Russia’s Central Asian Alliances: The Real Deal?

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Abstract: This article investigates whether current relations between the Russian Federation and the Central Asian republics can be considered true alliances. It lays out the legal, political and economic criteria for alliances in contemporary international relations theory and explores the differences between de-jure and de-facto alliances. The author concludes that Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan cannot truly be considered allies of the Russian Federation, while the development of Moscow’s relationship with Turkmenistan lags even further behind.

Key words: International law · International relations · International treaties · Allied relations · Military alliance · Russian Federation · Central Asia

INTRODUCTION

According to the Foreign Policy Concepts of the Russian Federation adopted in 1993 [1], 2000 [2], 2008 [3] and 2013 [4], the development of ties with members of the Commonwealth of Independent States remains the top priority of Russia’s foreign policy. Following the collapse of the USSR in the early 1990s and onwards, the Russian Foreign Ministry has made significant efforts to ensure that the republics of Central Asia retain close political, military, economic and cultural relations with Moscow. The aforementioned block, sometimes referred to as the “stans”, comprises Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, which are regarded by Moscow as its “younger brothers” and its main partners in today’s world [5].

This article aims to determine whether the Russian Federation’s partnerships with the Central Asian republics can be classified as alliances. It will define the legal and political criteria for alliances in contemporary international relations theory, identify the Central Asian states that claim to Russia’s allies and examine the key problems in their relations with Moscow.

Alliances: A Theoretical Framework: The principle of an alliance was first laid out in the de jure sense of the term in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which reads: “The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them… shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them… will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force” [6].

Thus, the allied relations of sovereign states can be said to be built upon their unconditional commitment to mutual assistance in security matters.

With regards to de facto alliances, they are somewhat self-evidently more broad: they encompass all fields of interstate cooperation and are therefore somewhat informal in nature.

The above being the case, what are the main features of “true” allies in the modern state system? Using hypothetical states A and B, allied relations may be described as follows:

In an exceptional case, allied states may establish a Unified Economic Space and reciprocally introduce a visa-free regime. Nevertheless it should be understood that these allies still remain sovereign states: their national interests may not totally overlap and there may be occasional disputes between them. However, they never exert pressure on each other, whether the military, political or economic.

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Military Relations

A and B are ready to unconditionally guarantee each other's security, or stronger state A acts as a guarantor of weaker state B's security, which is in turn completely confident about its ally's support.

Political/Diplomatic Relations

A and B support each other on world stage and domestically. They cooperate on various international issues and within international organizations, support one another's internal stability, prevent the interference of the third parties in each other's internal affairs, provide one another with non-military assistance as needed, contribute towards positive image of their counterparts in their own and foreign media.

Economic Relations

A and B are keen on developing bilateral trade, investment and financial cooperation.

Russia and the “Stans”: Regarding the relations between the Russian Federation and Central Asian states, we can see that, de jure, four of the five stans claim to be Russia’s allies. On May 15th, 1992, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan signed the Collective Security Treaty, which declared them political and military allies in a manner similar to NATO: “If aggression is committed against one of the party states by any state or a group of states, it will be considered aggression against all states party to this Treaty. In case an act of aggression is committed against any of the party state, all other party states will render necessary assistance, including military, as well as provide other support with the means at their disposal” [7].

Moreover, Russia has concluded separate agreements with Central Asian states, each of which might be considered alliances. With Kazakhstan [8], Kyrgyzstan [9] and Tajikistan [10], it signed Treaties of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance which proclaimed them military allies; with Tajikistan, it also signed an Agreement on Allied Cooperation Oriented toward the Twenty-First Century [11] and with Uzbekistan, an Alliance Treaty [12]. However, all of the aforementioned agreements specifically regarded military cooperation: politically and economically, there continued very significant disagreements between Russia and the stans and in the international arena, they pursued different and often opposing interests.

All of the Central Asian states continue to experience what might be termed “the Russian problem” which resulted from policies of ethnocratization enacted by local elites and the subsequent and systematic violation of the rights of non-titular ethnic groups. The use of the Russian language in the Central Asia shrank drastically, Russian culture eroded and the local information space was isolated from its Russian counterpart. The “Sunshine republics” sought to reduce their economic dependence on Moscow and reorient their foreign trade towards alternative partners. Several countries (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) did not fulfill their economic obligations to the Russian Federation while Russia’s agreements with the other states (Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan) were violated by Moscow. From 1991 onwards, Russia exerted political and economic pressure on its partners, much to their indignation. In the diplomatic arena, Central Asian states implemented multi-vector policy model aimed at enhancing cooperation with the West, Middle East, China, South and East Asia. As the stans grew more stable, their foreign policies also grew more independent from Moscow.

The evidence presented above demonstrates that the so-called alliances between the Russian Federation and Central Asian states exist mostly on paper. This is most true of Uzbekistan, which in 1999 withdrew from the Collective Security Treaty, breaking its alliance with Moscow subsequently adopting a strongly anti-Russian foreign policy. Relations remained largely frozen until 2003 and in 2006 Tashkent returned to the CSTO, however only temporarily, as it withdrew again in 2012. This being the case, it would be quite a stretch of the imagination to label Uzbekistan an ally of Russia. As for Turkmenistan, it has persisted in its policy of isolationism largely since its independence-no alliance agreement between Moscow and Ashgabat is currently on the table.

CONCLUSION

Nowadays, much as in the past, the alliances between the Russian Federation and Central Asian have a largely “on paper” character. In reality, they seldom seek to raise their level of interaction to one that might be called “true” alliance.

RESULTS

The phenomenon of alliances between sovereign states is one of the most complex phenomena in modern international relations. De jure alliances are only strategic agreements in which military allies guarantee one another’s security on supposedly unconditional grounds. De facto alliances, in contrast, are broader: they encompass all levels and fields of interstate cooperation.
At the same time, it should be taken into account that allies still remain sovereign states with independent foreign policies. At present, four of the five Central Asian republics are Russia’s military allies, but the level of their political and economic cooperation cannot be considered an alliance.

REFERENCES