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Andrei P. Tsygankov

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Mariya Y. Omelicheva

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## 20

## CENTRAL ASIA

*Mariya Y. Omelicheva*

UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS, USA

In December 2016, Russia's president Vladimir Putin signed a decree approving a new Foreign Policy Concept for the Russian Federation (2016). The document updates and amends the goals and directions of Russia's foreign policy in response to the changes in U.S. politics and international affairs. The main regional priorities remain, however, the same. Similarly to the previous foreign policy documents,<sup>1</sup> the new concept names regional integration within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and cooperation with CIS members as Russia's regional priorities. In a notable change to the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept, which listed Ukraine as Russia's "priority partner" in the CIS, the new document plays up the Eurasian Union comprised of the two Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, and Russia. Central Asia is also highlighted in the new document in yet another way. The 2016 Foreign Policy Concept stresses Russia's national interest in the Far East, where twelve regions of the Russian Federation share a nearly 7,000-kilometer-long border and strategically important infrastructure with Central Asia.

The region that encompasses the former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, has always mattered to Moscow. The eighteenth-century Russian conquests of the nomadic and settled people of Turkic and Iranian origin had given the Tsars and, later, the Soviets, control of a vast landmass of striking topographic and human diversity. Historical legacy of Tsarist and Soviet domination has left an indelible mark on Russia's perceptions and attitudes toward Central Asia. The region's pivotal geopolitical location, coupled with security vulnerabilities and immense hydrocarbon resources, has been central to the Kremlin's foreign policy toward Central Asia.

The goals of this chapter are to review, assess, and explain Russia's foreign policy in Central Asia. It begins by providing an overview of the theoretical explanations dominating the thinking about Moscow's foreign policy. These explanations will be highlighted in the subsequent sections examining the key issue areas of Russia's foreign policy in Central Asia. These include security cooperation, energy cooperation, trade and economic relations, and Russia's effort to sustain its appeal as the foremost partner in Central Asia. Each of the sections will reflect on the record of Russia's successes and failures. The central argument of this chapter is that the dominant geo-political and ideological readings of Russia's relations with Central Asian states are limited in explaining Russia's foreign policy toward the region. I suggest examining Russia's engagement in Central Asia by looking at Russia's own geopolitical imagery. Such a critical

geopolitical perspective shifts the discussion of foreign policy from an exclusively materialist and ideological foundation to the realm of discursive constructions, the so-called geopolitical visions about global politics and Russia's place in the world. These geopolitical visions provide Russia with a repertoire or descriptive and prescriptive ideas making certain foreign policies and their outcomes more or less possible.

### **Explaining Russia's foreign policy in Central Asia**

The majority of publications on Russia's foreign policy have interpreted its international conduct through a lens of political realism (see, for example, Kubicek, 1997; Bohr 2004; Bohr, 2004; Blank, 2011; Cooley, 2012). Realist commentaries have also appeared under the rubric of classical geopolitics emphasizing the geostrategic importance of Central Asia to Russia, but also China, the United States, and other states.<sup>2</sup> From the vantage point of political realism, Russia's foreign policy in Central Asia represents one element of the renewed "Great Game," the geopolitical race for influence and control of the vast energy resources in the region (Menon, 2003; Marketos, 2009).<sup>3</sup> In the 1990s, U.S. and Chinese companies were in competition for the Central Asian gas and oil. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, Central Asia assumed a marked geostrategic importance for Washington. The United States opened two military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to facilitate the transfer of military supplies for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troops in Afghanistan and increased its military assistance to Central Asia.<sup>4</sup> The direct security engagement of the United States in Central Asia has evoked strong Russian reaction. NATO's Partnership for Peace program activities in Central Asia invoked similar concerns. The Kremlin feared that over time this might diminish Russia's role in the post-Soviet territory and allow the United States and NATO to expand further southeast (Menon, 2015).

Russia has also been cast as an inherently expansionist empire, whose authoritarian political culture and entrenched imperialist outlook have shaped its policies toward its neighbors (for further discussion, see Tsygankov, 2012; Van Herpen, 2014; Omelicheva, 2016). Prominent historians studying the relationship of the Russian Empire to the non-Russian borderland underscored the role of its imperial ideology centered on its beliefs in "virility and power" and recognition by the Western states of Russia's expansionism (Pandey, 2007: 324). Russia's belief in its civilizing mission toward the backward people of the East was also named among the reasons behind Tsarist Russia's policies, and the Soviet institutional, cultural, and ideological frameworks of control established in Central Asia.<sup>5</sup> In contemporary scholarship, Moscow's imperialist ideology has been linked to diverse ideas and images about a cultural unity of peoples in the post-Soviet territory that Russia is predestined to preserve (Laruelle, 2012).

