested to do so, as in the case of the 2010 ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan.¹⁹ When confronted with Kazakhstan's request for a deployment of peacekeepers following the violence of early January 2022, however, the CSTO under President Putin's leadership immediately deployed troops to safeguard critical infrastructure

¹⁸ Ulugbek Khasanov, "Central Asia: Regional Security as a Process", Valdai Club, Jul. 15, 2021. <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/tsentralnaya-aziya-regionalnaya-bezopasnost/>

¹⁹ Miriam Elder, "Kyrgyzstan tests Russia's regional commitments." *Agence France-Presse*, June 15, 2010. <https://www.pri.org/stories/2010-06-15/kyrgyzstan-tests-russias-regional-commitments>

and support Kazakh security services. There exists no unified strategy for the response of the CSTO states to internal or international conflicts. Rather, until now it was primarily used to facilitate the preferential transfer of military equipment and to modernize military standards. CSTO specifically acted as a transitional tool of military cooperation from the early post-Soviet era to the present day.²⁰

Yet, post-Soviet loyalties fray slowly. Even the most prosperous of the independent post-Soviet states (not including the Baltic NATO/EU members), Kazakhstan has maintained fairly positive relations with Russia despite a willingness to strengthen economic and diplomatic ties with China, the EU, and the United States as part of the multi-vector foreign policy championed by its first President Nursultan Nazarbayev. It remains to be seen if this will change following Russia's deployment in 2022, with much hinging on the timetable of the withdrawal from Kazakhstan. As of this writing, the CSTO troop pullout is underway, with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu asserting that the process should take 7-10 days.²¹ How 'complete' this pullout will be remains to be seen.

Russia's position as a security guarantor of the region is being tested post-Afghanistan, and that position is threatened by Chinese investment in Central Asia since the early 2010s, particularly as Russia can no longer claim a virtual monopoly on arms

sales. In terms of economic dominance, Russian annual trade with Central Asia stands at \$28.65 billion, two thirds of Beijing's \$46.48 billion.²² By comparison, Russian accounted for 80 percent of the region's trade in the 1990s (\$110 billion).²³ The long-term outlook for Russian economic competition with China in the region remains grim.

Afghanistan: The Cauldron of Chaos

If there is a singular inflection point which might make or break Russian dreams, the American withdrawal from Afghanistan – and the ensuing power vacuum – may be it. America's hasty and messy abandonment of the two-decades-long conflict has seen the Taliban, Al Qaeda, ISIS-K and other radical organizations reemerge as geopolitical players and turn Afghanistan yet again into a fertile territory for Islamic extremism. Russia has put on a calm front, built up contacts with Taliban, and avoided military moves to invite conflict with the Taliban, perhaps remembering their last jaunt into the graveyard of empires which lasted a decade and contributed to the fall of the Soviet Union.

Yet, Russia appears to have a willingness to engage with the region and is openly negotiating with the Taliban. Open diplomatic channels have been paired with military exercises alongside Tajikistan and Uzbekistan on the Afghan borders, as well as meetings between Shanghai Cooperation

²⁰ Navruz Karimov, "Effectiveness of the CSTO in the context of the changing regional security system." *Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting*, Jan. 11, 2021. <https://cabar.asia/en/effectiveness-of-the-csto-in-the-context-of-the-changing-regional-security-system>

²¹ "Russia-Led CSTO Troops Begin Withdrawal From Kazakhstan" *Radio Free Europe Liberty Radio*, Jan. 13, 2022. <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-csto-troops-withdrawal-russia/31652147.html>

²² "Get Insights by Country" Global Edge. <https://globaledge.msu.edu/global-insights/by/country>

²³ Edward Lemon, "How is Russia Responding to China's Creeping Security Presence in Tajikistan?" *Russian Analytical Digest*, March 6, 2020. https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/RAD_248.pdf

Organization and CSTO members and other powers demonstrating an awareness of the security threat posed by the terrorist-run state.²⁴ Putin has been an early voice against accepting Afghan refugees, noting the lack of a filtering mechanism to prevent a potential influx of Islamists, thus drawing a wedge in the relations between Washington and its Central Asian friends, and thwarting U.S. requests to accommodate refugees in the neighboring Central Asian states.

