

Non-Regional Actors in Central Asia

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Edited by Anna Gussarova



Introduction

“Non-regional actors in Central Asia” is the second paper of the Strategic Studies Network series of publications on Central Asia. The Strategic Studies Network promotes sustained strategic dialogue and collaborative research in an effort to inform policymakers and the academic community about issues of strategic importance in North Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia.

The Central Asian expert community has traditionally focused on two approaches to analyzing security challenges and threats. The **first approach** links the region to Afghanistan and the risks it presents, including the consequences of the withdrawal of American forces. The **second approach** concentrates on geopolitical turbulence caused by players outside of the region such as Russia, the European Union, the United States, the People’s Republic of China, etc.

Central Asia Institute for Strategic Studies presents this paper that tries to analyze the impact of the non-regional actors in Central Asia - *Russia, China, The United States, European Union, Turkey and Iran* - and evaluate their influence in Central Asia in days to come. The paper is based on the discussions of the Strategic Studies Network annual meeting in Almaty, Kazakhstan.

Russia in Central Asia: a Regional Problem or a Regional Possibility?

Dr. Hanna Shelest¹

To analyze Russia in the Central Asian region, it is important to understand what role it plays there. Is it a regional actor or a regional spoiler? Can we name it a regional problem or a regional possibility?

In general, it is possible to state that Russia does not have a Central Asian strategy as a regional approach and a vision of its policy. Moscow prefers bilateral relations, relying on those leaders, who are still loyal. However, the foreign policy crises Russia appeared due to the war in Ukraine, multiplied to the new conflicting zones in the Middle East and Asia, increased competition from China can lead to the revitalization of its Central Asian political involvement, which already could have been followed since 2016.

Russian Future in the Region of Central Asia

The Russian involvement in Central Asia is mostly based on the old contacts and post-Soviet perceptions. Not dealing with the five Central Asian states as equal partners, Moscow prefers deepening of the political and economic dependence, which however without a solid long-term strategy is risky and costly. The Russian vision of this region is more about Greater Eurasia, where it has a dominant role, where the Central Asian states are just a part of it. While Eurasian Economic Union covers the whole post-Soviet space and Shanghai Cooperation looks wider than Central Asia, aiming to involve more Asian states, Russian does not present regional initiatives.

Considering the current state of affairs within the Russian Federation, the question we raise is what a bigger concern for the Central Asian states should be: weaker or stronger Russia.

Weaker Russia can be a result of the objective and subjective reasons. Among the objective reasons, we can expect a spillover effect from the Western sanctions imposed on Russia and decline of the Russian economy. In this case, Moscow will not be able to support political regimes it is working with, or to buy energy resources for the prices the Central Asian countries expect. It will also influence investments and trade turnover. Weaker Russia can mean absence of economic activities with the region and problems to migrants working in Russia. At the same time, weaker Russia can mean less involvement in the political process in the region, certain diversification of the foreign policy partners for the regional states, or a possibility for some regional cooperation based on the very needs of the Central Asia countries.

One of the biggest Russian challenges is that the Central Asian states do not support its anti-European rhetoric and territorial claims policy. In 2008 after the Russian-Georgian war and the Russian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states - none of the Central Asian states followed Moscow decision

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despite the pressure. In 2014 and illegal annexation of Crimea, during the UN General Assembly voting on Crimean resolution, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan abstained, while Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan were absent at the voting. Later, none of the states followed anti-European sanctions imposed by Moscow in response to the anti-Russian sanctions due to the annexation of Crimea and peace violation on the East of Ukraine.

In general, for the last two years, Central Asia states become more reluctant to deeper integration with Russia. During the October 2016 President Putin visit to Astana, President of Kazakhstan referred to his state as a reliable partner to Russia, while Putin used wording of strategic partnership and alliance. In case of weakening Russia, these tendencies can trend upward.

Stronger Russia can mean increased political and economic pressure, along an idea of the Russian national interests to secure zones of influence in its neighborhood. It is important to mention that comparing to the Eastern European region, where Russia constantly compete with the EU and NATO, perceiving them as enemies and fighting for the influence at the post-Soviet space, in Central Asia, Russian main competitor - China is not perceived as so. Russia does not compete with China for the influence in the region. One of the possible reasons is that China does not propose an alternative political or security reality, but currently prefer to concentrate on economic involvement. However, stronger Russian economic involvement in the region can also mean a sooner rather later clash with the Chinese interests, especially in the energy sphere and investments projects. It can lead not to the fair competition after which “clients” receive better quality for less money, but a raise in corruption.