Russia's continuing quest to define and strengthen its national identity has given rise to explanations informed by constructivist assumptions (Hopf, 2002; Clunan, 2009; Tsygankov, 2013). The constructivist conceptions of Russia's foreign policy have highlighted the centrality of the idea of greatpowerness in Russia's understanding of the Self. Central Asia has been significant to Moscow principally because the region has been fundamental to Russia's self-perceptions as a great power state. Russia's global status has given it the ipso facto "right for involvement" in any matter Russia sees as important for its own interests (Lo, 2002: 53; Smith, 2016).

My contention is that neither perspective by itself suffices to provide a complete understanding of Russia's foreign policy. The factors that determined the Russian desire to dominate Central Asia have been complex, interrelated, and changing. They included economic and geopolitical motives, but also imperial ideology necessitating the extension and retention of state authority over diverse populations. A deeper understanding of Russia's foreign policy in Central Asia can be achieved through the application of an approach that integrates the insights

from different theoretical perspectives, considers the context, and recognizes ways in which the Russian leadership, itself, views the world and Russia's place in it. A critical geopolitical perspective measures up to these expectations. It synthesizes orthodox geopolitics and geo-economic discourse to develop a new understanding of changing geopolitical images held by the nations (Zabortseva, 2012: 170). Instead of conceptualizing foreign policy as a product of imperial ideology or competition for power and resources, the critical geopolitical approach views it as a social, cultural, discursive, and political practice of "construction of ontological claims" (Kuus, 2010). These are the so-called "truths" of global politics constructed, defended, and experienced by the leadership of countries (Omelicheva, 2016). The examination of Russia's engagement with Central Asia through the lens of its own beliefs about power, ideology, and the nature of global affairs can enhance our understanding of Moscow's foreign policy in the region.

### Security-related drivers of Russia's foreign policy in Central Asia

According to the government rhetoric and specific projects engineered by Russia in Central Asia, security-related considerations have been the primary drivers of Moscow's engagement with Central Asian states. For the Kremlin, the rise of religious extremism and terrorism in the predominantly Muslim nations has been the most alarming development in Central Asia. Consequently, Russia has sought to insulate itself from the threats associated with the activities of radical Islamic groups in Central Asia<sup>6</sup> and drug trafficking flows traversing the region from Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup>

To coordinate states' efforts in the fight against terrorism, the Russian leadership initiated the CIS Anti-Terrorist Center (ATC), which was established in Moscow in 2000. A structural subdivision of the ATC was opened in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. The intensified military and security cooperation of Russia with the former Soviet Union republics was institutionalized in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), whose permanent military base was established in Kant, Kyrgyzstan, in 2002. The base hosts part of the Collective Rapid Deployment force (CRDF) designed to support "collective security" of the region. Another CRDF division is staged at the 201st Military Base in Tajikistan. This is Russia's largest military facility abroad with an estimated 7,500 military personnel in 2016 (Laruelle, 2008).

Concurrently, President Putin invested considerable time and effort to reenergize another security grouping, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The original mandate of the SCO was limited to the issues of border demarcation and demilitarization. By 2002, the organization had expanded its objectives to the fight against the "three evils" of terrorism, Islamism, and separatism to assuage security concerns of its founding members – Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) was established in Tashkent in 2004. Conjoint antiterrorist operations, military exercises, and security drills held under the auspices of the SCO and CSTO have become a regular feature of Russia–Central Asia security cooperation. The CSTO has also implemented the annual international counter-narcotics drills *Kanal* (Channel), and instituted the Collective Rapid-Response Force in 2009 to counter aggression, terrorist attacks, and drug trafficking operations (Omelicheva, 2011).

Russia has scored some success in its security and military affairs in Central Asia. In the defense, military, and security sectors, the region remains firmly anchored to Moscow. The Kremlin planners map out security cooperation with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and even Kazakhstan on the many aspects of these states' security and defense policies. These include joint military exercises, the purchasing and servicing of weapons and systems from Russia, sharing of intelligence information, cooperation over border control, and the training of military and security

personnel (Omelicheva, 2011). Russia reinforced its military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and moved closer toward its goal of creating of a joint CSTO air defense system with Armenia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan (McDermott, 2012).

