
6. The policy of Russia in Central Asia: a perspective from Kazakhstan

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I. Introduction

Zbigniew K. Brzezinski was correct in his evaluation of the geopolitical role of Eurasia:

A power that dominated Eurasia would exercise decisive influence over two of the world's three most economically productive regions, Western Europe and East Asia. A glance at the map also suggests that a country dominant in Eurasia would almost automatically control the Middle East and Africa . . . In the short run the United States should consolidate and perpetuate the prevailing geopolitical pluralism on the map of Eurasia. This strategy will put a premium on political maneuvering and diplomatic manipulation, *preventing the emergence of a hostile coalition that would challenge America's primacy*, not to mention the remote possibility of any one state seeking to do so. By the medium term, the foregoing should lead to the emergence of strategically compatible partners which, *prompted by American leadership*, might shape a more cooperative trans-Eurasian security system. In the long run, the foregoing could become the global core of genuinely shared political responsibility.¹

There is nothing to add to this. However, Brzezinski would be wrong to assume that there is no state capable of challenging the leadership of the USA in Eurasia. There is such a state—Russia, despite its present political, economic and military weakness. The question is whether Russia is ready to solve the problem and whether it has an effective strategic and tactical plan to solve it.

An analysis of the policy of Russia in the Central Asian region helps to indicate an answer to this question.

II. The course of Russian policy

The character and direction of Russian policy in Central Asia since the collapse of the USSR at the end of 1991 can be divided into several stages.

1991–93: Russia loses its position

For both objective and subjective reasons Central Asia continued its extreme economic dependence on Russia but found itself on the periphery of Russian policy. There is no doubt that the ethnic–political factor, which began to inten-

¹ Brzezinski, Z., 'A geostrategy for Eurasia', *Foreign Affairs*, Sep./Oct. 1997, pp. 50–51. Author's italics.

sify in the USSR at the end of the 1980s, played a role in separating the newly independent states from Russia. Having no other ideological basis for the development of their own statehood, the majority of the former national republics returned to their national sources, and this strengthened the nationalistic tendencies in them.

However, as early as the end of 1992 the growth of these tendencies had practically stopped and been replaced by an understanding of the necessity of independent economic survival. One of the paradoxes of the Soviet economic system was that for a long time the national republics were subsidized from Russia. For example, in 1988 the positive trade balance of Russia with other republics (in world prices) was \$51 billion. The share of Kazakhstan was \$11 billion, of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan \$1.8 billion each and of Uzbekistan almost \$5 billion. Only with Turkmenistan was there an equal flow of trade.² On the eve of the collapse of the USSR the share of direct subsidies from the USSR in the republican budgets varied from 20 per cent in the case of Turkmenistan to 45 per cent in Tajikistan.³ Technical credits from Russia were of immense importance for the newly independent states. In 1992 in Kazakhstan they amounted to 25.1 per cent of gross national product (GNP), in Kyrgyzstan 22.6 per cent, in Tajikistan 42.3 per cent, in Turkmenistan 67.1 per cent and in Uzbekistan 69.2 per cent. For the first seven months of 1993 in Kazakhstan they were worth 48.8 per cent of GNP, in Kyrgyzstan 23.9 per cent, in Tajikistan 40.9 per cent, in Turkmenistan 45.7 per cent and in Uzbekistan 52.8 per cent.⁴ There were no other sources to compensate for the loss of these subsidies.

Other objective conditions, apart from economic factors, played an essential role in maintaining the position of Russia in Central Asia—a common cultural space, the size of the Russian ethnic group, the still rather attractive image of Russia as an economic and political partner, political levers of influence, and so on—as did subjective factors. The majority of the leaders of the Central Asian states, in spite of their nationalistic rhetoric, ‘were aware of the highly vulnerable nature of their nations’ premature births, and each leader recognized the risk of his own ouster’.⁵ Fear of destabilization in the event of sharp estrangement from Russia and their inability to resolve independently not only potential interstate but also intra-state conflicts made an integration model of relationships with Russia more attractive for the states of Central Asia.