Moscow clearly understands what the dependencies of the Central Asian states are. Energy transit, migrant workers, security concerns in fighting terrorism and extremism are just few to name. In case of stronger Russian involvement, all these spheres will be used to demonstrate greater dependency, when security or economic spheres will be a pre-basis for the political cooperation and orientation.

In the security sphere, Russia prefers to cooperate on an individual basis. Collective Security Treaty Organization remains weak and is not seen as a reliable mechanism for regional security. It is worth mentioning that Uzbekistan even withdrew from the organization in 2012. At the same time, on bilateral basis, having military presence in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, Russia has been increasing and modernizing its military bases. As an example, the military base in Tajikistan was prolonged till 2042 with 7,500 personnel, explained by Afghanistan and ISIS challenges. Aspirations to increase military presence will be accelerating, joined by all efforts to minimize any military and security cooperation with NATO states, even within the Afghanistan issue.

There is a clear indication that Russia does not perceive five regional states as equal partners but as minor players. Moreover, with the absence of the regional approach, it is mostly speculate at the existing economic dependency and past political contacts, rather than developing a long-term strategic approach to the region. In addition, Moscow cannot decide is it a part of the region or an external player, more preferring the latter, it narrows its possibilities for a full-fledged involvement. With recent crisis development, the Central Asia countries are balancing in their

policies, not fully supporting Russia and searching for alternatives.

While Russian is not taken a role of the regional integrator, when more and more spheres needs a five-country approach to the resolution of the existing problems (transport, borders security and integrated management, environment, water security, connectivity, trafficking and humans security), it opens a window of opportunity for other third players who can become a facilitator or an accelerator of such regional initiatives.

Using Belts and Roads: the Trajectory of Chinese Engagement in Central Asia

Jeffrey Payne²

China's One Belt, One Road (OBOR) Initiative is an unmistakable hit throughout Central Asia. OBOR's promises of financing and development proved too appealing for the leadership of any Central Asian state to refuse. It mattered not to Central Asia's leaders that there is no OBOR blueprint or that much of what propels OBOR are domestic forces inside China. What matters is that China is a present and willing partner at a time when such an actor is needed. There is no uncertainty that OBOR will shape the future of Central Asia, but what does remain a question is how active a role the Central Asian states will play in the shaping of their region.

OBOR'S Meaning for Eurasia

[OBOR](#) is a complex vision for the development of much of Asia, Africa, and parts of Europe. Beijing imagines a network of railways, communication nodes, trading posts, roadways, pipelines, and maritime routes connecting much of the world to each other and to China's provinces. This network is without a doubt propelled by Chinese financing and political will, but is sold to the world as an unprecedented opportunity for mutual development.

How closely the [vision](#) for OBOR matches the reality is up for debate. [Details](#) of how China will assist in financing OBOR projects remains unclear, as funding streams stem from multiple ministries, state owned enterprises, and regulatory bodies. This is in part by design due to Beijing's continued valuation of bilateral relationships over multilateral efforts. In fact, many of the success stories of OBOR were conceived, pursued, and developed long before OBOR was official state policy. There can be no mistaking that OBOR is primarily a project intended to achieve certain Chinese national interests. Energy concerns, stemming from China's reliance on Indian Ocean [sea routes](#) for supply and an overdependence on importation, encouraged Beijing to invigorate its ties throughout the energy-rich countries to its west and develop multiple pathways by which energy resources could reach Chinese territory.

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Under-development in China's western provinces is a consistent problem that the state has not been able to solve. OBOR's westward engagement and planned network would hopefully turn China's west into a hub for Eurasian commerce.

There exist hurdles to China's plan. A deepening footprint in Eurasia inevitably will bring China into the orbit of local political problems. This problem set, which can range from an increased [probability](#) of terror attack to risks for substantial economic loss, requires Beijing to play a careful political game. Yet, to some degree heightened risk is inevitable with OBOR, which is why Beijing has begun the process of securing its potential investments. The recently opened [dual use naval facility](#) in Djibouti positions Chinese military assets in a key geopolitical position. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor [deepened](#) military and political ties to the Pakistani regime.³ In Central Asia, China has increasingly leveraged its leadership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to [enhance joint security training](#) among member states, particularly on counterterrorism activities. OBOR may be sold as an economic vision of the future that is propelled by infrastructure development, but a key part of Beijing's vision is positioning itself to have a political impact.

