



CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE

T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: contact@chathamhouse.org

F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 www.chathamhouse.org

Charity Registration Number: 208223

Russia and Eurasia Meeting Summary

Russia in Central Asia: Security Challenges – Real and Imagined

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This is a summary of an event held at Chatham House on 11 February 2013. Alexey Malashenko discussed Russia's role in Central Asia.

Russian gains in Central Asia are seen as follows. First, Russia wants to regain its influence it had in Soviet times, remnants of which it has been trying to collect.

Second, Russia is interested in preserving the authoritarian power structures in Central Asia. This used to be a relatively easy task. But the situation in Tajikistan and Kazakhstan is changing, while the political system in Kyrgyzstan since the second revolution has been difficult to define, but most experts agree it is not authoritarian. The former Russian president, Dmitry Medvedev, once stated that a parliamentary republic was not the right system for Kyrgyzstan. President Vladimir Putin is not satisfied with the situation there, but has to deal with the regime in place. The developments in Kyrgyzstan do not mean that Tajikistan and Kazakhstan will democratize, too, but they may generate change in the region. Some Russians believe that in five years moderate Islamists will be in the government in Dushanbe and Astana.

Furthermore, Russia wants to tackle the problem of drug trafficking where, rhetoric aside, nothing has been done. Today only four per cent of narcotics are stopped at the Russian border with Kazakhstan. Local political elites in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are believed to be involved in drug trafficking themselves. There are rumours in Tajikistan that the Russian military are also involved in the drug trade. After withdrawal of the NATO troops from Afghanistan, this problem will continue.

There is still geopolitical competition among the outsiders to the region – Russia, Europe, the United States and China. There exists much speculation regarding the 'winner' and what alliances are possible. China is increasingly active in the region. Estimates of the volume of China's trade with Tajikistan vary between \$1 billion and \$9 billion. Lack of reliable information is one of the major problems in understanding Central Asia.

Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan try to avoid cooperation with Gazprom and are considering diversification of gas lines. This creates problems for Russia and President Putin.

There are eight million Russians living in Central Asia, but Russian state does nothing to provide support to them. Russia is disappearing as a cultural and political factor in the region.

Another problematic issue for Moscow is migration from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, in particular due to the 'Islamization' of such migration – the Central Asian immigrants see themselves increasingly as parts of a broader Muslim community, and consider their religious identity more important than their nationality.

To maintain its presence in the region Russia continues to create international organizations. Putin's government believes that such organizations, with their core in Moscow, will constitute a base for the consolidation of Russia in the former Soviet region. The latest integration project of this kind is the Eurasian Economic Union, which is expected to be in place by 2015. However, Russia will fail to realize this project. President Nursultan Nazarbayev has already expressed criticism of the project. Officially Kazakhstan supports the idea, but it is concerned about the problems it will create. President Alexander Lukashenka of Belarus is only concerned with money, but his country is a special case. The Eurasian Economic Union is a special form of bilateral relations, in particular with Belarus, and it will never transform itself into an international organization.

What other countries could potentially join such a union in future? Kyrgyzstan and Armenia will not. Tajikistan might consider it.

Putin presents the Eurasian Union as a larger off-shoot of the Eurasian Economic Union rather than an attempt to reconstruct the Soviet Union. Yet there have been talks in Moscow about creation of the Eurasian Union Parliamentary Assembly. Such ideas were negatively received by Kazakhstan, which firmly stated that the future of the organization cannot be political. There is a strong opposition to a Eurasian Union in Kazakhstan. Even if the regime changes and Nazarbayev leaves office, the chances that any successor would support this project are low.

China is not thrilled about the idea either and does not foresee cooperation between the Eurasian Union and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) is also a rather speculative organization, created by Russia in order to preserve its military presence and influence. According to its secretary general, its member states are against any foreign intervention and should there be a need, such as a Taliban incursion into the north, this organization would be able to show how powerful it is.

Russia is gradually losing its positions in Central Asia. Its presence is based on bilateral relations with each country rather than with the region as a whole.

China may come to dominate the region: no matter who comes to power in these countries, they will all maintain good relations with China.

Kazakhstan will face a change of leadership in the years to come. President Nazarbayev, who has played a crucial role in the Kazakhstan–Russia relations, and who has been in power for more than 20 years will leave office. Yet his successor will not be a national leader. The transition will be decided by local political figures who think about the future with Nazarbayev taking part in this process. While the Russian elite is mostly concerned with money, there is genuine concern about the future in Kazakhstan. This became important after Nazarbayev had understood the problem of radical Islam. Elites are actually in favour of economic and even some political reform, but at the same time, fear of change exists in society at large.

Cooperation between Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan concerns water, borders and drug trafficking. But otherwise the main trend in their interactions is dispute rather than cooperation. The negative outweighs the positive. It is not misunderstanding, but negative mutual perception that is revealed in private talks.

Russia is interested in stability in the region. Its political and military presence in Central Asia and the South Caucasus can be explained by the lack of security there. Therefore the Russian presence is actually necessary.

The state of expertise on Central Asia in Russia is rather poor. There is no new generation of scholars involved in Central Asia studies and few high-level experts. Publications are through official institutions and reflect Russia's official position towards the region. All publications reflect the state of bilateral relations at the moment they are prepared. There are no university departments that specialize in the region and hardly anyone starts a career on Central Asia: most experts in the field start as specialists on the Middle East, China or India.

Islamic radicalization continues in Central Asia. What role could it play during political transition in the region? If Uzbekistan faces a confrontation among its clans, the weakest of them might utilize Islam. If democratic parliamentary elections take place in Tajikistan, an Islamic party could receive as much as 25-40 per cent of the vote.

It is difficult to predict what will happen after the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan. It is unlikely that the Taliban will immediately move out towards Tajikistan or Uzbekistan. Civil war in Afghanistan will continue and possibly those who lose may move to neighbouring countries. Yet the threat has been exaggerated.

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Turkey has interests in the region, but since it is impossible to succeed everywhere, it has to decide where to concentrate its main efforts: Syria, Europe, the Caucasus or Central Asia.

Three major challenges for Russia in Central Asia include radical Islam, the possibility of political change of any kind and an increased influence of other states, such as China.

The major challenges for the countries in the region are revolutions and the possibility of political integration through Russia's activities.