On the other hand, Russia has ignored the Central Asian states' internal dynamics conducive to political instability, terrorism, and organized crime. The Kremlin-led regional security projects have had a negligible impact on the root causes of security problems that continue to plague these states. A possible explanation for this inconsistency in the outcomes of Russia's military and security policies in Central Asia can be found in the arguments of political realism. According to the realist perspective, Russia's military and security engagement in Central Asia has been driven by geopolitical motives superseding its immediate concerns with regional security threats. Russia has sought regional domination under the banner of counterterrorist policy for countering U.S. hegemony and NATO's expansionism. In the 1990s, Russia's own economic, political, and military problems stymied the realization of Moscow's ambitions. By the turn of the twenty-first century, the global economic situation was favorable to the realization of Russia's geopolitical objectives. Russia's economic upturn coincided with Vladimir Putin's rise to power. The restoration of Russia's influence in international affairs was declared the chief priority for the Putin administration.<sup>8</sup>

While Russia's Central Asian policy cannot be understood outside the context of Russia-U.S. relations, as argued by political realism, the specific form that Russia's security and military policy has taken in Central Asia can only be discerned through the analysis of Russia's own geopolitical imagery of the region. The Russian views on Central Asia are rooted in historical memories of invasions that came from the Central Asian steppes. Improving the defenses of Russia's eastern frontiers became Moscow's strategic imperative. With the Central Asian territories fully absorbed by the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, Russia enjoyed a strong defensive position, partly attributable to the topography of the region. The only exception was a small portion of the border with Afghanistan, where the difficult terrain made it virtually impossible to stage a large army. This led to a long-term Russian unease, with the threat in Afghanistan still playing out in the modern times. Russia's 201st Military Base, previously known as the 201st Motor Rifle Division in Tajikistan, is its largest military contingent abroad. The division constitutes the core of the CSTO's rapid deployment force and has been continually reinforced by the Kremlin with new armaments. Russia has been seeking to expand this military base by adding an air component to it. The largest military reconnaissance exercise to date under the auspices of the CSTO took place in Tajikistan in 2016, where about 1,500 servicemen from CSTO member states practiced a scenario of an army of insurgents crossing into Tajikistan from Afghanistan.

Although, there is little evidence that any state or non-state group intends to infiltrate Russia or Central Asia, from the Russian standpoint history is filled with uncertainties and changes of intent, particularly in the West. Against the backdrop of NATO and U.S. expansion along Russia's western flank, Russia cannot hope to survive without a good defense in Central Asia. Yet, as in the Tsarist and Soviet times, modern Russia lacks a clear security and military strategy for Central Asia, but seeks to mesh together geopolitical and security goals under the banner of counterterrorism.

Those examining Russia's foreign policy through the lens of its neo-imperial ideology argue that Tsarist and Soviet legacies of domination in Central Asia have shaped its security and military approaches in Central Asian states. Indeed, Russia has borne the costs of security initiatives in Central Asia, and its forces, doctrines, weapons, and technology have dominated the CSTO's exercises and training. Russia's political leadership has occasionally coached Moscow's engagement in the region in cultural, philosophical, and spiritual terms. However, there have been

several inconsistencies between the expectations of neo-imperial ideology and Russia's foreign policy in Central Asia. Moscow did not seek, for example, to defend the sizeable Russian minorities in the region, despite the rise of ethnic nationalisms in all Central Asian states. It invested relatively few resources in the construction of Russian schools, universities, and military programs in the region that are so critical to the implantation of Russian culture into Central Asian states. The neo-imperial expansionism thesis has been further negated by the Kremlin's refusal to intervene in Kyrgyzstan during the ethnic riots in 2010, despite the appeals for Russia's help by Bishkek.

### **Russia's energy initiatives in Central Asia**

Vladimir Putin's first two presidential terms (2000–2008) coincided with the period of high global prices on energy that encouraged his efforts at regaining state control over Russia's gas and oil enterprises. In 2005, the state became a major shareholder of Gazprom, a successor to the Soviet Ministry of Gas Industry exercising near monopoly on Russia's extraction, production, transport, and sale of natural gas. The Russian state also holds a controlling share of stock in Rosneft, one of the largest oil companies in the country, and owns two other companies – Transneft and Transnefteproduct – which operate all oil pipelines (except the Caspian Pipeline Consortium) (Goldman, 2008; Rutland, 2008).