Central Asia's Role in OBOR

Wang Jisi, a prominent Chinese scholar, [argued](#) in 2011 that China's most advantageous strategic option was to deepen its role and strengthen its ties to states in Eurasia. Before OBOR was [announced](#) by Xi Jinping at a lavish ceremony in Kazakhstan in 2013, China had invested heavily in Central Asia. Pipelines, economic zones, dams, roads, bridges, and a host of other projects were built. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, one of few multilateral organizations China values, was used effectively to build trust between Beijing and the capitols of much of Central Asia. China established itself as a major non-regional actor in Central Asia and OBOR simply unified a diverse collection of projects that had long signaled Central Asia's value to the People's Republic.

For Central Asia, there was never really any choice as to whether to accept China's overtures for stronger ties and greater economic connectivity. Since independence, most of the Central Asian states were too heavily dependent on economic linkages to Russia, suffered from the burdens of antiquated infrastructure, and lacked the conduits to the larger global economy needed to help economies grow. Relations with China could assist greatly and they did for much of the past several decades. China became a valuable client for Kazakh oil interests and Turkmen natural gas companies. Infrastructure could assist in propelling economic growth in the suffering economies of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In many cases, Central Asia's leaders had to do little to attract Chinese investment and the investment that did come was without major political conditions, as China's conditions for engagement come with far fewer political conditions than Western countries.⁴

China's offers of assistance hid costs that are only today starting to be felt. Major

³ Bilateral ties between the PRC and Pakistan are sure to intensify following the August 2017 announcement by the U.S. Administration regarding U.S. involvement in Afghanistan and its skepticism of Pakistani commitment to counterterrorism.

⁴ Between 2005 and 2015, Central Asia as a comprehensive measuring unit witnessed a tenfold increase in Chinese investment. The rate of investment intensified following the announcement of the continental belt portion of OBOR.

infrastructure projects are still built with a [majority](#) of Chinese workforce, increasing tensions with Central Asia's working classes. Early investment created a pattern that has slowly indebted Central Asia to Chinese institutions. Local [industries](#) have been severely weakened if not outright decimated by increased ties with China, as goods produced in China proved cheaper for retailers to offer than the Central Asia equivalents. Central Asia's political leadership is well aware of these complications stemming from Chinese engagement. Yet, none of these problems are in and of themselves insurmountable.

What is proving to be a more serious potential problem is that Central Asian states are increasingly looking like client states of a Chinese-led regional order and not active agents defining the future of their own region. Central Asian states have thus far followed the OBOR script crafted by Beijing. A massive project like OBOR has many opportunities for partner nations to create separate add-ons, side projects, and new partnerships. To date, such opportunities have not been explored by leaders of Central Asian states despite the geopolitical advantages they possess in relation to OBOR.

For Central Asian states, it is necessary to do more to address the immediate negatives of OBOR: insist Chinese projects employ more local workers and negotiate direct aid to offset impact of local industries due to Chinese imports. Another moment is to recognize the limitations of OBOR and that the vision has multiple pathways that China uses to spread its influence – thus, be more selective in what financing is pursued and what projects will be constructed based upon the wider needs of society. Most importantly – pursue alternative opportunities under the OBOR banner. China is not the only game in town. The West can be a source of alternative funding, as can the GCC states. If OBOR is truly about win-win scenarios, then there is no risk to utilizing OBOR's benefits to further national interests.

EU Perspectives on Central Asia

Dr. Luba von Hauff⁵

In 2007, the EU launched its 'Strategy for a New Partnership' with Central Asia, a step that, at that time, was motivated by security and energy considerations. Following its liberally informed, comprehensive understanding of international engagement, Brussels pursued a politically transformative approach to the region, substantiating its policy by economic incentives, notably enhanced trade relations.

Accordingly, in the security realm, the strategy addressed the social and political aspects of local insecurity, and focused on improving the local states' functionality, responsiveness, and accountability - and with it, the governments' relationship with their respective societies. To reach these ends, the EU launched a broad range of initiatives within the framework of its strategy, of which most still operate today. While at first sight, these initiatives may appear social or technical in character, aimed,

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for instance, at the improvement of border and trafficking problems, the management of environmental issues, and the effective provision of basic state services such as education, health care, and social protection, their core is overtly [political](#). In fact, for the past decade, the focus has been on promoting political liberalization and the appertaining norms of democratic governance, respect for human rights, and the rule of law.⁶ In this regard, the European Rule of Law Initiative for Central Asia and the EU-Central Asia Human Rights Dialogue stand out in that they underscore the EU's principled understanding of security as inextricably linked to the presence of liberal democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights.⁷