Unfortunately the potential of these factors that would favour integration was not used by Russia to create the tools of integration in the economic, political and military fields. While making enormous efforts to approach the USA and Western countries, Russia lost practically all the opportunities open to it in that period to preserve its influence in Central Asia.

² Shmelev, N., ‘The prospects of recovery and development of economic cooperation between Russia and countries of Central Asia’, *Panorama* (Almaty), no. 42 (Nov. 1996), p. 8 (in English).

³ Shmelev (note 2).

⁴ Shmelev (note 2).

⁵ Olcott, M. B., ‘Central Asia’s catapult to independence’, *Foreign Affairs*, summer 1992, p. 108.

Table 6.1. Ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers in Central Asia, 1989

	Ethnic Russians	Russian-speakers
Kazakhstan	6 230 000	7 800 000
Kyrgyzstan	916 000	1 090 000
Tajikistan	388 000	495 000
Turkmenistan	333 000	421 000
Uzbekistan	1 650 000	2 150 000

Source: Vishnesvky, A., 'Migration in the ex-USSR within new geopolitical context', *Eurasian Community: Economics, Policy, Security*, nos 6-7 (1995), p. 78.

Moreover, the countries of Central Asia were perceived merely as the 'Asian underbelly', which ostensibly Russia had to cut off in the interests of a faster entry into Europe. The fact that more than 8 million ethnic Russians lived in the 'Asian underbelly', to say nothing of the Russian-speaking population (see table 6.1), was ignored. Historically, in terms of civilization and geopolitics, this territory had become 'rooted' to Russia. To sever its links would be dangerous for Russia itself because it could be the first step on the path to its own complete destruction as a federation. Nature, moreover, abhors a vacuum. Sooner or later it is filled with something else. There was also a delusion of another kind, connected with a critical view on Russia's part of the ability of the new post-Soviet states of Central Asia to form their own nationhood and develop independently. At the same time Russia forgot or ignored the potential of the technical and especially human cadres that had been formed there during the Soviet period.

The results proved extremely serious, if not tragic, for Russia's interests, while the regional states demonstrated their viability with more or less success. Moreover, some of them, having geopolitical and/or economic (above all, oil and transport) advantages, became the central links of new alliances, which occasionally directly or indirectly had an anti-Russian orientation, threatening the stability and the territorial integrity of Russia.

Russia itself was gradually losing its former positions in Central Asia. Today its trade turnover with countries of Central Asia is only one-third of the volume of trade with the former Central Asian republics in the USSR.⁶ Russian investments in the Central Asian zone of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) were sharply reduced. Technical credits through the Russian state budget were stopped. The new rouble put into circulation in the summer of 1993 in fact 'pushed out' the countries of Central Asia from the rouble zone, which accelerated their introduction of their own national currencies. In terms of trade, prices, financial transactions and currency exchange the Central Asian states were placed on the same footing with the countries of the 'far abroad'.

⁶ *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 26 Apr. 1997.

Moreover, the openness of Russia and of the majority of the post-Soviet states, including the Central Asian states, to the external world created conditions for outside influence on them to increase. Countries along the perimeter of the former USSR and leading world powers were again tempted to try to redistribute influence in the post-Soviet space. A strengthening of the USA and US-controlled international political and financial organizations in the region, attempts by Iran and Turkey to dominate in post-Soviet Central Asia, the strengthening of China, the rearmament and consolidation of the countries of the Islamic world and finally the demonstrated ineffectiveness of Russia's 'pro-West' foreign policy—all this logically drove Russia into a corner. As a result of shedding the burden of being a net donor to the Central Asian states, Russia lost its attractiveness to these countries as a main cooperation partner.

1994 to early 1996: new alliances

Russia was now immersed in domestic political struggle, the redistribution of property and the formation of new oligarchies and financial-industrial groups, and lost all control over the processes going on in the Central Asian region. In this period the former Soviet republics of Central Asia moved from the stage of proto-state formations to become real states with all the necessary attributes. All the tendencies that had appeared at the first stage that were negative for Russian influence continued to strengthen. The individual states were finally formulating their national interests, establishing their strategy for economic and political development, and selecting their strategic partners.

