

Central Asia: The Last Stronghold of a Declining Russia?

Written by Otabek Akromov

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OTABEK AKROMOV, AUG 19 2024

Sitting next to Vladimir Putin at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2022, the President of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, declared that Kazakhstan does not recognise any quasi-state territories, including Taiwan, Kosovo, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Lugansk and Donetsk. At the Astana Summit of the Commonwealth of Independent States in October of the same year, the president of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, addressing Vladimir Putin directly, said, “we have always respected the interests of our main strategic partner, [Russia]. We want respect, too.” What explains this audacity of leaders from the Central Asian region, which has always been considered Russia’s backyard? One of the main reasons behind the weakening of Moscow’s authority in the region lies in Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. However, an underlying cause that has nurtured distrust and triggered the decline of Russia’s authority is how Moscow has systematically used and abused its great power status in the region.

Realist scholars such as Kenneth Waltz (1979) and John Mearsheimer (2001) define great powers as states that possess and are capable of using military, economic, and political power to influence international affairs. That being said, they often overlook the societal aspect of great powers, placing paramount – and sometimes exclusive – importance on crude power. Great powers, however, become and remain as such as long as they are recognised by others as having special rights and duties in international society (Bull 1977). This recognition is earned when major powers protect international society by maintaining the balance of power and safeguarding the sovereignty of smaller states. Russia’s abuse of its dominant position in Central Asia and its subsequent invasion of Ukraine demonstrate how the misuse of crude power in the contemporary international system undermines great power status and leads to its decline.

After the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia was still geographically big, but it proved to be a weak state that was deeply mired in a myriad of domestic problems. Russia regained its great power status under Putin’s rule, symbolically marked by his 2007 Munich speech. Russia’s return to great power politics is largely attributed to its assertive role in countering American global expansion, including creating a backlash against democracy promotion. Moscow succeeded in this endeavour during the outbreak of so-called colour revolutions in the post-Soviet region. For instance, Russia helped ensure the regime survival of Central Asian states when the West stigmatised and sanctioned them for human rights violations, which could potentially incite mass protests in the region. Moscow, individually and through international organizations, provided diplomatic support and economic assistance, helping local leaders maintain their legitimacy and prevent potential social instability. Thus, Russia systematically contributed to preserving the international society of authoritarian states by resisting the democracy promotion efforts of the US and the European Union. These efforts culminated in Uzbekistan’s voluntary accession to the Collective Security Treaty Organization in 2005, making it the last recalcitrant state from Central Asia to join Russian political and military projects.

The foregoing duties that Russia fulfilled granted Moscow special rights in the region. The Kremlin enjoyed significant influence in determining issues of strategic importance, whether in military, political, or economic spheres in Central Asia. For instance, Russia had exclusive rights to establish military bases in the region and closely monitored political contacts between the five Central Asian states and the West. Central Asian republics also supported Russian

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international efforts by voting in favour of Moscow's positions within international organisations. Additionally, Moscow promoted the Russian language and culture in the region. Economically, Russia controlled major gas pipelines and trade routes, and it has been the main destination for Central Asian migrants.

As a result of its exclusive position in the region, Russia maintained a mentality of "the strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must" towards the Central Asian republics. The Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia, primarily advances Moscow's geopolitical goals rather than fostering economic integration among its member states. Although the fundamental principles of the EEU are to ensure freedom of movement and the free movement of goods by eliminating customs duties and other non-tariff barriers, the Kremlin violates these principles whenever it deems necessary. Additionally, Russia has used anti-immigration policies as political leverage against Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Uzbek governments, which in turn have fostered xenophobia and racism against Central Asia migrants, negatively impacting the overall attitude of people from the region towards Russia.

Russia also exploited its economic and strategic advantages inherited from the USSR against the region. One of the Soviet legacies that has had a detrimental influence on the sovereignty of Central Asian states is the fact that major routes and the transportation of energy resources out of the region primarily led through Russia. This gave Moscow a strategic advantage in utilising its transit potential to gain political concessions from the Central Asian republics by leveraging the Northern Corridor and the Central Asia-Center pipeline. Russia consistently tried to forestall any attempts to diversify trade and gas pipelines in the region and to disrupt potential integration processes among the five republics of Central Asia.

These aggressive policies in the region created widespread distrust toward the Kremlin. Instead of building a rule-based order and enhancing existing trade and energy projects to offer mutually beneficial opportunities, Russia restricted its approach to exploiting these instruments as political leverage against Central Asian states. While this was effective in forcibly tying the region to Russia for a certain period, in the long run, it undermined trust. It encouraged Central Asian republics to seek ways to escape this dependence whenever an opportunity arose. Consequently, these states have capitalised on the rise of China to diversify gas pipelines, while Russia has struggled to withstand and compete with China's growing economic presence in the region. Additionally, Russian intervention in Ukraine further weakened its position, opening avenues for Central Asian countries to explore alternative trade routes and potential balancing powers in the region.