Lessons Learnt

Reviewing the past decade's developments, then, the EU's approach to Central Asian security has seen mixed results. On the one hand, the post-Soviet region's states have clearly failed to evolve into liberal democracies – the standing of both, political freedoms as well as respect for human rights has not changed during the past ten years. At the same time, however, there have been considerable changes in less overtly politicized but still security-relevant realms, most notably improvements in the legal and socio-political spheres of state functionality and state-society relations: thus, [government effectiveness](#) and the rule of law have been advancing in all five post-Soviet states, and (government-organized) civil engagement has been rising as well. However, while the nature of these changes strongly suggests increased EU visibility and authority in the region, Brussels may still be considered a relatively weak actor, not last due to its own timidity regarding in the region's political development.

The tendency is not much different in the energy realm. Here, in fact, the main objective was to establish viable energy ties by way generally enhancing trade between the EU and Central Asia, and thus binding the energy-abundant countries closer to the EU. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the main addressees of Brussels' energy and trade policies have been the energy producers and exporters Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, while the economic relationship with the smaller, poorer, and in terms of raw materials less abundant states has failed to substantially evolve – here, Russia and China have remained the by far most important actors.⁸ But even in the former two, the establishment of closer ties has been complicated by the lack of adequate (and not Russia-controlled) transport infrastructure and capacity in the vast Eurasian landmass between Central Asia and the EU.⁹

In consequence, thus far, Brussels' economic leverage and visibility in the region as a whole has been meagre, as, in fact, has been its interest to substantially deepen contacts with these post-Soviet states: even oil-rich Kazakhstan, Brussels' most

⁶ Cf. Council of the European Union, *"The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership."* Brussels, 2007

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ European Commission, Directorate-General for Trade, *European Union Trade with Kazakhstan*, Units A4-G2, 10-04-2015; European Commission, Directorate-General for Trade, *European Union Trade with Turkmenistan*, Units A4-G2, 10-04-2015; European Commission, Directorate-General for Trade, *European Union Trade with Kyrgyzstan*, Units A4-G2, 10-04-2015; European Commission, Directorate-General for Trade, *European Union Trade with Tajikistan*, Units A4-G2, 10-04-2015; European Commission, Directorate-General for Trade, *European Union Trade with Uzbekistan*, Units A4-G2, 10-04-2015.

⁹ Cf. Luba Azarch, *Central Asia and the EU: Prospects of an Energy Partnership*, China and the Eurasia Forum Quarterly, 2009 / 4.

prominent and privileged Central Asian partner, maintains a relatively low export rate vis-à-vis Europe, continuously [staying below eight percent of crude oil export](#). These facts suggest that in both, the security and economics / energy fields, Central Asia has been not especially pivotal to the EU: over the past decade, it has failed to emerge as a substantial strategic value or threat on the EU's radar – in economic, political, and security terms.

However, this dynamic may change in the years to come, due to China's 'One Belt One Road' initiative, which, launched in 2013, pursues the objective to establish Central Asia as a future hub for Beijing-led international connectivity, linking the East with the West and vice versa in infrastructural, economic, technological, and social terms.¹⁰ This initiative, stretching into the EU itself and also covering substantial chunks of its neighbourhood, has contributed to an exponential rise of European attention vis-à-vis the Central Asia: in 2015, the region has even been set as an official area of cooperation within the EU-China strategic partnership document.

Future Contours

In other words, recently, Brussels has come to realize Central Asia's not insignificant geostrategic value in a geopolitically changing world, understanding that the region may serve as a platform to develop a new, more cooperative approach with the new all-important global power China in the highly strategic realms of technology, education and security. What is more, it is with Beijing's (financial and political) help and within the framework of apparently well-financed OBOR that Brussels' longstanding desire to link Central Asia with the EU in infrastructural terms – a project thus far complicated by both Russia and the lack of EU funds – may get closer to reality. Here, what the Europeans, notably [Germany, are eager to do is to combine Chinese resources with European standards](#), in technological but also in legal, and public policy realms. This is (among other things) why the EU connectivity platform, a European pendant to OBOR has been established, proving that in today's geopolitically uncertain times, Central Asia's potential to deepen the EU's ties with China, and to develop new fields of mutual interest is of substantial strategic significance to Brussels.

