

## Two Decades of Russia's Foreign Policy in Central Asia: Trends and Problems

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**Abstract:** This article aims to lay out the milestones of Russia's foreign policy in Central Asia under the presidencies of Boris Yeltsin (1991-1999), Vladimir Putin (2000-2008) and Dmitry Medvedev (2008-2012). It identifies the key challenges, achievements and failures of Russian diplomacy during each administration. The author concludes that over twenty years of policy concerning Central Asia, Moscow's approach was at times quite unstable and lacking in strategic planning. None of the three administrations were able to accomplish fully their policy goals.

**Key words:** International relations % Foreign policy % Military and political alliances % Trade and economic ties % Russian Federation % Central Asia

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### INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the development of ties with the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States quickly became Russia's top foreign policy priority. This notion is evidenced by the Foreign Policy Doctrines of the Russian Federation adopted in 1993 [1], 2000 [2], 2008 [3] and 2013 [4], as well as in the reminiscences of the Russian rulers of the "first Post-Soviet generation"- President Boris Yeltsin [5] and Minister of Foreign Affairs Yevgeny Primakov [6]. Russia's foreign policy placed a great deal of importance on ties with Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) due to their strategic geographical position, abundance in natural resources, economic ties with Russia and ethnic Russians residing within their borders. This article aims to investigate the milestones of Russia's foreign policy in Central Asia under the presidencies of Boris Yeltsin (1991-1999), Vladimir Putin (2000-2008) and Dmitry Medvedev (2008-2012).

**Growing Pains: Russia's Central Asia Policy under Yeltsin:** Russia's foreign policy concerning Central Asia began to take shape as soon as Boris Yeltsin took power. In short order, Moscow was forced to formulate a new strategy for a region in which it had suddenly become a stranger [7]. As a consequence of new geopolitical

realities, not to mention seemingly unending internal power struggles, Yeltsin's approach was at messy and riddled with contradictions throughout his tenure.

Through 1995, Russian leadership did not pay adequate attention to Central Asia. It viewed them as economically and politically backward countries that prevented Moscow from undertaking urgent reforms and turning westward. Initially Russia tried to walk away from Central Asia all together - it even encouraged the stans to seek partnerships with Turkey, Iran and the United States. Russians residing in Central Asia were similarly left to fend for themselves [8].

In September of 1992 when ethnic tensions in Tajikistan spiraled into a bloody civil war, Russia realized the flaws in its Central Asia approach and began to take greater interest in the region. For the next several years, Russia's regional policy could be summarized as follows: maintain security and stability in Central Asia and protect local governments from external threats. Such an approach to the regional issues was evidently simplistic that made Russia's foreign policy quite inefficient.

In January 1996, Dr. Yevgeny Primakov was appointed Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs. His nomination featured a shift in Moscow's diplomatic priorities from West to East - to one that paid more attention to developing cooperation with the Central Asian states. Russia's regional goals were expanded to include broadening political, military, economic and trade

cooperation with the “Sunshine republics” and counteracting the influence of external actors such as the United States and Turkey. This was a timely course adjustment, as significant hydrocarbon reserves were soon after found in several Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan), piquing the interest of a number of international powers. Thus began the “New Great Game” in Central Asia; local governments found themselves with increased leverage while Moscow found itself lacking in influence.

In all, the presidency of Boris Yeltsin was characterized by a weak, vague and wholly unsuccessful Central Asia policy. Its only notable achievements were its role in restoring peace to Tajikistan, prevention of major conflicts in other “Sunshine Republics” and maintenance of relatively high levels of cooperation with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, in contrast, almost left Russia’s orbit all together, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan remained major borrowers of Russian capital without giving Moscow anything in return.

#### **Vladimir Putin and Central Asia: a Long-awaited**

**Breakthrough?:** Vladimir Putin’s ascent to power came along with a wholesale review of Russia’s approach to Central Asia, aimed at boosting its effectiveness. Moscow advanced the development of economic and interregional cooperation with the five stans, leading to a diversification of their relations across numerous areas. Russia’s foreign policy was cleansed of ideology and political / military cooperation was no longer considered paramount. Simultaneously, Russia sought to raise the level of its interaction with the Central Asian republics: with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, it enhanced cooperation within the Collective Security Treaty Organization and Eurasian Economic Community; with Uzbekistan, it signed treaties on strategic partnership and allied relations; with Turkmenistan, it focused on energy. Lastly, Putin tried to improve Moscow’s image in the eyes of its Central Asian partners and knock down the wall of mistrust that had arisen between them under Yeltsin.