After the proposal of President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan in March 1994 for the creation of a Eurasian Union (*Evroaziatskiy Soyuz*) was ignored, integration began to move in the direction of the formation of different alliances. In September 1993 Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan had signed the Treaty on Deepening Cooperation; on 30 April 1994 they signed the Treaty creating a Unified Economic Space.⁷ The Central Asian Union, originally consisting of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, was set up in 1994; on 10 February 1995 the three countries signed the treaty setting up the Interstate Council.⁸ On 20 January 1995 Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia signed the Treaty founding the CIS Customs Union. In March 1996 Kyrgyzstan joined this treaty, thus forming the 'union of four';⁹ Tajikistan joined in February 1999.

⁷ 'Dogovor o sozdanií edinogo ekonomicheskogo prostranstva mezhdy Respublikoy Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzskoy Respublikoy i Respublikoy Uzbekistan' [Agreement on the creation of a unified economic space by the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Republic of Kyrgyzstan and the Republic of Uzbekistan], *Sbornik Dokumentov po Mezhdunarodnomu Pravu*, vol. 2 [Collection of documents on international law] (CAK: Almaty, 1998), pp. 250–54.

⁸ 'Soglasheniye o Mezhdunarodstvennom Sovete Respublikoy Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzskoy Respublikoy i Respublikoy Uzbekistan' [Agreement on the Interstate Council of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Republic of Kyrgyzstan and the Republic of Uzbekistan], *Sbornik Dokumentov po Mezhdunarodnomu Pravu*, vol. 1 [Collection of documents on international law] (CAK: Almaty, 1998), pp. 125–28.

⁹ By the Treaty on the Deepening of Integration in the Economic and Humanitarian Spheres (the 'Treaty of Four'). For the text, see *Sbornik Dokumentov po Mezhdunarodnomu Pravu*, vol. 2 (note 7), pp. 284–88; and *Diplomaticheskii Vestnik*, no. 4 (1996), pp. 56–60.

Also in 1996 an agreement between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Uzbekistan on the creation of a Eurasian transport corridor was signed;¹⁰ GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova) was formed in May 1997. With the exception of the 'union of four', in all its alliances Russia was given observer status at best and its significance as a 'locomotive of integration' was reduced within the framework of the CIS. The CIS itself was becoming a more and more ephemeral organization and was gradually dying.

It is important to emphasize that by the end of this period the process of redistribution of property in the post-Soviet states was generally completed. New and fairly significant players, large holders of property of both domestic and foreign origin, appeared in interstate relations. Their commercial interests began frequently to prevail over the will of the political leaders of these states and to determine the dynamics of the integration and disintegration processes.

Since 1996: integration or disintegration?

The third stage of the evolution of Russia's policy in Central Asia began when the pro-Western orientation of Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev was replaced in January 1996 by the more balanced orientation of Yevgeny Primakov. Russia began to make titanic efforts to regain its influence in the region—in many respects too late. With the exception of common threats, which are described below, the leaders of the Central Asian states were apparently not inclined to wait any longer until Russia had dealt with its own problems and begun to build up normal relations with its CIS partners.

Having lost its political and economic positions in Central Asia, Russia could no longer remain a landmark for the countries of the region. The vacuum was filled, on the one hand, by the increasing influence of China, Iran, Turkey and the USA and, on the other by attempts to create a 'common market of Central Asia' which, in the words of Nazarbayev, covers 50 million people, has huge hydrocarbon resources and has good prospects for rapid economic growth. Despite the Central Asian countries' differences of view about the problems of geopolitics, the internal contradictions and their different vectors of development, the latest direction of regional integration seems to have some prospects. Tajikistan joined the Central Asian Union in 1999. That Turkmenistan was also close to doing the same was shown at the January and June 1998 meetings of the leaders of five Central Asian states in Ashkhabad and Astana.