To conclude, during the past decade, Brussels did not regard Central Asia as vital to the EU in terms of security and economics, and even not in energy terms. However, due to the emergence of the China-led OBOR initiative, it gradually came to realise the region's geostrategic potential in helping to develop a more constructive, more mutual, relationship with new pivotal power China. It is for this reason that, for the time to come, Central Asia is likely to further entrench itself on the EU's foreign policy radar, if not primarily out of liberal democratic considerations of strengthening its neighbourhood, but rather out of geopolitical manoeuvring. In other words, from the EU's perspective, Central Asia is likely to become one possible platform of interaction and rapprochement with the People's Republic of China, with whom, according to Francesca Mogherini, 'cooperation, (to the EU), has never been so important' as it is now. It is against this new background that Brussels will evaluate the post-Soviet region's new salience for the time to come.

¹⁰ Cf. National Development and Reform Commission, *Visions and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21-Century Maritime Silk Road*, March 2015.

US Policy in Central Asia: Will Change Occur During Trump Administration?

*Dr. Roger Kangas*¹¹

On January 20, 2017, Donald John Trump was inaugurated as the 45th President of the United States. Since his surprise election on November 8, 2016, predictions about his foreign and domestic policies have become regular features of the think tank and media communities. Most are based on speculation and guesswork, given that he had no track record in politics and had surrounded himself with political neophytes, circumventing the usual foreign policy elite community of Washington, DC. Individuals such as Mike Flynn and Steven Bannon, who vocally advocated white nationalist and anti-Islamic views, were initially close to President Trump. Given their public declarations, it would be easy to assume that the Trump administration would follow a path hostile to Muslim countries.

However, their sequential ousters from office suggest that these views might not be dominant in the White House. Similarly, a Wall Street Journal editorial by National Security Advisor LTG H.R. McMaster and economic advisor Gary Cohn outlined a bleak portrayal of the global community, emphasizing that the United States has no permanent allies or friends and would seek to protect its interests in whatever way possible.¹² This “neo-Hobbesian” view counters the traditional American approach of working to promote peace, democracy and free market economies throughout the world by being a leader in maintaining the rules of international order. Concepts such as “right to protect” or the “freedom agenda” have been discarded for a more xenophobic “America First” mantra. With these initial assessments, it is no surprise that an evaluation of any future US policy toward Central Asia, a region deemed of limited importance, would be understandably pessimistic.

Well into the first year of the Trump administration, is such a prediction holding true? Traditionally, US policy toward Central Asia has been premised on four basic principles: the advocacy of democratic values and political transition toward democracy; human rights based on the UN Charter on Human Rights; economic development based on market reform; and regional security guaranteeing the sovereignty of the five states of Central Asia. These ideals were first articulated in a series of presentations in the summer of 1997 by then Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, entitled “[A Farewell to Flashman](#),” which underscored the most important objective: that the post-Soviet Central Asian states should stand on their own, away from the control of outside powers, most notably Russia. Through the administrations of G.H.W. Bush, William Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, these pillars remained in place. The prioritization has varied over the years. For example, after the 9/11 attack on the US and the subsequent military campaign in Afghanistan that began a month later, the “security” dimension became paramount. Indeed, the challenge for US policymakers has often been to find an effective way to maintain an Afghan-centric security focus while simultaneously engaging on political, human rights, and economic matters. While some critics suggested the US outright

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¹² McMaster, H.R. and Gary D. Cohn, “America First Doesn’t Mean America Alone,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 30, 2017.

abandoned these tools of engagement, an analysis of budget figures, programs, and personnel responsibilities notes otherwise. Limitations exist, of course. “Soft power” efforts such as the Peace Corps are now reduced to a small presence in Kyrgyzstan. Likewise, American-based non-governmental organizations such as the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, Freedom House, and the Soros Foundation have been curtailed, with many of their local offices closed and office representatives unable to register and reside in the region.

A positive development did take place in the in the final years of the Obama administration regarding US engagement with Central Asia. Secretary of State John Kerry oversaw the creation of the C5+1 initiative in September 2015, which brought together the foreign ministers of the US and all five Central Asian countries. Through these high-level meetings, and subsequent working group sessions created to address key topics, the US seemed to be [refocusing efforts on non-security relations](#). More importantly, these tracks primarily focus on modest, “workable” issues, such as smoothing out legal requirements on cross-border trade, or developing water and environmental standards, making the opportunities for cooperation and success more likely. This effort continues today, showing that engagement does not have to be high-profile to be successful.

