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The Right Distance: Russia–Central Asia Relations in the Aftermath of the Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract

The Central Asian states adopted an ambiguous positioning when addressing the sharp polarisation that Russia's invasion of Ukraine instigated within the geopolitics of Eurasia. This short paper analyses Russia–Central Asia relations within this newly polarised geopolitical settings, contextualising recent developments in the partnership within the processes of authoritarian consolidation currently at play in the region.

Producing a comprehensive assessment of the impact that the ongoing invasion of Ukraine continues to exert on the intensity of Russia's relationship with Central Asia represents a challenging analytical endeavour. Consider, for instance, the seven-minute monologue with which long-term Tajik president Emomali Rahmon addressed Vladimir Putin at the Russia–Central Asia summit held in Astana on 14 October 2022. Due to its tone and content, the speech, which predictably went viral across Central Asia's digital space, has often been regarded as an indicator that Putin's standing in the region has been irreparably damaged by his decision to invade Ukraine. A few elements of the speech, which was incidentally delivered in Russian, do however reveal a series of more intriguing nuances. To begin with, Rahmon complained about Russia's attitude *vis-à-vis* Central Asia, yet publicly demanded an increase in Russian investment in the region. Moreover, the Tajik president noted that Russia's regional policies disregard the importance of the partnerships between Moscow and the Central Asian capitals, but then proceeded to recognise, implicitly but not insignificantly, the strategic nature of these very partnerships.

To my mind, the Tajik president, through his typically boastful demeanour, was not calling for a comprehensive downgrading of the overall relationship; rather, he was seeking a profound recalibration of Russia–Central Asia ties. Its rhetorical fervour was certainly unprecedented, yet Rahmon's speech was also somewhat consistent with some of the strategic priorities contained within the neo-Eurasianist agenda pursued by former Kazakhstani president Nursultan Nazarbayev, as well as echoed portions of the foreign policy discourse crafted in post-Karimov Uzbekistan. This interpretation, which underpins the argument brought forward in this short paper, calls for a thorough re-examination of recent developments in Russia–Central Asia relations and, most importantly, their simultaneous contextualisation as occurring within the processes of authoritarian strengthening currently at play in the region.

Domestic Obstacles to a Wider Geopolitical Realignment

A very public debate on Central Asia's colonial past arose in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This debate—which stimulated scholars and intellectuals, particularly in Kazakhstan, to reflect publicly on the Soviet experience and its many neo-imperial legacies—was instigated by the eruption of the war and sustained by many unfortunate declarations issued by Russia's increasingly nationalistic, and internationally isolated, élites. In addressing this debate, the Central Asian leaders resorted to making regular reference to matters of sovereignty and independence in their foreign policy rhetoric. In policy terms, this rhetoric translated into the adoption of a series of postures that reaffirmed the international autonomy of Central Asia *vis-à-vis* Russia's ongoing attempts to obliterate Ukraine as a state and as a nation. Noteworthy examples include Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev arguing for the primacy of territorial integrity over self-determination when accounting for his refusal to recognise the statehood of the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics, while the government in Tashkent promptly announced sanctions on those Uzbek citizens who joined the Russian army as part of the conscription drive launched in September 2022. Similar postures did not, however, evolve into open condemnations of the invasion: in pursuit of a delicate balance, Central Asia's leaders did not support the onset of military operations in Ukraine, conformed—with some minor exception—to the sanctions regimen imposed on Russia, but never proceeded to express overt, unreserved criticism of the invasion itself. Their fragmented voting record at the UN General Assembly encapsulates the paradoxical paradigm sitting at the core of Central Asia's foreign policymaking in late 2022. In frantically pursuing equidistance from the belligerent parties, Kazakhstan even suspended its arm exports entirely, in order to avoid any of its arms reaching Ukraine. Uzbekistan went one step further, swiftly replacing a high-ranking official, namely foreign minister Abdulaziz Komilov, after he had pub-

licly called, during a parliamentary debate, for the immediate cessation of violence in Ukraine.

