

# POLICY BRIEF



## The Role of Russia in the Central Asian Security Architecture

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## Key Points

- Russia considers the Eurasia region as an exclusive sphere of influence to protect from external interferences providing security by means of bilateral cooperation and multilateral institutions such as the CSTO. Within the CSTO framework, Moscow aims to play the role of regional security provider by means of joint military exercises, of the delivery of modern military equipment at Russian internal prices, of the presence of CSTO military bases in Central Asian republics as the Kant airbase in Kyrgyzstan and the Russian 201st Motor Rifle Division in Tajikistan.
- After 2014 Russia could have the great geopolitical opportunity to legitimate itself as the only security provider in Central Asia. Regional stability and security represent shared concerns of all actors involved and they should work together to contain and fight against destabilizing threats coming from Afghanistan.
- However, Russia's invasion of Crimea and the explosive crisis with Ukraine have heavily damaged Russia's image in Central Asia, spreading serious concerns about Russian integration project in the security (CSTO) and political-economic field (EEU). Furthermore, the Russian economy's crisis - linked to low oil prices and the effect of the Western sanctions - have frozen Moscow's pledged investments to upgrade military capacities in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, while the reiterated refusal of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to join CSTO (considering that Uzbekistan has voluntarily left the CSTO in 2012 for the second time) undermines the Russian project to realize a Central Asian security architecture under Moscow's leadership.

## Introduction

Following NATO's disengagement in Afghanistan and in the region, Russia appears as the main security provider for Central Asian republics, involving them in long-term military cooperation on bilateral basis and also within a multilateral security institution, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). However, Russia's invasion of Crimea and the explosive crisis with Ukraine have heavily damaged Russia's image in Central Asia, spreading serious concerns about Russian integration projects in the security field (CSTO) and in the political-economic domain (the Eurasian Economic Union). As a matter of fact, this Russian geopolitical approach is perceived as an imperialistic attempt to restore its traditional influence in the post-soviet space, aimed to include Central Asian states within supranational organizations which follow Soviet Union's model.

However, the existent destabilizing threats which heavily affect regional stability - the return to their homeland of Central Asian foreign fighters linked to the Islamic State and the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan - have pushed Central Asian presidents to maintain a profitable military cooperation with Russia to preserve national and regional security. The alleged close relations between Moscow and some elements of the Taliban could be positively conceived by Central Asian presidents as a common attempt to build political and social stability in the region.

The aim of this paper is to evaluate the approach of Central Asian republics towards Russia's ambition to play the role of regional security provider, also considering that these countries are progressively looking to China as a potential partner in the security field, to balance Russian traditional role: as a matter of fact, Beijing is strongly interested to preserve security in Central Asia as a precondition to successfully develop its Belt and Road Initiative, the geo-economic corridor promoted by Beijing to reach the Europe crossing Central Asia.

We can observe that all Central Asian countries are worried about Russian integration projects and reject the idea to be included in a renewed version of the Soviet Union but they can differently oppose Russia's moves, playing a multi-vector strategy in the security field, which cannot - however - definitely exclude Russia. At present Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan appear the only countries which could successfully achieve this target, while the other Central Asian countries will be not able to resist to Russian pressures.

## Security drivers in Central Asia after 2014

Following NATO's withdrawal from the region and its redeployment in Afghanistan, Central Asian republics have progressively lost a strong security partner and the economic and strategic gains linked to this cooperation.<sup>1</sup>

In this new scenario, Russia must take charge of providing security in Central Asia by means of bilateral cooperation and multilateral institutions such as the CSTO. This Russian-lead security organization has been also defined as the "Eastern NATO", because it is conceived to counter-balance western influence in the former soviet space. Russia considers the Eurasia region as an exclusive sphere of influence to protect from external interferences. Within the CSTO framework, Moscow aims to play the role of regional security provider by means

1 Heidi Reisinger, "How to get out of Afghanistan: NATO's withdrawal through Central Asia," *NATO Defense College Research Paper* 79, (2012): 5-6.

of joint military exercises, of the delivery of modern military equipment at Russian internal prices, of the presence of CSTO military bases in two Central Asian republics.

