Russia’s Foreign Policy in Central Asia: Strengths, Weaknesses and Paths for Improvement

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Abstract: This article explores Russia’s foreign policy achievements in contemporary Central Asia and lays out the key challenges preventing Moscow from reaching its regional objectives. It then presents several means by which Russia’s diplomatic efforts could be more effective. The author concludes that Russia’s foreign policy in Central Asia is needing of adjustment if it is to yield results in the near future.

Key words: International relations • Foreign policy • Strategic partnerships • Alliances • Political/military relations • Trade • Economic ties • Russian Federation • Central Asia

INTRODUCTION

Since the collapse of the USSR, the development of ties with members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) has remained the top priority of Russia’s foreign policy. The importance of this goal was highlighted in Russia’s previous two Foreign Policy Doctrines, adopted in 2008 [1] and 2013 [2]. Given that the five Central Asian states are CIS members, Moscow views them as its closet partners (even allies) in today’s geopolitical turbulence. Nevertheless, the current state of Russian-Central Asian affairs seems to be rather contradictory: Moscow’s policies are often incoherent, if not contradictory [3], it is incapable of protecting its core interests in the region [4], the stan-bloc feels reluctant to maintain close ties [5] and external actors increasingly play on disagreements between Russia and the Central Asian republics [6]. This article aims to analyze the current state of Russia’s foreign policy in Central Asia, identify its strengths and weaknesses and suggest the ways to make it more effective.

Russian Foreign Policy in Central Asia: Achievements and Problems: Russian foreign policy in Central Asia has a number of strength and drawbacks. Among the main achievements of Russia’s diplomacy, we should note that Moscow has managed to build fairly effective system for cooperation with Central Asia. Legally, four of the five stans (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) are Russia’s allies and Turkmenistan is a strategic partner. Furthermore, none of the “Sunshine Republics” is a member of international organizations that counteract Russian influence (NATO, etc.). Interactions between Russia and the Central Asian states remain relatively pragmatic and more importantly, profitable for Moscow. In Central Asia, Russia was able to settle the most severe international conflict in the Post-Soviet space, the Tajik Civil War (however, both the Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria conflicts remain unresolved). Lastly, due to the rapid growth of its economy, Central Asia may soon become a major market for Russian goods and services.

However, Russia’s foreign is not without its drawbacks.

First, Moscow incorrectly treats Central Asia as a single unit, in other words lumping all of the stans together. This approach fails to acknowledge the diverse interests of the Central Asian republics and has led to a number of diplomatic missteps.

Secondly, Russia has yet to elaborate a comprehensive regional strategy. Moscow’s regional aims have focused only on a narrow range of issues without taking into account the massive variety of factors which shape political dynamics in the Central Asian subsystem.

Thirdly, Moscow seems unable to strike a stable balance between the two most powerful regional actors, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. For whatever reason, either Astana or Tashkent has taken priority, but never
both simultaneously. At present, Russia is close with Kazakhstan, while its other strategic partner and ally, Uzbekistan, very much “key player” in the Central Asian heartland [7], has drifted to the periphery of Moscow’s attention. Such an approach is obviously illogical and has cost Moscow credibility in the eyes of the stans. Fourthly, Russia has never been able to influence the internal affairs and foreign policy of Central Asian states, which have arguably drifted out of Moscow’s orbit. During the economic crisis of 2008-10, Russia’s influence on Central Asia receded to its lowest level to date [8].

Lastly, the main stakeholders in Russian-Central Asian relations have tended to be “Sunshine Republics” selves, while Moscow seems content sitting on the sidelines and reacting to its neighbors’ initiatives. The Central Asian republics are primarily interested in Russia’s financial, economic, logistical and military assistance-when Moscow failed to provide support during the financial crisis of 2009-10, Central Asian interest in further cooperation decreased. In the coming years, Turkmenistan will be another important strategic partner for Russia. As long as their relations remain as distant as they presently are, Moscow cannot hope to expand political and military cooperation with Ashgabat. However, the two sides could take steps to develop bilateral trade, economic and humanitarian relations [11].

In the cases of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, Russia will be forced to make a painful choice of whether or not to continue its allied partnerships with these small nations. Politically and economically, they remain weak and will only require increasing economic and strategic support [12]. From a financial perspective, relations with them will never be profitable for Moscow. Nevertheless, potential political and strategic dividends may be enough to cover the costs of subsidizing the Kyrgyz and Tajik economies [13].

**CONCLUSION**

While Moscow frequently declares that it has vital interests in Central Asia, its diplomacy in the region lags behind the times and remains rather ineffective. If this challenge is not met with adequate effort, Russia risks losing its ground in a region that has already become a target of Western and Chinese economic, political, and ideological expansion. The main aims of Russia’s foreign policy in Central Asia may be laid out as follows. First, Moscow must find equal footing with its Central Asian partners and treat them as unique states that pursue unique interests in the international arena.
Secondly, it should attempt to strike a balance in its relations with regional powers, who remain loggerheads with one another. Finally, it must refrain from placing excessive demands on the stans, while not granting unreasonable concessions.

Findings. At the moment, Russia’s foreign policy in Central Asia seems to be making some progress and may therefore be termed relatively successful. Nevertheless, it faces numerous challenges that demand innovative solutions. Firstly, Moscow treats the region as a monolithic unit and interacts with local states without differentiating between them. Secondly, Russian diplomacy appears to lack adequate strategic planning. Third, Moscow is unable to strike a balance between its key regional partners, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Forth, it appears unable to exert influence on the political and socio-economic development of the stans. Fifth, its diplomacy in the region remains too passive and reactive—it should take the lead on integration with its Central Asian partners. To overcome its flaws and make its diplomacy more effective, Russia must improve its relations with Kazakhstan, enhance its contacts with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan and restore high-level partnerships with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—in other words totally “update” its foreign policy in Central Asia.

REFERENCES