The invasion of Ukraine instigated a rapid, sharp polarisation in the geopolitics of Eurasia. The Central Asian states responded to this polarisation by attempting to maintain what they saw as the right distance from the Russian Federation, that is balancing the intensity of their relations with Russia in a context of the competing pressures exerted by the Kremlin and the international community on the one hand, and those arising from domestic political developments on the other. In pursuing this often-elusive equilibrium, the Central Asian leaders pursued an established foreign policy stance—the primacy of their domestic authoritarian stability—in a rapidly changing regional and international settings. Throughout 2022, at least three of the five Central Asian regimes have embarked upon, and in some cases completed, processes of authoritarian regeneration: Turkmenistan, in March 2022, successfully orchestrated the region's first dynastic transition; Uzbekistan, after an attempt executed with limited success in June–July 2022, continues to grapple with the identification of a viable solution to remove constitutional term limits on the presidency of Shavkat Mirziyoyev; and, in Kazakhstan, the re-personalisation of the political landscape around the figure of Tokayev turned out to be the key to seal the era of instability book-ended by Nazarbayev's relinquishment of the presidency in March 2019 and the events of January 2022. Such processes normally place intra-élite relations under significant stress: it is therefore unrealistic to consider their completion to be entirely disconnected from the preservation of the Kremlin-centric network of authoritarian solidarity that, throughout the last decade, has so often contributed to stabilising the Central Asian regimes.

Maintaining the right distance from Russia is significant to the Central Asian regimes in navigating their domestic consolidation drives without alienating an important source of authoritarian support or, alternatively, encountering the potentially destabilising criticism of Western states. It has become, in this sense, a key factor behind their decisions to engage in ultimately ambiguous positioning *vis-à-vis* the invasion of Ukraine. This is, however, not to say that the invasion itself has not significantly altered other aspects of the wider Russia-Central Asia relationship: multilateral integration and people-to-people ties, as the next two sections will demonstrate, have undergone a profound transformation after Russian troops entered Ukrainian territory on 24 February 2022.

The End of Eurasian Regionalism?

Russia-led Eurasian multilateralism constitutes one specific cooperation area that has likely been irrevocably damaged by the Kremlin's decision to invade Ukraine. The Central Asian leaderships have always struggled to

come to terms with the neo-imperial connotation intrinsic to the three Russian-led multilateral organisations, namely the Commonwealth of Independent States [CIS], the Collective Security Treaty Organisation [CSTO] and, more recently, the Eurasian Economic Union [EaEU].

The invasion, to begin with, obliterated any prospect of the EaEU's membership expanding in Central Asia. As Russian tanks rolled into Ukrainian territory, the Uzbek debate on whether to join the EaEU—a rare instance in which the foreign policy of a Central Asian state came to represent the object of genuine public discussion—lost any momentum. The neo-imperial rhetoric emanating from the Kremlin throughout 2022 confirmed the reservations of the anti-EaEU segments of the Uzbek élite, who opposed membership by pointing to the many downsides of increased dependence on the Russian Federation. As the sanctions regimen persists, and the Russian economy remains in a state of perhaps irreversible crisis, Central Asia's EaEU members, and Kazakhstan in particular, are likely to oppose further integration with Russia in the economic realm, so as to prevent Russia's declining economic performance becoming an even more destabilising influence upon local economic processes.

The geoeconomics of war have, incidentally, been equally detrimental for already existing economic linkages: the regular interruptions that the Caspian Pipeline Consortium—the main export route for Kazakhstan's crude oil—has experienced throughout 2022, served to confirm that large-scale economic cooperation between Russia and Central Asia has entered an era of enhanced precariousness. However precarious, longstanding linkages with Russia are unlikely to evaporate overnight: the economic impact of the war is expected to constrain Central Asia's economic recovery from the pandemic, increasing the importance that established linkages have for future growth.

