

Russian-Kazakhstani and Russian-Uzbekistani relations: opposing models of political and military alliances

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Abstract. This article compares Russian-Kazakhstani and Russian-Uzbekistani relations as two opposite models of political and military alliances. It analyses the evolution of interactions between Moscow and each of its partners, explores the nature of their relationships, and compares the national interests of Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. It concludes that the Russian-Kazakhstani union reflects its political and legal status while the Russian-Uzbekistani coalition exists mainly on paper.

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Introduction

In a modern international system rife with instability, conflicts, and contradictions, most all independent states seek to gain the support of partners. Weaker states need it to protect their national security and prevent possible attacks from other international actors, while stronger ones seek to legitimize their domestic and foreign policy. Such support is frequently provided within political and military alliances.

It is clear that Russia, which has of recently positioned itself as a great power, requires external support to legitimize its activities. On paper, it currently has eight allies: Abkhazia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and South Ossetia, with whom it had signed the treaties to this effect [1]. The largest and strongest among Russia's allies are the Republics of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

In spite of several key similarities, Astana and Tashkent view their relations with Moscow from different angles, and Kazakhstan considers its allied commitments to Russia unlike Uzbekistan.

This article aims to compare the Russian-Kazakhstani and Russian-Uzbekistani relations as two opposite models of political and military alliances in Moscow's diplomatic practice.

Russia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan: the development of bilateral relations

Initially, both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan mistrusted the leadership of a nascent "Democratic Russia" as on December 8th of 1991, Boris Yeltsin had signed the Belovezh Accords on the dissolution of the Soviet Union [2] behind the backs of the presidents of the "Sunshine republics" and even had not informed them about his intention to dissolve their common state. Yeltsin had known full well that both Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan and Islam

Karimov of Uzbekistan had consistently advocated the preservation of the Soviet Union, albeit in a modified form.

Nevertheless, on December 13th of 1991, the leaders of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan met in Ashgabat and agreed that their countries could not exist without Russia [3]. In economic terms, they were totally dependent on Moscow, as it had traditionally been their leading foreign trade partner. Kazakhstan and Russia had a 7500 km long land border – the longest frontier in the world. For Uzbekistan, the Russian Federation had always been the main donor supplier of goods lacked by its monocultural economy. In the security field, neither Kazakhstan nor Uzbekistan had armies capable of meaningful self-defense. Politically, the two republics needed Moscow's support on the world stage in order to win acceptance of their newly independent status.

On May 15th of 1992, Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, among the other states, signed the Collective Security Treaty, which declared them political and military allies [4]. Subsequently, Russian-Kazakhstani relations rapidly improved in all areas, while Russian-Uzbekistani relations were relegated mainly to military cooperation. Thus, from the very beginning, Russia's alliances with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan had a number of key differences.

In 1998, Russia and Kazakhstan signed the Declaration on the Eternal Friendship and Alliance, oriented towards the 21st century, which marked an improvement in their bilateral relations to their highest level [5]. Meanwhile, Uzbekistan began to distance itself from Russia, and in 1999, it withdrew from the Collective Security Treaty, breaking its alliance and other military commitments to Moscow.

In the 2000s, Russian-Kazakhstani relations continued to flourish: in 2000, the parties established

the Eurasian Economic Community, and in 2002, the Collective Security Treaty Organization. Uzbekistan, on the contrary, avoided Russia, and until 2003, exhibited a preference toward cooperation with Western states. After 9/11, Kazakhstan did not offer its territory for the use by the U. S. and NATO forces, while Uzbekistan became the first Central Asian republic to allow the stationing of such forces on its territory [6].

In 2003, the Uzbek-American relations rapidly deteriorated, and in May 2005, after the Uzbek authorities violently suppressed an armed uprising in Andijan, seen by Westerners as a “peaceful march against Karimov’s dictatorship”, they crossed the line of a full-scale conflict [7]. Tashkent was plunged into isolation and faced the threat of the U. S. interference in its domestic affairs. Given the circumstances, it sought support from Russia, and in November of 2005, Russia and Uzbekistan signed the Agreement on Allied Relations [8]. Hence, Moscow and Tashkent became military and political allies again.

In 2006, Uzbekistan returned to the Collective Security Treaty Organization and expanded its cooperation with Russia. However, the period of their rapprochement was rather brief: in March of 2008, when Dmitry Medvedev, whom Karimov looked down upon, was elected the new Russian president, their relations rapidly cooled. Uzbekistan’s diplomacy turned to the west once again, and its allied relations with Russia were reduced to mere declarations [9]. Astana became the main ally of Moscow not only in Central Asia, but in the world.

The character of the Russia – Kazakhstan and Russia – Uzbekistan alliances

The Russian-Kazakhstani and Russian-Uzbekistani relations varied widely in their character. If Kazakhstan sought to develop comprehensive, multi-level and multifaceted cooperation with Russia, Uzbekistan kept its relations with Moscow distant and tried to limit the extent of their partnership. For instance, Russian-Uzbekistani military and security cooperation was pursued actively only if Tashkent faced a threat (in 1995-1998, when the Taliban were threatening Afghanistan’s northern neighbors, and in 2005-2007, when Uzbekistan feared intervention by NATO). The scale of economic cooperation between Russia and Uzbekistan was significantly inferior to that of Russia and Kazakhstan [10]. In the event of international crises (such as the conflict between Russia and Georgia in August of 2008 and the transition of Crimea and Sevastopol to the Russian Federation in March of 2014), Kazakhstan provided Russia with a diplomatic support [11], whereas

Uzbekistan’s position either remained neutral or was critical to Moscow [12].

The national interests of Russia and its central Asian allies

Since Russia and its Central Asian partners are independent and sovereign states that have significant weight on the world stage, they have largely overlapping interests. Nevertheless, these interests will not always coincide completely: sometimes they may disagree or discuss and search for compromise. However, following the collapse of the USSR and onwards, the national ambitions of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were quite different: in case of Kazakhstan, they mostly converged with the Russian interests, and in case of Uzbekistan, they often collided with them.

Conclusion

The Russian-Kazakhstani and Russia-Uzbekistani relations have marked differences. While on a de-jure basis, both states are Russia’s allies, de-facto, Kazakhstan is a “truer” ally than Uzbekistan. A similar trend is observed in the analysis of each state’s national interests: Moscow and Astana’s interests are largely analogous, whereas Tashkent’s ambitions often contradict those of Moscow.

Findings

Russian-Kazakhstani and Russian-Uzbekistani relations reflect two opposite models of political and military alliance in Moscow’s diplomatic practice. The Russian-Kazakhstani union is dynamic, strong, and stable. The Russian-Uzbekistani coalition looks quite different: while de-jure the two states are still allies, de-facto, they have done little to advance this partnership.

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