The U.S. military presence in the post-soviet space after 2001 helped Russia to gain strategic military concessions in Kyrgyzstan (Kant military airbase) and in Tajikistan (the establishment of a permanent Russian base for the Russian 201st Motor Rifle Division after the eviction of Russian border army from the Tajik-Afghan border in 2005).<sup>2</sup>

For Central Asian states, the progressive disengagement of the United States and NATO from the regional security field spread serious concerns because of Afghanistan's permanent condition of instability and the potential destabilizing impact provoked by the return of Central Asian fighters - affiliates of the Islamic State - from the Middle East to their homelands. According to an International Crisis Group report, there are between 2000 to 4000 Central Asian fighters, which have been trained to fight in Syria and Iraq, most of them from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.<sup>3</sup> Afghanistan is perceived as the main source of threats to the regional security architecture and the risk of spill-overs from this country appears concretely high: growing cross-border armed incursions of terrorists could trigger a dangerous condition of political instability in Central Asia, as well as the devastating social impact of drug and weapons traffics. Moreover, the US's retreat severely undermined their attempts to implement a multi-vector strategy in foreign policy, which would have allowed them to balance Sino-Russian influence. The decision of Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev to close the Manas Transit Center in 2013 (put into effect in June 2014) heavily undermined US's project to promote regional cooperation in the security field, through the involvement of Central Asian republics (with the partial exception of Turkmenistan) in the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), originally conceived as an infrastructural web to supply NATO troops in Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup>

Following the geopolitical marginalization of the US in the region, Russia and China have consolidated their reciprocal spheres of influence in Central Asia, respecting some kind of "division of labor", based on the reciprocal acquiescence on Russia's interest to maintain military influence in Central Asia and the Chinese ambition to become the main economic partner for the post-soviet republics, as the leader of regional economic cooperation.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, the existent regional security organizations (CSTO and also the Shanghai Cooperation Organization - SCO - the latter jointly lead by Russia and China in order to ensure regional stability) proved unable or unwilling - or both - to intervene during outbreaks of violence or internal security crises in Central Asia. The military inaction of CSTO and SCO during the inter-ethnic clashes in Osh (Kyrgyzstan) in 2010 - which involved Uzbek and Kyrgyz - represented the most evident example of Russia and China's dilemma to provide

2 Vladimir Paramonov, Aleksey Stokov and Oleg Stolpovski, *Russia in Central Asia: Policy, Security and Economics*. (New York: Nova Publishers, 2009) 20-38, 57-59; Fabio Indeo, "The geopolitical consequences of the US-Russian "military airbase race" in Central Asia," *The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (2010): 149-158.

3 International Crisis Group, *Syria Calling: Radicalization in Central Asia*, (Bishkek/Bruxelles: ICG, 2015) <<https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/central-asia/syria-calling-radicalisation-central-asia>> (accessed March 20, 2018).

4 Andrew C. Kuchins and Thomas M. Sanderson, *The Northern Distribution Network and the Modern Silk Road: Planning for Afghanistan's Future* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2009), <[https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/publication/091217\\_Kuchins\\_NorthernDistNet\\_Web.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/091217_Kuchins_NorthernDistNet_Web.pdf)> (accessed March 20, 2018).

5 Stephen Blank, "New signs of Chinese military interest in Central Asia," *The Central Asia Caucasus Analyst* (2016), <<https://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13421-new-signs-of-chinese-military-interest-in-central-asia.html>> (accessed March 25, 2018).

security in the region: both organisations claimed that the lack of a foreign aggression or an external security threat hampered them from militarily intervening, because of they are not designed to deal with internal security issues or conflicts between member-states.<sup>6</sup>

## Russia as regional security provider: challenges and weaknesses

After 2014 Russia appears as the only security provider able to preserve regional security which represents - in Moscow's perspective - the necessary precondition in order to achieve its aims in the region: a condition of instability in Eurasia will be a threat to Russian southern border's security also negatively affecting the implementation of supranational political and economic projects (the Eurasian Economic Union - EEU - which currently includes Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia and Belarus).