At the same time, however, Russia’s impact on Central Asian states remained relatively weak; here I must disagree with the widespread view that Moscow sought to conserve authoritarianism [9] and corruption [10] in Central Asia and encourage the economic backwardness of the stans [11]. Moscow was at no point interested in such a policy and furthermore had no opportunity to implement it. The “Sunshine

Republics” matured rapidly; their foreign policy remained multi-vectored and they were unwilling to come back into the Russia’s sphere of influence.

Another distinctive feature of Putin’s Central Asian policy was an aspiration to make it more profitable for Russia. As a result, Moscow participated only in regional projects that could boost its revenue. This approach led to a degree of confusion: whereas official statements largely concerned economics, Moscow in reality developed cooperation with the five stans mainly in political / military and energy fields - while the other areas of their interaction languished. Eventually, these tactics led to indignation among Central Asian states. In 2005, the major joint ventures of Russia and its regional partners (hydroelectric power plants in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, long-term investments in their economies, the development of transportation infrastructure, etc.) began to fail. The evidence presented above demonstrates that many goals set by Vladimir Putin in Central Asia had not been achieved - and that in spite of adjustments, Russia’s approach remained ineffective.

#### **Dmitry Medvedev and Central Asia: Modernization Falls**

**Flat:** Contrary to expectations, Dmitry Medvedev’s election did in fact lead to significant policy changes, particularly concerning Central Asia. While Russia’s general aims and principles remained similar, Medvedev paid less attention to the region than his predecessor did. His policy was at times insufficiently deft: for example, he torpedoed a balance in relations with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (who remain locked in a struggle for regional influence) carefully built by Vladimir Putin and emphasized expanding dialogue only with Astana. Under Medvedev, the Russo-Kyrgyz, Tajik, Turkmen relations reached their most frigid point since the collapse of the USSR, while Kazakhstan gradually ousted Russian companies from its markets [12]. The growth of misunderstanding between Russia and the Central Asian republics was also caused by the “Five-Day War” in the South Caucasus and Moscow’s reluctance to help its partners during the economic recession of 2008-2010. Other exacerbating factors include continuing Chinese expansion in Central Asia [13] and Russia’s hesitancy to settle inter-ethnic conflict in Kyrgyzstan during 2010. Lastly, an increasing trend of great power ambitions in Russian diplomacy - particularly in relation to integration projects - has led Central Asian leaders to look on Moscow warily. As a result, Russian influence in Central Asia drastically weakened.

## CONCLUSION

Unfortunately, in the first twenty years of its interaction with Central Asia, Moscow failed to achieve most of its regional goals and the stans grew increasingly more independent. Russian leadership failed to build an adequate Central Asian strategy: although all the three presidents (Yeltsin, Putin and Medvedev) insisted that the region was of critical importance for Moscow, none of them was ready to provide it with the necessary political and economic support to keep it in Russia's orbit. As a result, Russia's regional influence declined steadily. Nevertheless, Russia's foreign policy in the region had some successes: Central Asia remained relatively stable; none of the stans joined a block that could be termed unfriendly to Moscow and all of them retained an interest in promoting cooperation with the Russian Federation.

## RESULTS

From 1991 through 2012, Russia's foreign policy in Central Asia lacked a clear definition of its objectives and long-term strategic planning. Boris Yeltsin's presidency proved quite harmful to Russia's interests in the region, not only did its influence dramatically erode but its demeanor towards them often violated diplomatic practice. Vladimir Putin was most successful: he corrected many mistakes committed by his predecessor and achieved better results; however, Russia failed to consolidate its position in the region by providing local states with large-scale economic assistance. Under Medvedev, Russian diplomacy in Central Asian saw a return of negative traits typical of the Yeltsin era, which significantly weakened Russia's leverage in relations with the "Sunshine Republics". Thus, in the first two decades of Russia's interaction with Central Asia, Moscow's policies remained inconsistent and immature.

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