The other policy orientation on the basis of which the coordination of the interests of the Central Asian states is possible, and which will limit even more the political and economic influence of Russia in the region, is the selection of routes for the transport of hydrocarbon raw materials. Huge reserves and the existing transport and transit restrictions, caused first of all by the policy of Russia, are forcing Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to search for the most accessible and profitable routes to the world markets. This is being

¹⁰ *Delovaya Nedelya*, 23 May 1997.

actively encouraged by Western companies, which are pushing the states of Central Asia to use transport routes that bypass Russian territory. The Caspian region is being increasingly transformed into another conflict zone on CIS territory. This is not only because of the forecast reserves of hydrocarbons. The oil of the Caspian region is a minor factor in comparison with the geopolitical significance of plans to 'push out' Russia from Central Asia.

Objectively, the 'oil factor' is contributing not to integration but to disintegration, for several reasons. First, in the near future the states of the Caspian region will be potential competitors of Russia, delivering their power resources to outside markets, first of all in Europe. Second, to an even greater extent they will become competitors for foreign investment. In this respect they are in a better position than Russia, since much less investment will be needed to develop Caspian deposits and transport hydrocarbons to the world market than is the case with Russia's oil and gas projects.

In these circumstances Russia is left with only one strong means of influencing the Caspian states—control of the export pipelines. However, there are no reasons to believe that it will maintain its monopoly over transporting Caspian hydrocarbons to Europe. First, Western governments interested in the Caspian projects and in strengthening their influence in the region (first of all the USA) and Western oil companies differentiate between the delivery of oil and gas to the world market. Second, the leaders of all the Caspian states, although not denying Russia its role, also support alternative routes. Finally, the commercial interests of Russian petroleum companies may not coincide with the state interests of Russia. The situation is developing in such a way that the system of land communications connecting Europe and the USA through Iran and Turkey with the countries of Central Asia can pass through the Caspian region. The plans are already partly realized. If this project of bypassing Russia's territory is realized Russia will completely lose control over this geopolitically important region.

Under present conditions the position taken by the Russian political establishment raises many questions. In spite of the changes in Russia's policy it has apparently not yet realized its geopolitical and geo-economic role as a key power on the Eurasian continent, nor the role individual leaders may play for the benefit of integration. However paradoxical it may seem, today personal contacts between the leaders of the CIS states may still work in favour of integration within the CIS. The close personal contacts between presidents Boris Yeltsin and Nazarbayev played the not least role in integration between Russia and Kazakhstan; contacts between Nazarbayev and Askar Akayev, President of Kyrgyzstan, were as important in facilitating Kyrgyzstan's joining the 'union of four'. It should be stressed that up to now the majority of issues between members of the Central Asian Union and other member states of the CIS have been decided at the level of state leaders. In this connection it is more than strange that Yeltsin was absent from a meeting in June 1998 between China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan on border problems and from the presentation of the new capital of Kazakhstan, Astana, in July 1998. If

the leader of Russia not only ignores the personal invitation of the president of another state but also neglects even the interests of collective security, this will hardly promote integration.

III. Russia and Central Asia: mutual interests

In this sense one can agree with *Izvestiya's* political observer, Alexander Bovin, that the future of Russia as a great power will depend on whether it manages to realize its Eurasian status and to enter the global community as an effectively operational, useful bridge—political, economic and cultural—between western and eastern Eurasia.¹¹ This cannot be done without close political and economic cooperation between Russia and the states of Central Asia. The main task of the foreign policy of Russia in this region is to develop a strategy which takes into account all the arguments and will promote a revival of its political and economic influence in the region.

Russia still remains the most important neighbour and partner for all the Central Asian countries. Moreover, it is the only powerful guarantor of regional stability and security in the region.

Russia's loss of its previously dominant positions in Central Asia, a deliberate policy on the part of third countries of pushing it out from the region, a prolonged crisis in the Russian economy and society, and the search for new strategic partners—all these things could not but undermine the old authority of Moscow on the Central Asian periphery. They encouraged nationalistic aspirations within a certain spectrum of the Central Asian societies and encouraged local elites to pay less attention than before to and sometimes even neglect the interests of the noticeably weakened former 'metropolis' in this region.

Even so, Russia has the chance to keep its influence in the region.