Would the arrival of the Trump administration change these efforts in Central Asia? To date, no senior official from the administration has outlined a “new approach” to the region. Barring a declarative statement in the coming year, one will have to look at other indicators to assess what a Trump policy toward Central Asia might be. Before one passes judgment on the slow timing, it is important to note that this is not unusual. Central Asia has not held a high priority position in US foreign and security policy and it often takes time for actual policy initiatives to be articulated. It was not until the end of August 2017 that a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (DASD) for South and Central Asia was nominated. The nominee, Dr. Colin Jackson, has a distinguished record in security studies and a solid background in Afghanistan. Combined with the [Trump administration’s declared policy toward Afghanistan](#), and by extension, Pakistan and India, announced until 21 August 2017, it’s evident that the US will most likely continue to view the Central Asian states as subordinate to the greater mission in Afghanistan.

Is this “more of the same?” To an extent, yes. First, the security relationship will continue, albeit in a limited capacity. As the US presence in Afghanistan is a fraction of what it was in the first decade of the Afghan War, the supply routes through Central Asia will not be as important. Nor do any US military bases exist in Central Asia, as they did previously.¹³ Second, economic and trade relations will continue to have some value, but will be kept primarily in the realm of the private sector. The American pavilion of the Astana 2017 EXPO is a good representation of this effort: private companies seeking niche markets in the country. Third, the relationship with President Putin of Russia could offer a “wild card” in US-Central Asian relations. Assuming President Trump’s admiration for and deference to Vladimir Putin continues, expect that the US will support a continued Russian presence in the region. Indeed, some suggest that a partnership with Russia can limit the influence of China and help combat transnational terrorist groups like ISIS.

¹³ The Manas Transit Center in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, which was the last US facility in Central Asia, closed in June 2014.

Finally, the dynamic, unless otherwise articulated, will be transactional. This last point is generally seen from the perspective of the US: what does Central Asia have to offer the United States? However, transactions go both ways, and the reduced posture of the Americans will inevitably raise the important question: what does the US have to offer each Central Asian country? If trade and investment aren't forthcoming, one could find this dynamic to be negligible. Ultimately, this means that in the coming years, the US could be less of an actor in Central Asia than in the past – not as a specific policy choice, but because of decisions made in how the US presents itself overseas.

Turkey in Central Asia: a Regional Approach?

*Özge Nur Öğütçü*¹⁴

Since 1992, Turkey has been trying to adopt accurate policies on the newly independent post-Soviet states. It is important to remind that Turkey is the first country that recognized the independence of the former Soviet states. Relations improved rapidly because of the common interests, despite of some challenges especially in the 1990s, and close ties have brought Central Asian countries and Turkey closer.

In the early 1990s, Turkey's attitude towards Central Asia was relatively enthusiastic and emotional, lacking a tangible action plan. However leaders of the Central Asian countries and Turkey showed an interest in developing strong relations and therefore high level visits, meetings and summits were held immediately. For instance, in 1993 Friendship, Brotherhood, and Cooperation Congress of the Turkic States and Communities was launched by Turkish authorities. The main vision of these summits was to create a platform between Turkey and the Turkic states, including Central Asia, and relative communities with the aim to strengthen dialogue.

Turkey's ambitions were stimulated by a role of being a model for the countries in the region, Turkey has been seen as an example because of its secular structure with a Muslim population, open market economy and aspirations to become an EU member. Also considering the fact that Turkey is a member of NATO since 1952, Turkey's unique ties with Central Asian countries were believed to benefit Western world in the region security-wise. This role was at first welcomed by the leaders of the region as well. Turkey kept her ties with Central Asian countries while preserving her EU membership policy. As in today, those two approaches do not necessarily contradict with each other. On the contrary, good relations with the West proved to be beneficial for the countries in Central Asia.

However, all these attempts to further relations have not been able to yield expected results, as Turkey had a limited capacity. Despite the support, albeit not full-fledged, from the West, Turkey was not able to deliver her promises and fulfill her role as the "role model" mainly because during the 1990s Turkey's agenda was intensely occupied with domestic affairs such as counter-terrorism activities against PKK and impacts of the global economic crisis.

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In addition, even after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russian legacy was still obvious in most of the former-USSR countries and the region was left with many disputed issues. Also in time Western actors, Russia and China, aimed to become more active in the region due to different concerns and interests. In that sense, for Turkey to successfully engage with the Central Asian countries it was inevitable to adopt policies that were complementary to the policies of other priorities of Central Asian countries.

Regional Cooperation and Turkey

This particular period witnessed emergence of new regional organizations such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) and Economic Cooperation Organization which was established in 1985 but expanded in the 1990s to ten members, the original three Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and the new seven Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. These organizations proved to be sound platforms on critical matters of concern for the countries in and of the region.