However, Russia's invasion of Crimea and the explosive crisis with Ukraine have heavily damaged Russia's image in Central Asia, spreading serious concerns about Russian integration project in the security (CSTO) and political-economic field (EEU). In this last case, Putin's idea that member countries can adopt a common and shared foreign policy is feared by Central Asian presidents, as perceiving it as a threat eroding their national sovereignty. Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev has clearly stressed that the EEU will only have an economic dimension, refusing the idea to create a supranational political institution.<sup>7</sup>

The comment pronounced by President Putin that before the presidency of Nursultan Nazarbayev "Kazakhs had never had statehood" has further enhanced Kazakhstan's mistrust toward the idea to further expand the EEU into a framework of politico-economic cooperation.<sup>8</sup>

Moscow's aim to protect Russian-speaking population in the post-soviet space is perceived as a looming threat for the five Central Asian states, which are home to more or less sizeable communities of ethnic Russians. Moreover, Putin's claim that pro-Russian troops in Crimea were only protecting Russian military facilities is perceived as an incumbent threat for Central Asian republics such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – which host Russian military bases – or Kazakhstan, which hosts the Baikonur Cosmodrome.

Among Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan appears the more vulnerable to Russian pressures: as Ukraine, Kazakhstan shares a long borders with Russia, with large ethnic Russian minorities (22 per cent of the population) and an interlinked economy.<sup>9</sup>

6 Sergei Blagov, "Russia, CSTO, SCO Struggle to Settle Kyrgyz Unrest," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 7, no. 124 (2010); <<https://jamestown.org/program/russia-csto-sco-struggle-to-settle-kyrgyz-unrest/>> (accessed March 25, 2018).

7 Dosym Satpayev, "Kazakhstan: Economic Integration without Relinquishing Sovereignty," in *The Eurasian Economic Union Analyses and Perspectives from Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia*, ed. Felix Hett and Susanne Szkola, 11-16 (Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2015) <<http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id-moe/11181.pdf>> (Accessed March 21, 2018); Rilka Dragneva and Kataryna Wolczuk, "Eurasian Economic Integration: Institutions, Promises and Faultlines," in *The Geopolitics of Eurasian Economic Integration*, ed. David Cadier, 12-15 (London: LSE Ideas, 2014) <<http://www.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/publications/reports/pdf/SR019/SR019-Dragneva-Wolczuk.pdf>> (accessed March 21, 2018).

8 Michel Casey, "Putin's Chilling Kazakhstan Comments". *The Diplomat* (2014), <<https://thediplomat.com/2014/09/putins-chilling-kazakhstan-comments/>> (accessed March 28, 2018).

9 Janusz Bugajski and Margarita Assenova. *Eurasian Disunion. Russia's Vulnerable Flanks* (Washington DC: The Jamestown Foundation, 2016) 370-371,377 <[http://jamestown.org/uploads/tx\\_jamquickstore/Eurasian\\_Disunion2.pdf](http://jamestown.org/uploads/tx_jamquickstore/Eurasian_Disunion2.pdf)> (accessed March 28, 2018).



Furthermore, the CSTO cannot be defined an inclusive multilateral organization in the regional security field, because Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan - two of three Central Asian countries, which share a border with Afghanistan - are not members: Ashgabat never joined CSTO due to its positive neutrality status in foreign policy while Tashkent withdrew the organization (for the second time) in 2012 and refused to join it from 1999 to 2006.

These Central Asian states have regularly rejected Russian offers to join this regional security organization which could help them - in the Moscow perspective - to better preserve domestic stability also preventing destabilizing threats along their border. This reiterated refusal of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan clearly complicates the possibility to organize a regional response to the terrorist threat, also undermining the project to realize a joint air defence system to implement a regional “umbrella of protection”, based on the cooperation among Central Asian countries and Russia in air defence matters.

Moreover, the creation of an effective integrated air defence system in the region will require Moscow’s engagement to deploy modern military capacities in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, supplying equipment (i.e. combat fighter aviation) at heavily discounted prices (as CSTO members) with a massive investment of roubles.<sup>10</sup>

Considering the presence of CSTO military bases on their territory, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are key pawns in the Russian project of regional security architecture aimed to preserve stability on its southern borders: the Kant base in Kyrgyzstan plays the role of air force component of the CSTO Collective Rapid Reaction Forces, while Tajikistan’s military base is the largest Russian military presence abroad, hosting nearly 7000 soldiers of the 201st division.

Even if the military base concessions were renovated, some problems have emerged about the military cooperation between Moscow, Bishkek and Dushanbe.