Economic factors for integration

Although in economic respects the Central Asian states are becoming less and less dependent on Russia, it still remains their main trade and economic partner. Because of their geographical position, in particular their lack of a direct exit to the sea, and because of the remaining orientation of the regional infrastructure, the greater part of the import and export transactions of the Central Asian countries is still with Russia or other countries of the CIS. In 1997 the share of trade with Russia plus other CIS countries in the trade of Kazakhstan was 53 per cent of exports and 69 per cent of imports; for Kyrgyzstan 78 per cent and 55 per cent, respectively; for Tajikistan 34 per cent and 60 per cent; for Turkmenistan 68 per cent and 87 per cent; and for Uzbekistan 23 per cent and 32 per cent. For comparison, only 18 per cent of Russian exports go to the CIS countries and 29 per cent of its imports come from these countries.¹²

¹¹ Bovin, A., 'Kazakhstanskiy azimut' [Kazakhstan azimuth], *Izvestiya*, 8 July 1998.

¹² Rasov, S., 'In new Central Asia', *All Over the Globe*, 15 Mar. 1998.

In the foreseeable future such factors as the Central Asian countries' rich deposits of raw materials, the construction of roads to the sea, their adaptation to the world market, the development of extensive relations with suppliers of high-technology equipment from countries of the 'far abroad' and competition on the hydrocarbons market will be factors for disintegration. However, there will remain such obvious integrating factors in the economic field as the well-tested system of pipelines and other types of transport; market conditions providing for mutual exchange of goods and services; and interest in maintaining cooperative and technological ties, above all in power engineering and transport, in order to preserve the viability of enterprises created before the break-up of the USSR and oriented towards joint activity. In any case, the contacts of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and even Uzbekistan with Russia, given all their positive and negative aspects, speak for themselves.

Common threats

Common threats arising in the region are also of crucial importance for the strengthening of Russia's positions in Central Asia. The Afghan centre of instability in the zone of the 'Islamic arc' is rapidly advancing to the north. The development of a narcotics route to the West through the region is an enormous common danger. The fact that existing state boundaries do not coincide with ethnic boundaries contains the threat of a temptation to change them. The national interests of the Central Asian states are far from coinciding. Finally, a very important factor is the increasing internal instability in these states. Add to those factors the 'Chinese factor' and the threat of 'Islamic extremism' and the picture becomes rather complex.

The interest in Russian help in localizing these threats is obvious. It is greater in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, less urgent for Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Although the threats are different for each of the Central Asian states, the extent of the danger is understood by all. It is also understood that successful localization of those threats is practically impossible without Russia.

A merging of the Afghan and Tajik conflict potentials could completely destroy the existing power balance not only in Central Asia but in all its geopolitical environment as well, creating an extensive belt of instability in the zone of the 'Islamic arc'. The growing 'ethnicization' of the conflict in Afghanistan could in its turn revive the ghost of 'ethnicization of the boundaries' and increase desire for boundary changes. This would significantly expand the conflict zone, probably up to the Caucasus region. It is easy to predict what would follow. Since stability in the region depends almost entirely on external factors, someone should undertake the burden of responsibility for localizing conflict and maintaining stability in this region. Despite a significant foreign presence, no country can make a greater contribution than Russia.

As to the Chinese factor, the following circumstances must be kept in mind. At the beginning of the next century the planned economic growth in China and other Asian countries will change the pattern of global consumption of oil,

natural gas and other principal natural resources. This will increase the significance of the Central Asian and Russian deposits of natural resources. The needs of Asia will stimulate the formation of new trade relations, transport schemes and pipeline construction, and this will require a strengthening of China's presence in the Central Asian region. Although China's attention at present is concentrated on a southerly direction, this will undoubtedly place significant economic and demographic pressure on Central Asia and the Russian far east. In both senses, Russia will have to adapt to China, which is looking to take its place among the leading world powers. If a deep internal crisis prevents China from becoming a global power, its impact will be felt even more strongly, since a weakened Russia will have to resist unrest and chaos passing from a destabilized China not only into Russia but also into Central Asia.