Also, in order to support countries in the region to overcome current problems, Turkey and FAO launched [FAO-Turkey Partnership Programme](#) in 2006. According to the web page, the program is to provide assistance on food security and rural poverty reduction in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.” The programme is financed by the Turkish government and so far Turkey contributions reached US\$ 20 mln. Second phase of the programme has started in 2015 and planned to be finalized in 2019. FAO and the Ministry of Forestry and Water Affairs of Turkey signed an agreement which insured US\$ 2 mln annually contribution from the Ministry, for the next 5 years (until 2019).

The security dimension of the relations also matters. In the beginning of the 2000, region faced another threat following the 9/11 attacks. NATO involvement in 2003 to lead the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission to support Afghan security forces was finalized in 2014 and the troops withdrew from Afghanistan in 2014. Mission in Afghanistan has eventually avoided the expansion of threat across the region and therefore, there is an understanding that Turkey’s active contributions can be considered as an added value to Turkey’s efforts in Central Asia.

Moreover, since the independence Turkey has been providing military assistance to Central Asian countries. Additionally, recently Ministers of Defence of Uzbekistan and Turkey signed an agreement upon Turkish MoD visit to Uzbekistan. According to the agreement, by 2018 Uzbek soldiers and officers will be trained in Turkey.

Meanwhile, as Turkey’s economy improved over the years, development aid programs became an important foreign policy tool. In 1992 Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency was established with the aim to coordinate Turkey’s foreign aid efforts. According to Annual Reports of TICA, US\$ 53.03 million was dedicated to Central Asia and Caucasus in 2014. In 2016, amount of the year end expenditure of Department of the Central Asia and Caucasus is 27.5 million Turkish Liras, which is approximately 10% of the total year-end expenditure of the agency in 2016.

To strengthen cultural ties organizations such as The International Organization of Turkic Culture (TURKSOY), Turkic Council, Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic-Speaking Countries (TURKPA in 2008) and International Turkic Academy (in 2010) were established between the years 1993 – 2009. They are still active in various fields. Moreover, two of the Central Asian countries host Turkish universities such as Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University in Kyrgyzstan and Akhmet Yassawi University in Kazakhstan.

On the state level, Presidency of Turks Abroad and Relative Communities (YTB) is among the institutions which proved to be among Turkey's important Public Diplomacy pillars particularly in the Balkans, South Caucasus and Central Asia. YTB was established in 2010 and it aims to build bridges among the Turkish origin people living abroad and other relative communities.

Why these attempts are important? What does Turkey want to achieve?

Turkey has traditionally deep rooted ties with Central Asian countries, therefore, besides economic aspects, Turkey signals that she is ready to take active role in any initiative that will promote regional integration which is an ongoing process which requires support and political will of the Central Asian countries. As it is a known fact, Central Asia can be considered as the least integrated region. Central Asian countries are still facing regional problems. Abovementioned efforts supported and/or initiated by Turkey eventually to [act as bridges via providing platforms for further communication](#) to overcome the regional challenges.

Learning from the outcomes of her previous mistakes and experiences, Turkey recognized the necessity of the role of other actors in the region to reach sustainable solutions and besides her efforts to strengthen her bilateral ties with the Central Asian countries, Turkey decided to become more active within the multi-lateral formations. Turkey has come to understanding that geopolitical positions of land-locked Central Asian countries and the sensitive security environment in the region require balanced policies and strong regional cooperation. In that sense China-led “One Belt One Road” (OBOR) which focuses also on Central Asia has emerged as a great opportunity. OBOR has three main land routes and two of them passes through Central Asia. However, Middle Corridor of the OBOR Initiative is on Turkey's agenda since this corridor is planned to connect Central Asia with the international community via Turkey.

Potential, not Priority: Iran's Relations with Central Asia

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After more than 25 years, relations between Iran and Central Asia have yet to reach their full potential. The Islamic Republic has neither prioritized the post-Soviet space

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nor formulated a comprehensive strategy for the region. In its [20-year outlook for 2025](#) Tehran has identified Central Asia as part of greater Southwest Asia and thus as a sphere of immediate geopolitical and economic interest. Yet, cooperation efforts between Iran and its northern neighborhood have been unremarkable.

Connectivity First

As Iran aspires to become a major trade and energy hub between the Asian and European continent, regional connectivity has been high on its political agenda. This is reflected in Tehran's infrastructure projects such as the Anzob Tunnel in Tajikistan or the North-South railway project between Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Iran which connects Central Asia to the Persian Gulf. Inaugurated in 2014, the 925 km long railway is expected to allow for the annual transport of [20 million tonnes](#) of goods by 2020. Iran has a major interest in the expansion of transit routes that put it at the crossroad of international trade, thus markedly increasing its geopolitical significance in accordance with its 20-year strategic outlook.