One of the main projects that has actively been promoted in Central Asia is the Middle Corridor trade route. This initiative is seen as an alternative to Russia's Northern Corridor, which connects China to European markets via Russia. In contrast, the Middle Corridor is a multimodal land and sea transport route that facilitates the movement of goods from China to Europe through Central Asia and the Caucasus. Spanning over 4,250 km of rail lines and 500 km of seaways, this route is 2,000 km shorter than Russia's Northern Corridor. Moreover, Kazakhstan is increasing oil exports through non-Russian routes under an agreement with Azerbaijan to use the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline. These alternative routes are gaining popularity, particularly in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The weakening of Russia's authority is also evidenced by the intensification of regionalism among the five republics of Central Asia and their growing cooperation with the West. For instance, these republics initiated the Central Asian Summit, which has been held annually since 2018 (except during the period of the pandemic) without the participation of external powers. As a result, the region's total foreign trade turnover in 2024 reached \$220 billion, nearly doubling compared to 2017. Recently, these republics have conducted war games for the first time without Russian or Chinese participation. In their efforts to further decrease Moscow's influence, Central Asian states are also working to build a regional identity, with some even closing down Russian propaganda channels as a measure to diminish the Kremlin's impact on identity formation.

External powers are also playing their part in fostering regionalism in Central Asia. The US presence in the region has been revitalised with the signing of a new US Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025 and Joe Biden's participation in the New York summit of C5+1. The recent business Forum B5+1 held in Almaty demonstrates Washington's commitment to fostering regional connectivity from within. Its allies further solidify American efforts in the region. For

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example, the EU recently announced a €10 billion commitment to the Middle Corridor project. At the same time, Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has offered a Central Asia aid package to establish trade routes and promote people-to-people exchanges. The availability and presence of alternative powers aiming to strengthen the sovereignty and independence of local states against Russian influence indicate the decline of Moscow's once-exclusive position in Central Asia.

Another significant trend in the relations between Russia and Central Asia underscores the weakening of Russia's influence in the region. Central Asia was once heavily dependent on Russia in many spheres, but this is being reversed. After losing a substantial portion of its European market, Gazprom has been seeking new opportunities to export natural gas to different destinations, including Central Asia. As a result, the Central Asia-Center pipeline, which previously supplied Russia with gas, has now been diverted to sell Russian gas to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Russian economy also needs high-quality and innovative technologies from the West. However, due to economic sanctions and other restrictions levied by the US and EU, Russia has been unable to import those goods. As a result, Moscow relies on the markets of some Central Asian countries as a re-exporting hub, which increases Russian dependence on the region.

Russia is also experiencing a decline in migration from Central Asia. Since April 2024, the number of job seekers from Tajikistan in St. Petersburg has decreased by 60%, while those from Uzbekistan have fallen by 40%. Additionally, Uzbekistan's dependence on remittances from migrants working in Russia is diminishing. For instance, in the first half of 2024, the volume of remittances to Uzbekistan increased by 25% to \$6.5 billion, primarily due to a sharp rise in money transfers of migrants working in the USA, Germany, South Korea, and Poland. This trend indicates that Russia's share continues to decline amid the demographic crisis that emerged due to the war in Ukraine, which has strained its economy by reducing available manpower.

The primary focus of contemporary Russian foreign policy is finding ways to mitigate the international isolation of its leadership, which began following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As part of this effort, Russia seeks to demonstrate to the world and its own population that it still has "friendly" countries. To this end, Russian propaganda attempts to portray the Central Asian republics as supportive of Russia's military operations in Ukraine. However, these countries often abstain or do not participate in relevant votes altogether.

Russian authority was reinstated when it resisted American expansion in international relations by preserving the balance of power and protecting the sovereignty of smaller states. However, due to the excessive use of crude power manifested in the intervention of Ukraine and unilateralism in Central Asia, Russian authority is in decline. The invasion and occupation of a sovereign territory for the first time since the end of World War II, aligned with the imperialistic rhetoric of Putin, caused extreme caution among Central Asia states. On top of that, systematic abuse of Russia's exclusive position in the region reinforced this mistrust, thus motivating Central Asian republics to seek ways of diminishing their dependence on Russia. Thus, Moscow's instruments of extracting political concessions in the region are gradually losing their effectiveness as the war in Ukraine continues. Of course, due to its size and geographic proximity, Russia will always be a major player in Central Asian affairs. However, the extent to which neighbouring states recognise Russia as a security guarantor is declining. This is evidenced by the centrifugal tendencies in Central Asia, including the lack of political support for Russia, the intensification of intra-regional cooperation, and the search for alternative power sources. Nevertheless, what remains uncertain is whether or not the West will stay committed to strengthening the sovereignty of Central Asian states.

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