America's withdrawal provided an opportunity for Russia to make a case to all of its neighbors, the Central Asian states in particular, that the United States is not capable of providing security and is not a reliable ally. And while geographic distance allows many U.S. policymakers to put Afghanistan out of their minds, chronic instability there is an enormous threat for the war-torn country's neighbors – and will pose secondary and tertiary consequences for U.S. foreign policy in Eurasia. Russia can make the case for a strengthened CSTO and perhaps achieve some success as a result of the fall of Kabul. Reports that the Pentagon was interested in monitoring Afghanistan from Russian military bases may demonstrate an awareness in Washington that abandoning each and every regional foothold was a grave error that has given Russia, at least for now, the opportunity to dominate the region's security and intelligence.²⁵

For countries who face Russian aggression, bruised faith in American assistance might leave them more willing to give in, particularly if they view themselves and their sovereignty as lower priorities to the U.S. than East Asia and the Pacific. In October 2021, a Taliban delegation arrived in Moscow for talks on Afghanistan alongside China, Pakistan, India, and Iran. The U.S. was not invited. This was a shrewd Kremlin move to be viewed as a regional power broker.²⁶

Conclusion: Challenges to Moscow Grow

As the 2020s march on, it is in Russia's best interest to carefully compete and collaborate with China, while keeping Islamism in check and ensuring that the Taliban does not destabilize Central Asia. Thus far, Russia has managed its relationship with China deftly, happy to play a junior partner so long as it furthers the Kremlin's geopolitical (anti-Western) interests. But the sustainability of the course remains an open question. The Taliban is not a unified, centrally controlled entity, nor does it control Al Qaeda and ISIS-K. A clash on the Tajik-Afghan border may result in a war and draw Russia into a meatgrinder of an unknown duration against its will. Economic competition with China will be fierce, given the scope of the Belt and Road Initiative and China's massive economic potential. That match Russia is doomed to lose.

²⁴ Tina Dolbaia and Michael Robinson, "Russia, Turkey, and Iran: Regional Powers React to U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan." *Walsh School of Foreign Service*, 2021. ceres.georgetown.edu/research/student-projects/russia-turkey-and-iran-regional-powers-react-to-u-s-withdrawal-from-afghanistan/

²⁵ Middle East Media Reporting Initiative, "Military Correspondent Lavrov: For Now, The Disadvantages Of American Bases In The Former Central Asian Soviet Republics

Bordering On Afghanistan Outweigh The Benefits," Special Dispatch No. 9583, October 11, 2021. memri.org/reports/military-correspondent-lavrov-now-disadvantages-american-bases-former-central-asian-soviet

²⁶ Anton Kolodyazhnyy, "Taliban delegation to join Moscow talks next week - report." *Reuters*, October 14, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-delegation-join-moscow-talks-next-week-report-2021-10-14/>

The mutually beneficial energy security relationship between the Central Asian states and China is in particular a serious obstacle to Russia's regional ambitions, and it remains to be seen how Moscow can counter Beijing, if at all. A quasi-alliance of sorts may be possible, at least in areas where Sino-Russian interests do not clash. This is a short sentence with four qualifiers.

Extremist and terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan are the most immediate security concerns to Russia, and thus the top priority of any Russian geopolitical strategist. Should instability and extremism begin to escape Afghan borders, a Russian response – with or without China – will be absolutely necessary. Russia simply cannot maintain its sphere of influence if it cannot protect the basic security needs of Central Asia, its ability to project power contingent on its perception as a competent security partner and power broker. Should its role in these two capacities come into question, which is entirely possible given the budgetary and personnel constraints, it would spurn the creation of a new security paradigm and likely see China assume the role that Russia once claimed – hegemon of Central Asia.

Simultaneous engagement in Central Asia and in the Caucasus may be even more unsustainable for Russia. Turkey recently initiated the expansion of the Organization of Turkic States to Russia's

dismay, and some interpreted the Kazakhstan CSTO mission as a strong message to Ankara as well. How the Kremlin manages its involvement in Kazakhstan – and whether the ultimate outcome is a net positive or net negative for Russian influence – will be a bellwether for future adventures in the region. At the very least, Russia is left emboldened and more confident post-Kazakhstan.

As Turkish power and ambition grows and Iran expresses increased interest in the areas to its North-West, Russia is destined to increase its involvement in the Caucasus as well. Thus, Washington's engagements with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia are crucial for the U.S. policy vis-à-vis Russia, Turkey and Iran. It is in the U.S.'s strategic interests to keep an eye on Moscow's gambits in these two crucial geographic regions, and maintain and increase its political and military presence there in the years to come.

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