In 2005, Vladimir Putin introduced a new concept of Russia as an “energy super-state” to describe Moscow's intent to use its dominant position in the energy market and near monopoly on the supplies of gas to multiple states for raising its international clout in relations with European countries and former republics of the Soviet Union (Kazantsev, 2010). This merger of Russia's energy and foreign policy appears to be consistent with the premises of political realism. The latter advocates the use of power for achieving national interest, and natural resources constitute an important element of national power.

Central Asia rich in natural resources has become drawn into Russia's energy schemes. Kazakhstan's Tengiz oil and gas field located along the northeast shores of the Caspian Sea is the sixth largest oil field in the world, and its proven gas reserves rank fifteenth in the world. Turkmenistan's gas reserves are second only to Russia's proven natural gas reserves. The Russian monopoly over the gas and oil transportation routes to and from Central Asia provided Moscow with a powerful bargaining chip in negotiations for lower import prices on Central Asian gas and oil. The resale of cheap Central Asian energy to Ukraine, Georgia, and European customers, and using the imported energy for the government-subsidized domestic consumption, afforded Russia considerable geopolitical and economic benefits at the time of high world energy prices. All in all, Moscow has regarded Russia's control over the production, sales, and transportation of energy resources in Central Asia as a vital strategic asset for enhancing its political and economic standing in the region (Kanet and Sussex, 2015).<sup>9</sup>

Moscow's energy policy in Central Asia has also demonstrated inconsistencies with the realist expectations. Russia's energy initiatives in the region have been motivated by the goal of countering U.S. and EU influence in the energy sector. In 2007, for example, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan signed an agreement for the reconstruction and expansion of the western branch of the Central Asia–Center gas pipeline connecting the Caspian gas fields in Turkmenistan with the Russian natural gas pipeline system (Yesdauletova, 2009). The idea behind this new pipeline was to reduce the rationale for projects like Nabucco, which was designed to transport gas from the Caspian Sea to Europe bypassing Russia, backed by the EU and the United States. It is China, however, that has broken Russia's economic and energy monopoly in Central Asia. In 1997, the state-owned Chinese National Petroleum Company (CNPC) won

a development and exploration contract for two of the richest oilfields in Kazakhstan. By the end of 2005, CNPC had completed the construction of a new pipeline bringing Kazakhstan's Caspian oil to China's Xinjiang (Fishelson, 2007). In December 2009, the Chinese president Hu Jintao welcomed the opening of the Turkmenistan–China natural gas pipeline, running from Turkmenistan through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to China. Also in 2009, the Kenkiaak–Kumkol section of the Kazakhstan–China oil pipeline became fully operational. The final stage of the pipeline, stretching nearly 3,000 km across Kazakhstan to the Caspian oil fields, was completed in 2011, but additional work on new pumping stations has continued to increase the pipeline's capacity (Weitz, 2008). The construction of the Central Asia–China gas pipeline system has lessened Russia's strategic importance for Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and even Kazakhstan in terms of energy politics. Although, Central Asia was potentially a hotbed for rivalry for regional hegemony between Russia and China, Moscow and Beijing have avoided political tensions over Central Asian states.

Furthermore, the realist perspective is unable to explain the nature of a statist geo-economic model based upon the principle of state control of economic policies, even at the expense of economic prosperity. Although, Russia has had several distinct traditions of foreign policy thinking,<sup>10</sup> statist beliefs have dominated Russia's foreign policy during Vladimir Putin's term. With its emphasis on the preservation of, and increase in, the role of the state in social, political, and international affairs, the statist ways of thinking encourage the consolidation of state control over economic relations rather than the development of market-based institutions and norms. In the context of Russia, statist beliefs have been juxtaposed on the framework of patron-client relations between political and economic elites which originated in the Soviet period. The ruling elites view society as their own private domain and appropriate public resources for personal gains in the form of rents from natural resources, among other things (Becker and Vasileva, 2017).

In Russia, a model of economic development designed to boost state power and feed particularistic interests has undermined its economic growth. Within this framework of statist thinking and client-patron relations, Russia's Gazprom has quickly depleted its old gas deposits, but has failed to divert its profits into substantial investments into the modernization of equipment and exploration of the new gas and oil wells. The business of re-selling Turkmen gas, whose prices increased more than 20 times throughout the 2000s, became unprofitable.<sup>11</sup> In 2008, Gazprom was forced to buy Turkmen, Uzbek, and Kazakh gas at the European price owing to growing Chinese competition. The geo-economic logic inspired by the concept of "energy super-state" has failed under the impact of the global financial crisis, the competition from liquified natural gas, and an increased volume of the shale gas projects in the United States and Europe.