In 2017 then Kyrgyz President Atambayev discussed about a future scenario without Russian military bases in the country after 2027, also stressing the need to create new Russian military facilities on the southern border where destabilizing threats coming from Afghanistan are more evident. In 2009 Russia and Kyrgyzstan signed an agreement to extend Russian military presence in Kant for 49 years, but this deal was revised under Atambayev’s presidency in 2012, in order to create a unified military base combining all of the various facilities (in addition to Kant, Russia holds a weapon test range in Karakol, a signals centre in Kara-Balta, a radio-seismic laboratory in Mayly-Suu), with a term agreement of 15 years.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Russia announced that it is prepared to spend \$1.1 billion to upgrade Kyrgyzstan’s army.

In 2012 Russia and Tajikistan “renovated” the deal, which extended the presence of the Russian military base for 30 years, and Moscow promised 200 million dollars to upgrade Tajikistan’s army.<sup>12</sup>

10 Guy Plopsky, “Russia’s Big Plans for Air Defense in Eurasia,” *The Diplomat* (2017), <<https://thediplomat.com/2017/04/russias-big-plans-for-air-defense-in-eurasia/>> (accessed March 28, 2018).

11 Joshua Kucera, “Russia Cements Control Over Military Bases In Kyrgyzstan,” *Eurasianet* (2012), <<https://eurasianet.org/node/66323>> (accessed March 28, 2018); Bruce Pannier, “Kyrgyzstan’s President Wants Another Russian Military Base,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (2017), <<https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-new-russian-base-atambaev-putin-afghanistan/28583538.html>> (accessed March 28, 2018).

12 Igor Rotar, “Moscow and Dushanbe Strengthen Their Military Alliance,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 10, no. 184 (2013), <<https://jamestown.org/program/moscow-and-dushanbe-strengthen-their-military-alliance/>> (accessed March 28, 2018).



However, these pledged investments in the military field have been delayed due to the decline of the Russian economy in 2015-2017 following the combination between the effects of EU sanctions against Russia and low oil prices. Between 2015 and 2016 Russia was not able to provide promised investments in hydro-electric plants in Kyrgyzstan and to upgrade the Kant airbase, while the pledged investment of \$1.2 billion in military aid to Tajikistan has been partially released following the Chinese military advance in the country.<sup>13</sup>

In October 2016 China and Tajikistan held their first-ever joint bilateral military exercises in Tajikistan, but this Central Asian country has been also included – together with Pakistan and Afghanistan - in the “Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism” promoted by China as a potentially new security cooperation initiative in the region, which appears to exclude Russia.<sup>14</sup>

Tajikistan, together with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, shares a border with China which aims to preserve security and stability in the region in order to successfully promote its Belt and Road Initiative, this corridor trade which crosses Central Asia before it reaches Europe and the markets. The convergence of security interests has allowed China to implement bilateral military cooperation with all five Central Asian countries, increasing military aid and equipment supplies: consequently, Beijing has progressively emerged as a potential security supplier alternative to Russia.<sup>15</sup>

Undoubtedly, the progressive deterioration of the security scenario in Northern Afghanistan have worried neighbouring Central Asian countries: in the last three years, Balkh Province (close to the Uzbek-Afghan border), Kunduz and Badakhshan provinces ( which borders Tajikistan) and Faryab Province (adjacent to Turkmenistan) have become targets of Taliban offensive.<sup>16</sup>

In spite of refusing to join CSTO, the reluctant Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have showed a growing willingness to develop military cooperation with Russia on bilateral terms, in order to protect national borders and to enhance domestic security, implicitly recognizing this Russia’s security role.

Under the new President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan has reconfirmed the main ideological pillars of its foreign policy doctrine: no foreign military bases in Uzbekistan, no alignment with foreign military or political blocs, which excludes Tashkent’s participation in the CSTO or EEU.<sup>17</sup>

Uzbekistan’s decision to strengthen military cooperation with Russia on bilateral basis is conceived as a profitable strategic option, because Moscow can support Tashkent’s efforts

13 Bugajski and Assenova, *Eurasian Disunion. Russia’s Vulnerable Flanks* 390, 425-430.

14 Fuad Shahbazov, “China’s Long March into Central Asia: How Beijing Expands Military Influence in Tajikistan,” *The Central Asia Caucasus Analyst* (2017), <<http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13429-china%E2%80%99s-long-march-into-central-asia-how-beijing-expands-military-influence-in-tajikistan.html>> (accessed March 28, 2018).