In its foreign policy towards the region, Tehran has largely put economic interests and pragmatism before ideological concerns, all the while trying not to antagonize Russia in Moscow's security backyard. Iran's partially shared culture, language and history with Central Asia does make it a natural partner in Tehran's eyes but has been a source of concern for others at the same time. The secular republics have been worried about Iran's possible influence on their Shiite minorities and Tehran's means to fuel ethnic and religious tensions in the region. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have been particularly anxious about Iran interfering in their domestic affairs with Dushanbe openly accusing Iran of having [meddled](#) in its 1990s civil war.

Bundle of Constraints

While different national concerns and interests have produced varying degrees of political and economic relations between Iran and individual Central Asian states, transnational obstacles in particular have taken their toll. The relationships of some of the post-Soviet republics with Israel and the United States have put constraints on their relations with Iran. Countries like Uzbekistan have favored strong ties with Washington and accused Tehran of trying to impose its anti-Western stance on the region through regional organizations such as the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). Tashkent has been outspoken in its criticism of what it perceived as an Iranian attempt to politicize ECO by using it as a platform against Israel and the United States. Overall, the organization has not been able to seriously boost intra-regional trade and has lacked substantial collective action.

Washington has had further tangible impact on political and economic relations between Tehran and its northern neighbors. US pressure on Central Asian states has affected the realization of major infrastructure projects with Tehran. Moreover, economic sanctions against Iran's nuclear program have long narrowed the scope of possible cooperation. Differing views on the legal status of the Caspian Sea and how it should be divided, have further complicated relations between the littoral states of Iran, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Despite repeated statements by high ranking officials on being [on the verge of a solution](#) to the decades-long dispute, an agreement has yet to be reached. Given the multitude of constraints, trade relations have been limited. In 2016, Central Asian exports to Iran did not exceed [639 million Euros](#) and

Tehran was not even among the top ten exporters to the region. Notwithstanding Iranian aspirations to become a major trading partner to Central Asia, overall it has not been able to compete with actors such as Russia, China, Turkey or the EU.

Mutual Interests and Benefits

Iran and Central Asia share a variety of security concerns and interests, most notably the stabilization of Afghanistan. Afghan instability has posed serious challenges for Iran and Central Asian states including illicit trade, drug trafficking, terrorist activities and general border control. This has prompted the need for combining efforts in order to reduce spillover effects from the Afghan war. Tehran has shown particular interest in security cooperation with its main Central Asian ally Turkmenistan to counter terrorist threats. However, no significant security relations have formed, yet, and Iranian-Turkmen relations have recently been hampered by a [gas dispute](#) still not fully resolved.

Besides deepened cultural relations, the biggest prospects for cooperation remain in the economic sphere. The landlocked Central Asia states benefit from regional link-ups that allow them to diversify their trade relations and transport their goods and energy resources through alternative routes. Conveniently located between the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf, Iran can serve as a gateway to open Seas, providing Central Asia faster access to world markets.

With the nuclear agreement of 2015 and the subsequent removal of nuclear-related sanctions, a major constraint has been lifted. This allows for additional infrastructure ventures, investments in oil and gas development projects and renewed energy cooperation. Tehran has already shown interest in reviving its old oil swap deals. Using Caspian oil in its northern refineries would [save Iran the costs](#) of transporting its own crude to the north internally.

Outlook

Addressing the [2017 ECO summit in Islamabad](#), Iranian president Hassan Rohani made it clear that he sees the future of global economy on the Asian continent. With the nuclear agreement in place, Iran's 20-year strategic outlook has been revitalized and the current government in Tehran has given "economic diplomacy" a major spotlight in its foreign policy approach. While this might indicate more positive conditions for cooperation, Iran's heavy engagement in a crisis-driven Middle East and today's presence of other influential actors in Central Asia such as Russia or China, and more recently also some Gulf states, make a substantial expansion of Iranian-Central Asian relations unlikely in the foreseeable future.

However, connecting the region through infrastructure projects will remain an important common goal and both sides can already take several steps to elevate bilateral relations such as boosting private sector cooperation, facilitating visa issuance, establishing direct banking relations or exploring the possibilities of free trade agreements. Notwithstanding domestic and external obstructions, giving their mutual relations a higher priority can be beneficial for all sides. Unlike in the Middle East where Iran faces a number of zero-sum scenarios, relations with Central Asian states can actually produce a multitude of win-wins.

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Information

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