### **Russia's economic engagement with Central Asia**

The decade following the disintegration of the Soviet Union witnessed a flurry of efforts aimed at the institutionalization of economic cooperation of the newly independent states. The numerous treaties signed under the auspices of the CIS envisaged the creation of a common market and economic union, a free trade zone, and a space for free movement of people and capital. Economic projects uniting all CIS members were, however, unsuccessful in furthering integration, and Moscow sought to replace it with smaller regional projects. In Central Asia, these efforts led to the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEc) in 2000 with the goal of promoting the creation of the Customs Union and a Single Economic Space between its members – Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Russia also sought to strengthen its economic position in Central Asia by joining the Organization of

Central Asia Cooperation (OCAC) in 2004. Russia's hope was that the OCAC, established by the Central Asian republics in 1994 for coordinating their economic policies, would merge with the EurAsEc. The OCAC dissolved into the EurAsEc the following year, and Russia acclaimed the creation of a unified economic space with the Central Asian republics and Belarus as an important economic complement of the CSTO (Laruelle, 2008).

In practical terms, Central Asia has played a lesser role in Russia's economic policy compared to, for example, the EU, which has been Russia's first trading partner. The turnover of goods between Russia and Central Asia remained very low throughout the 1990s (US\$6–9 billion annually), and constituted only 6.7% of Russia's total annual trade turnover in 2009. Trade turnover began growing in the post-2008 financial crisis period, but remained far behind Russia's trade volume with the European states.<sup>12</sup> It also retained the overall pattern of primary commodity orientation. The main products exported from Central Asia are raw materials, primarily gas and oil, but also minerals, agricultural products, and chemicals. Russia exports various manufactured goods to Central Asia. Russia's proportion of total foreign investment in the Central Asian republics also increased in the 2000s, but remained low compared to its share of foreign trade turnover in the same states (Sinitsina, 2012).

The ebbs and flows of Russia's internal economic situation have affected the fate of Russia's economic policies in Central Asia. The economic crisis of 1998, the financial crisis of 2008, and the recent economic recession sparked by the plummeting of oil prices and Western sanctions on Moscow have had a deleterious effect on the health of Central Asian economies. All Central Asian republics have sought to diversify their economic relations to decrease their dependence on Russia, and with the revitalization of Chinese economic relations with the region, Russia's economic standing in Central Asia has been reduced. Starting in 2008, China gradually displaced Russia as the largest trading partner with all of the Central Asian states, and became a major lender and investor in these countries, especially in the energy sector. Beijing has been supplanting Gazprom's presence in Turkmenistan by increasing its purchases of natural gas ever since 2009, and it has recently taken over in Kyrgyzstan as the builder and partner in two hydro-power projects forsaken by Moscow (Kelly-Clark, 2016).

In 2013, Beijing proposed a new development strategy and framework involving Central Asia. The Silk Road Economic Belt is an initiative to integrate China with countries of Central and Southeast Asia into a cohesive economic area through building pipeline and railways infrastructure, broadening trade, and increasing cultural exchange. To counter this push by Beijing, Vladimir Putin announced the development of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), as a way to tie Central Asian republics to Russia. Developed from the Customs Union created by Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan in 2007 (which came into force in 2010), and the Single Economic Space established by the same states in 2012, the EEU came into effect in 2015, replacing the EurAsEc. The EEU seeks to eliminate non-tariff barriers and facilitate trade among the EEU members. It will also allow for the free movement of capital and labor, liberalization of services, and harmonization of the member-states' regulations. Armenia and Kyrgyzstan joined the EEU along with Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus.

Putin's thinking about the EurAsEc and the EEU as the "civilizational alternatives" to the EU have been cited as examples of Russia's imperial projects (Vasilyeva and Lagutina, 2016). Putin's appeals to Russia's "civilizational identity" and the "preservation of Russian cultural dominance" in the wake of the events in Ukraine (Putin, 2012) have also been used to testify to Russia's neo-imperial aims (Galeotti and Bowen, 2014). Upon closer inspection, the Kremlin perspectives on Eurasia are complex, diverse, and volatile. Vladimir Putin instrumentalized the various Eurasianist ideas and coached Russia's foreign policy in civilizational terms. He, nevertheless, has shied away from the most radical ideas promoted in the slogans of nationalist parties



(e.g., the National Bolshevik Party led by Eduard Limonov) and writings of selected Eurasianist scholars such as Alexander S. Panarin and Alexander G. Dugin (Tsygankov, 2016).