15 Fabio Indeo, “China as security provider in Central Asia: a realistic perspective?,” *OSCE Academy Central Asia Security Policy Brief*, 17 (2015), <[http://www.osce-academy.net/upload/file/Policy\\_Brief\\_17.pdf](http://www.osce-academy.net/upload/file/Policy_Brief_17.pdf)> (accessed March 28, 2018).

16 Bruce Pannier, “Majlis Podcast: Who Would Help Defend Central Asia From Insecurity In Afghanistan?,” *Qishloq Ovlozi, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (2017), <<https://www.rferl.org/a/majlis-podcast-who-is-security-guarantor-central-asia/28487332.html>> (accessed March 30, 2018).

17 Richard Weitz, “Uzbekistan’s New Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity under New Leadership,” *Silk Road Paper* (2018), 48, <<https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/1801Weitz.pdf>> (accessed April 6, 2018).

to improve security and stability along the Uzbek-Afghan border, perceiving Moscow as a reliable partner to provide security on the regional level, due to the NATO and US disengagement from the region. In October 2017 Uzbekistan and Russia held their first joint military exercises since 2005, while in April 2017 Tashkent and Moscow ratified an agreement on military-technical cooperation which allows Uzbekistan to purchase Russian military equipment at prices close to Russian domestic prices as well as to repair existing hardware.<sup>18</sup>

The flexible approach of Russia - which has normally granted preferential terms only for CSTO members - highlights the relevance of Uzbekistan as an indispensable partner for Moscow in order to provide security in the region.

The election of Shavkat Mirziyoyev as new president of Uzbekistan has represented the moment of opportunity for Russia in order to improve bilateral relations with this Central Asian country and to deepen cooperation in some fields of common interests, like regional security, military cooperation, trade and migration.

## Conclusions/Recommendations

In spite of different Central Asian attempts and initiatives to develop military cooperation with other security partners and to boost national military capacities, Russia will be able to maintain its traditional role of security provider in the region in the next decades.

Russia appears the only external geopolitical player that could concretely achieve this aim. China's increasing military influence in Central Asia is limited to the bilateral dimension of the cooperation, considering that SCO appears not able to provide security in the region: moreover, the current geostrategic scenario in Central Asia hampers China to deploy military bases in the region, while Russia holds two military bases which contribute to preserve Moscow's military presence in the post-soviet space. As a matter of fact, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan - as CSTO members - can't host a foreign military base on their territory without the full consent of all other members of the organization, while Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan's foreign policies exclude this possibility as part of their national policy. At the same time, China's moves to build a military base along the Afghan-Tajik border confirms Beijing's growing concerns on regional stability, focusing its initiative on the weaker ring of the Central Asian security architecture.

Concerning the United States and NATO, the geographical distance, the Sino-Russian opposition, the rise of other international crises (i.e. Syria, North Korea) and reasons of domestic policy have frozen a renewed military presence to support the stabilization process in the region.

As we observe in the text, the implementation of a regional security architecture under Russian authority appears far to reach without the involvement of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, which share border with Afghanistan and could better support a regional strategy to contain security threats coming from there.

<sup>18</sup> Dmitry Stephanovic, "Russia's military cooperation goals in Central Asia," *The Diplomat* (2018), <<https://thediplomat.com/2018/02/russias-military-cooperation-goals-in-central-asia/>> (accessed April 6, 2018).

Moreover, Uzbekistan borders with all the other four Central Asian republics, enhancing its potential role of a regional security hub, while Turkmenistan's engagement will be important to draw up a framework of security cooperation in another delicate scenario, the Caspian Sea. Bilateral cooperation between Russia and Central Asian republics could be more feasible also producing tangible results, as the technical-military cooperation between Moscow and Tashkent has showed.

The achievement of regional security and stability strictly depend on a key precondition: to deepen the involvement of Central Asian nations in a decision-making process, within which they should accept to share political and military responsibilities in order to handle and solve the existing security threats. The failure of the attempts to stabilize Afghanistan strengthens the shared necessity of all Central Asian states to promote initiatives and security cooperation, overcoming regional rivalries which have hampered the elaboration of a Central Asian approach to regional security.

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