

## Russia's national interests in Central Asia in the context of changes within the international system

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**Abstract.** This article explores Russia's national interests in Central Asia in the context of the fundamental changes in the international system from 2008 through 2014. The author divides these changes into geopolitical, strategic, economic and political, and concludes that the development of broader cooperation with the "Sunshine republics" remains of vital importance for Moscow.

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### Introduction

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the development of ties with the former Soviet republics has remained a top priority of Russia's foreign policy [1]. From a geopolitical point of view, the Post-soviet space is Russia's "backyard," whose significance for Moscow cannot be understated. The region is as large as it is heterogeneous – therefore, it makes sense to divide it into several sub-regions that have common geographical, historical, political, economic, ethnic, and cultural features. We can distinguish four areas: the European countries (Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine), the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and quasi-states, Abkhazia and South Ossetia), Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan) and the Russian Federation, whose territory is too large to be considered one of the said sub-regions.

In the wake of the collapse of the USSR (and with it the Eastern Bloc), the international system experienced dramatic changes, which greatly affected Russia as successor to the defunct empire. These changes occurred in several stages. In the 1990s, the bipolar system was dismantled, the great powers grew accepted the idea that the Soviet Union no longer existed. As a result, Russia's influence in the world remarkably weakened [2]. In 2000, years of profound political and socio-economic crisis in Russia were finally overcome, and its foreign policy grew much more active [3]. Its attempts to restore its former geopolitical status found strong position its Western partners. The third wave tectonic shifts began in 2008, when a deep and global financial crisis broke out, and many countries, including Russia, reevaluated the capabilities of their diplomacy in unfavorable conditions.

This article aims to define Russia's national interests in Central Asia at present, i. e. in the context

of changes in the international system since 2008. To achieve this goal, we divide Russia's interests into four groups: geopolitical, strategic, economic and political.

### Geopolitical interests

The Central Asian region occupies a vast area, spanning nearly 4 million square kilometers. Its northern territory (the steppes of Kazakhstan) remains sparsely populated, yet holds great demographic and economic importance for Russia. Note that we are not talking about the annexation of these Kazakh territories by the Russian Federation: it has never questioned the territorial integrity and inviolability of its main ally's territory. What we mean is the joint development of these areas when mutually beneficial.

The five Stans have traditionally played the role of a "geopolitical bridge" linking Europe and Asia, North and the South, East and West, and the Christian and Muslim worlds. In the future, extensive transport corridors may appear and cross the Central Asian steppes and deserts as they once did in the period of the Silk Road.

Central Asia borders both Afghanistan and Iran, states which play an important role in world affairs, but contribute to instability in the international system. From 2001 through 2014, when U. S. and NATO forces were carrying out anti-Taliban operations in Afghanistan, Central Asia was turned into a frontline in the fight against terrorism [4].

Finally, Central Asia is the only area in the world where the strategic interests of three great powers – Russia, China and the U. S. – as well as those of a number of regional actors – Turkey, Iran, India, Pakistan, Japan, South Korea, Germany, France, the U. K. – enter into direct contact with one another.

### **Strategic interests**

To date, four out of the five Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) are Russia's military and political allies, as they have signed bilateral treaties to that effect [5].

Three countries in the region (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) widely cooperate with Russia within the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a military-political bloc, which also includes Armenia and Belarus [6] and acts under the auspices of Moscow.

Russia has military bases in two states (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), and in Kazakhstan, it rents several test grounds and the Baikonur Space Complex.

It is also vitally important for Russia to enhance cooperation with the Stans on the issues of the prevention of inter-ethnic conflicts, the struggle against traditional forms of international crime, and the new threats and challenges [7].

The Central Asian states are the closest military and strategic partners of Russia, which make a great contribution to the maintenance of its security. In turn, Moscow successfully fulfills the role of guarantor of the national security of its regional allies.

### **Economic interests**

The Central Asian states are abundant in mineral resources. They possess enormous deposits of oil and gas, coal, uranium ores, ferrous and non-ferrous metals, precious and semi-precious stones, and raw materials for the chemical and construction industries. The maintenance of a stable access to the said resources is rather important for Russia.

From a geo-economic point of view, Russia seeks to prevent Caspian hydrocarbons from competing with its own in the European markets. In this respect, it has sought to develop strategic partnerships with the "Sunshine republics" in order to keep the situation under its control [8].

The economies of Russia and its southern neighbors remain complementary, and they have actively developed trade links: the Stans are major consumers of Russian industrial products and services, and Russia is a key importer of their raw materials and agricultural products.

Most of the Stans (except Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) have an abundant labor force, whereas the Russian Federation is increasingly short of workers. Seeing as the Central Asian population largely speaks Russian, the demographic potential of the region may be used towards Moscow's interests.

Russia and Kazakhstan in particular have made great strides on the issues of integration [9]: in 2010, they established the Customs Union, and in

2012, the Single Economic Space. By 2016, they will have built the Eurasian Economic Union.

### **Political interests**

A large Russian diaspora, numbering up to 8 million people, is represented in Central Asia. Thus, the protection of these Russians' rights remains one of the main interests of the Russian government.

In all the Stans, the Russian language continues to play the role of a lingua franca. In Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, it has a special constitutional status. Russia aims to preserve the high social position of the Russian language and the national culture in Central Asia [10].

It is crucial for Moscow to prevent the use of the territory of its neighbors to exert pressure on Russia, threaten its security, and undermine its national interests.

The Russian Federation and the "Sunshine republics" widely cooperate and support one another on the world stage, in particular, within various international organizations. This fact is increasingly important given the growing level of disagreement and confrontation between Russia and the West.

Finally, there are virtually no ideological contradictions between Russia and its Central Asian partners. They share a set of common values: the maintenance of stability and order in the Post-soviet space; the protection of the existing legal framework; the avoidance of revolutionary upheavals; respect for human rights in difficult socio-economic and political conditions, the management of new threats and challenges; the prevention of intervention by external actors in their domestic affairs; the maintenance of political, ideological, and cultural pluralism in today's world [11].

### **Conclusion**

As in the previous two decades, the Russia's national interests in Central Asia remain very central and wide-ranging: they cover virtually all the fields of its foreign relations.

### **Findings**

Despite the significant changes in the international system that have occurred from 2008 through the present, Russia's national interests in Central Asia have retained considerable depth and diversity. The said interests may be divided in several groups: geopolitical, strategic, economic and political ones. A separate analysis of each of them has shown that the development of broad cooperation with the "Sunshine republics" remains vitally important for Russia.

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