By focusing on Russia's reactions to U.S. expansionism, realist perspectives have overlooked the nature of EU policies in Central Asia. It has been argued, for example, that Russia's foreign policy has partly proceeded from a reaction to EU structural power in the Central Asian states. The interpretation of EU policies in Central Asia and the choice of responses to them have been mediated by the domestic politics of Russia (Cadier, 2015). The EEU, in particular, has been connected in its goals and design to the EU, and its time of emergence has been tied to the development of EU programs in the post-Soviet territory. The EEU's emphasis on market integration through the harmonization of standards, norms, and regulations provides evidence to support EU influence on Russia's vision of its own structural power in Central Asia (Cadier, 2015).

### **“Soft power” in Russia's foreign policy in Central Asia**

Neither the political realist theories nor the perspectives highlighting Russia's neo-imperial aims consider Russia's efforts to increase the appeal of Moscow's model of political and economic development in an effort to counter U.S. hegemony in the ideological realm. According to the Kremlin, a great power in international relations is supposed to flaunt an attractive model of development and exhibit moral greatness (Ziegler, 2012).

Although the Kremlin has never promoted its view on governance as actively as Western states and international organizations, it, too, has sought some convergence between Russia's own and other states' perspectives on governance and international relations by embedding its expectations into Russian foreign policies. Using regional organizations created in the post-Soviet space, Russia has pursued a new regional order through the definition and institutionalization of certain values and norms which operate in opposition to the accepted principles of liberalism, democracy, and freedom. Moscow's political discourse, for example, has emphasized the existence of multiple democratic models and paths to democratization, and called for recognition of this diversity and equality of the various forms of democratic rule. In this way, Russia has acted consistently with an expanded conception of a great power state which possesses soft power resources and is able to play the role of a normative architect of international relations. Moscow has formalized the concept of “soft power” in its foreign policy repertoire in Russia's 2013 Foreign Policy Concept as well as in the new Foreign Policy Concept approved in 2016.

The Kremlin based its ideological, image-making, and public relations campaign on a more effective use of electronic media. The Internet has become a cheap and convenient resource for disseminating Kremlin-backed information about Russia at home and abroad. Moscow's TV news and radio programming, in both English and Russian, have been systematically employed in an effort toward “regime branding” and legitimizing Russia's policy abroad (Lankina and Niemszuk, 2015). In 2005, the Russian government inaugurated its own grant-making scheme for delivering funds to the homegrown and foreign organizations loyal to Russia. This became part of the effort to create a network of state agencies, NGOs, think tanks and research institutions operating in Russia and abroad with the goal of promoting a positive image of the country and countering Western soft power (Omelicheva, 2015: 105). Moscow opened cultural and language offices in Central Asian states resembling Western projects, and organized youth exchanges and educational programs. Russia-backed and funded organizations have become actively involved in various international practices such as development financing and

election monitoring, once exclusively controlled and administered by Western institutions (McGlinchey, 2011).

## Conclusion

Russia's foreign policy in Central Asia has gone through a definite shift under the leadership of Vladimir Putin. Deserted by the Kremlin in the early 1990s, the region became an important strategic theater for Russia in the 2000s. Russia significantly expanded its economic cooperation with the Central Asian republics, tripling its trade with the region between 2003 and 2007. Moscow funded and implemented multiple industrial projects in the region, and retained its dominant position in the prospecting, production, and transportation of Central Asian gas and oil. In some measure, Russia has succeeded in keeping Central Asian republics in its orbit of influence by applying the traditional methods of strategic and economic manipulation and "soft power" tools. No other states surpass Moscow's military, defense, and security ties with Central Asia. Russia dominates the energy transportation routes and has the most diverse portfolio of investments in the region. Its political ideas and frameworks have been attractive to the leaders of Central Asian states. Russia's soft power has generated copycat versions of several Russian legislative initiatives by Central Asian governments.