So far as the CSTO is concerned, recent events in Central Asia had presented this organisation with a series of opportunities to regain currency after many years of operational stasis. On the one hand, the intervention in Kazakhstan (January 2022) sealed the CSTO's role as a nodal point of the region's authoritarian solidarity networks pivoting on the Putinite regime: the mission conducted in Almaty—almost entirely comprising of Russian military personnel—helped Tokayev and his associates to regain control over a rapidly deteriorating situation, after a split in the ruling élite had led to the eruption of violence and lawlessness in the streets of Kazakhstan's former capital city and had threatened to overthrow the regime as a whole. The same reactive response, on the other hand, was not deployed as violence escalated at the border between two other Central Asian CSTO members—Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The Kyrgyz government, in retaliation for what it perceived as the lack of protection provided by the organisation during these border clashes, subsequently cancelled large-scale

CSTO military exercises it was due to host. Considering also the impasse that this organisation is experiencing in the context of the ongoing conflict between its member state Armenia and its neighbour Azerbaijan, more than one legitimate question surrounds the CSTO's future, both within and outwith Central Asia.

New Facts on the Ground: Russia's *relokanty* in Central Asia

After the launch of a mobilisation drive across the Russian Federation, many Russian citizens left the country to escape conscription. The outflux of Russian citizens reached Central Asia, with the Kazakhstani government reporting 200,000 arrivals from Russia between 21 September and 5 October 2022; approximately 50,000 Russians are thought to have arrived in Uzbekistan across the same period. Not all *relokanty* intend to permanently settle in Central Asia, however, and many have already left the region in search of long-term settlement elsewhere. Those who have stayed have so far contributed to an unprecedented rise in the local cost of living, as Central Asia's unregulated rental market reacted to a sudden rise in demand by significantly raising prices for medium-term and short-term accommodation. This is the second wave of Russian immigration to Central Asia since the war has started: in March–April, Russian professionals moved to the region with a view to escape the asphyxiating political climate developing at that time across the Russian territory.

The precise impact of a sustained increase in Russians residing in Central Asia is difficult to anticipate; there is nevertheless mounting evidence pointing to the mixed responses to the short-term inclusion of *relokanty* into the social fabric of the region's principal urban centres. While a generally warm welcome, based on Central Asia's tradition of hospitality, has been extended to Russian citizens who moved to the region in the autumn of 2022, local media reports noted that some disgruntled citizens have underlined the poor treatment traditionally received by Central Asian migrants in Russia, while also highlighting that the region's most nation-

alistic fringe communities have begun to express some concern about the impact that Russian outmigration may have upon Central Asia's ethnic balance.

Always in pursuit of their ambiguous positioning *vis-à-vis* the war and its multifaceted impacts, the Central Asian regimes have to date opted to tolerate the influx of Russian citizens escaping conscription, excluding any consideration of extradition and allowing them to stay within the limits imposed by existing national legislative frameworks. At least for the moment, the politics of Russia's *relokanty* to Central Asia would seem set to stay confined within the people-to-people dimension of the overall relationship between Russia and Central Asia.

Concluding Remarks

The invasion of Ukraine changed the parameters of the broader Russia–Central Asia relationship, altering some of the trends that had defined this partnership across the last decade. The neo-imperial reverberations of the invasion itself seem to have convinced the region's leaders to set a series of redlines that they are no longer willing to cross while dealing with the Putin regime. Recalibrating the relationship by diluting its colonial dimension may be one of these red lines; limiting Central Asia's further integration into Russia-led multilateralism is certainly another one. The regional appeal of the EaEU and the CSTO has in this sense entered an era of irreversible decline, suggesting that, in Central Asia at least, the post-Soviet regional order has all but ended.

It is however too early to argue that Russia's clout within the region has vanished. Beyond their differences on the neo-imperial connotation of Russia's foreign policy, the Putin regime and its Central Asian counterparts do ultimately share an equally non-democratic outlook, and are part of the same networks of authoritarian solidarity stretching across Eurasia. However low the international reputation of the Putin regime may fall, these networks are unlikely to dissipate overnight, preserving, for a few more years at least, Russia's centrality *vis-à-vis* the power preservation agendas pursued by the Central Asian regimes.

About the Author

Luca Anceschi is Professor of Eurasian Studies at the University of Glasgow, where he is also the editor of *Europe-Asia Studies*. He can be followed on Twitter [@anceschistan](https://twitter.com/anceschistan).

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