This gives Russia a chance to keep its influence in the region. Whether one likes it or not, objective analysis of the geopolitical situation in post-Soviet Central Asia shows that China and Russia are still the dominant external forces there, capable of influencing each other and the world at large. Other forces in the region either have an insignificant role or are mere formal presences, and in the event of any real threat their role would almost certainly be reduced to zero.

Islamic influence will continue to leave its mark on the states of the Caucasus and Central Asia and on the border regions of Russia. The new Muslim states on the territory of the former USSR will eventually take their place in the Islamic world. Moreover, it is quite possible that in Tajikistan or elsewhere in Central Asia groups with fundamentalist connections and inclinations will come to power. States like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, less exposed to traditional Islam, will remain under the influence of Russia slightly longer than others, but even they will become more and more Islamic in time to come. A strengthening of Islam in Russia itself cannot be excluded and would carry a potential threat of destabilization if consensus between the Muslim regions of Russia and the states of the 'Islamic arc' were to be reached on an anti-Russian basis.

However, even here the situation may not be disastrous. First, the states of Central Asia developed over several centuries under the influence of Russian civilization. Russia was constantly present in both the European and the Asian balances of power as a decisive element. Therefore, not surprisingly, the attention of observers is still focused on the power and not on the weakness of Russia. Second, however paradoxical it may sound, Islam, now radical Islam, if not actually forcing the Central Asian states closer to Russia, is at least making their political establishments feel uncomfortable. No other factor explains Uzbekistan's sharply changed attitude towards its former metropolis.

IV. Conclusions

There is a clear trend for Russia finally to lose its political and economic positions in Central Asia. If this tendency was latent in the region in 1994–96, today it is visible. There are a great many reasons to explain it, among them the

reluctance of Russia's CIS partners to lose even a part of their sovereignty; the position of the USA and Western powers which do not wish to see Russia strengthened; and the aspirations of China, Iran, Turkey and others to redistribute spheres of influence in Central Asia. However, the main reason is Russia itself. The weakening of the Russian economy and military power and the permanent political struggle which has enfeebled the Russian state machine and central authority have left it incapable of backing up its diplomatic activity and recapturing the image of an attractive strategic, economic and political partner.

Is this situation hopeless? In the author's view, disregarding the linkage between the limited capabilities of Russia and its changed geopolitical environment, it is not. Russia's capabilities in relation to the Afghan, Chinese and Islamic factors have been mentioned, and the internal problems of the states of Central Asia are not likely to be resolved without the participation of Russia. In Russia itself, judging by recent publications there, an understanding is developing of the extent of the threatened loss of its geopolitical influence in the post-Soviet space and of the need to strengthen Russia's positions in a southerly direction. The Russian political elite, with rare but significant exceptions, seems in many respects to have determined its policy concerning Kazakhstan. Russia has concluded that conflict with Kazakhstan is undesirable, and this gives hope for the future. Kazakhstan and even Uzbekistan took their steps, both announcing the preservation of close contacts with Russia, and Kazakhstan concluding its strategic partnership agreement with the USA. The next step is for Russia to settle and to reconsider its attitude towards the region taking into account the changed circumstances.

An ideal model of cooperation between Russia and the countries of the Central Asian region involves, on the part of the former, overcoming its paternalism and great-power recidivism, and on the part of the latter the rejection of their odd combination of militant nationalism and dependence. The 'romantic' period of nation-state building in the countries of Central Asia is over. The froth of local nationalism, frequently disguised as a belief in democracy, has settled. The euphoria of independence and sovereignty and of the achievement of formal parity in relations with the former metropolis is being replaced by a comprehension of the rigid realities of post-Soviet life and of the lack of alternatives to sustained cooperation with Russia.

The re-establishment and consolidation of the Russian presence in the region and an end to tendencies unfavourable for Russia are possible if a coordinated policy of dynamic and flexible balancing within the framework of a real power balance in the region, taking into account Russia's much reduced capabilities, is pursued. This policy should avoid the extremes of attempting to facilitate integration, dictated by current political needs, on the one hand, and merely passively observing the shrinking Russian presence in the region, on the other. The idea of Eurasian integration is not so fruitless, and the Russian political establishment should recollect where the 'geographical axis of history' lies and what elements constitute real geopolitical values for Russia.