The geopolitical loyalty of Central Asia to Moscow has come, however, at the expense of practical outcomes in regional affairs (Baev, 2005). Not only have Russia's bilateral and multi-lateral initiatives in Central Asia failed to effectively address the problems of drug trafficking, terrorism, and obstacles to regional economic integration, they have furthered the political malformations responsible for engendering them. Viewed in this light, Russia's foreign policy has had a damaging, if limited, effect in Central Asia.

The unveiling of the EEU coincided with a deep economic recession in Russia. The value of the Russian ruble plummeted in the wake of Western sanctions, Russia's counter-sanctions, and low oil prices. To avoid losing their competitiveness, the Central Asian EEU members have been forced to let their currencies weaken along with the ruble. Furthermore, Russian consumers' demands for imports from key Central Asian industries fell precipitously. Combined with the reduced purchases of gas by Gazprom, the drop in commodities' sales affected the volume of turnover trade between Central Asian countries and Russia. The fall in exports to Russia has had particularly harmful effects for the Central Asian members of the EEU, which joined the union to benefit from greater access to the Russian market. Before Kazakhstan allowed its currency to float, its citizens opted to buy the relatively cheap Russian goods in Russia, prompting the Nazarbayev government to call for negotiations to restrict the trade. According to statistics from the EEU, trade between Kazakhstan and Russia from January–November 2015 was down 25.6% compared to the same period in 2014, and between Kyrgyzstan and Russia down 19.4%. The trade turnover between Russian and Kazakhstan was lower by 26% in 2016 for the same period compared to the previous year, and down 6% with Kyrgyzstan (Eurasian Commission, 2017). The EEU's ability to mollify the systemic fault lines and international contradictions characterizing the EurAsEc were questioned by analysts. The current economic recession in Russia adds an additional level of uncertainty about the future of the EEU (Cadier, 2015: 169; Tarr, 2015).

Russia's economic decline has also affected the millions of Central Asian migrants working there whose earnings plunged, affecting the wellbeing of their families at home. Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan are among the most remittance-dependence states in the world, and the Central Bank of Russia has recorded two-fold drops in remittance transfers to these countries since the beginning of the crisis. For the Kremlin, the migration issue was a powerful instrument for inducing the entry of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan into the EEU. The Russian economy had

also benefited from injections of low-paid Central Asian labor (Laruelle, 2008; Lo, 2015). The crisis, however, has unleashed virulent anti-migrant sentiments in Russia, prompting the Putin administration to introduce more stringent visa regulations for migrants. Restricting Central Asian migration to Russia has been compared to cutting foreign aid, with far more damaging consequences for the Central Asian people.

The important differences in the Central Asian states' political and economic potential<sup>13</sup> and differences in their foreign policy preferences have also affected Russia's foreign policy strategies in Central Asia. The Kremlin has approached Central Asia as a region, but has also focused on building and strengthening bilateral relationships of varying importance in different foreign policy sectors with individual Central Asian states (Oliphant, 2013; Lo, 2015). Kazakhstan has been viewed as Russia's most reliable and valuable partner, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have only mattered for Moscow's regional security interests and measures aimed at countering Western influences and democratization attempts. Uzbekistan has been a pivotal component of regional security, but very difficult to influence. Turkmenistan has played an important geo-economic role for Moscow, despite the recent row over the gas contract negotiations with Ashgabat. Reflecting these diverging priorities of the Russian Federation and the realities of Central Asia, Moscow's foreign policy in the region has often proceeded through bilateral rather than multilateral frameworks, and is likely to retain this "logic of hierarchy" that seeks to support selected states with more focused instruments in the near term (Cooley and Laruelle, 2013).

According to the critical geopolitics perspectives advocated in this chapter, Russia's perceptions of and interests toward Central Asia have been evolving and multilayered. The Kremlin has visualized Central Asia as a zone of geopolitical contestation with the West, a strategic location central to Russia's defense and reaffirmation as a great power (Sakwa, 2013: 174). Russia's economic and energy policies in Central Asia have been influenced by Moscow's statist thinking and the tradition of patron-client economic relations. The region has been featured in Russia's civilizational narratives highlighting its right, responsibility, and destiny to play a decisive role in regional politics, security, and international relations. In Russia's official discourse, references to geopolitical considerations have been intertwined with civilizational arguments. Russia's quest for great power status has been broached in practical as well as cultural and historical terms. Combined with the realist assessment of Russia's relative capabilities, this type of geopolitical-ideological reasoning has given rise to Russia's foreign policy in Central Asia being designed to close the gap between its ambitious self-perceptions and the uncomfortable realities of a rapidly changing world. The fusion of practical and ideological arguments allowed the Russian government to rely on an elastic, opportunistic, and pragmatic approach in its relations with Central Asia.

The place of Central Asia in Russia's foreign policy will continue to grow and will be dominated by political and security concerns. What changes may come will be driven by several factors, particularly the status of U.S.-Russia relations and the popular legitimacy of the Putin regime. Central Asia policy is far from being a top priority for the new U.S. administration. The region matters to the U.S. government in the context of broader U.S. policies, such as security in Afghanistan. The limited economic, security, and civil society engagement with Central Asia entertained in the past will remain in place or decline under the leadership of president Trump. At the same time, Central Asian regimes and people have become suspicious of the U.S. political agenda, and critical of its role in Eurasia and the Middle East. Central Asian governments will be hesitant to commit themselves to U.S. initiatives that go contrary to Russia's interests in Central Asian states, as the price would be too high and have an uncertain result. However, Russia will seek to strengthen its position in Central Asia, including in the economic realm, to compensate for the political independence of Ukraine and Georgia, and U.S. continued support for strengthening NATO and building European nuclear, cyber, and conventional defenses.

The “Great Game” in Central Asia, however, will be played between Russia and China. The changes in the energy market – rising costs of Central Asian gas and competition from the liquefied and shale gas projects in the Persian Gulf, United States, and Europe – will be the primary drivers of Russia’s economic downsizing in Central Asian states, leaving more room for China’s growing presence in the Central Asian states. Whether or not Moscow will feel threatened by China in Central Asia will depend on the extent to which Beijing will seek to translate its growing economic presence into political influence. Similarly to Russia, China has viewed the region as a second-order priority in its foreign policy and has not been eager to exploit its economic power for increased political clout in the region. China is pretty much the only external player to have made inroads in Central Asia, and the region has seen increased activity by Turkey, India, Iran, Pakistan, and the Middle Eastern states. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have tried to distance themselves from Russian-led integration, while reaching out to other external powers.

### Notes

- 1 Vladimir Putin approved the 2000 and 2013 foreign policy concepts of Russia upon assuming the post of Russia’s president. Dmitri Medvedev decreed the 2008 foreign policy concept following his inauguration as the Russian president.
- 2 Although, there are important differences between the classical geopolitics and realist traditions, there are also certain consistencies in their assumptions about the world, including state-centrism, the centrality of power, and pursuit of hegemony.
- 3 “The Great Game” is a phrase used to describe a political and diplomatic rivalry between the Tsarist Russia and British Empire in the nineteenth century over Central and Southern Asia.
- 4 Karshi-Khanabad (K2) airbase in Uzbekistan was shut in 2005 at the request of the Uzbek government. The Transit Center in Manas, Kyrgyzstan, was closed in 2014.
- 5 The Soviet Socialist republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan were created in the late 1920–1930s by the Soviet nationality planners and became thoroughly integrated into the Soviet system (Rywkin, 1990; Crews, 2006).
- 6 The problem of Islamism in Central Asia has been associated with activities of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Hizb ut-Tahrir, and a number of less known radical Islamic movements, such as Akramiya and Tablighi Jamaat among others.
- 7 Because of its geographic position between the major narcotics producing territories of Afghanistan and the major narcotics markets in Europe and Russia, Central Asia serves as a transit area for drugs.
- 8 Vladimir Putin rose to Russia’s leadership in 1999 having replaced ailing Russian president Boris Yeltsin.
- 9 Furthermore, Kyrgyzstan is completely dependent on Russia for energy import, and Tajikistan’s all oil-based products are imported from Russia. Kazakhstan, where local oil refineries are unable to meet all the country’s needs, also partly relied on the supply of oil from the Siberian refineries in Russia.
- 10 Among those philosophical traditions are Westernist, Civilizationalist, and Statist.
- 11 In 2003, Gazprom signed a contract with Turkmenistan which guarantees it a near monopoly over the purchase and exportation of Turkmen gas.
- 12 In 2011, for example, Russia exported to EU just under €200 million in goods and imported over €100 million (Nevskaya, 2016). The same year, Russia imported about US\$10 million from Central Asian states, and exported about US\$22 million (Sinitsina, 2012).
- 13 Kazakhstan is the region’s economic engine and a destination for the labor migrants from other Central Asian states. Uzbekistan is the most populous republic and regional military strongman. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are the resource-barren and weakest Central Asian states from an economic and political standpoint.

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