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Russia–Kazakhstan Relations and the Tokayev–Nazarbayev Tandem

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Abstract

After nearly 30 years in power, Nursultan Nazarbayev's decision to stand down on the 19th March 2019 as president of Kazakhstan took many observers by surprise. The former prime minister and speaker of the Kazakh Senate, Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev, took up the post of acting president as constitutionally designated, and then won an extraordinary presidential election in June 2019, which was marred by opposition protest demanding fairer elections and political reform. But the transition is one in which little has changed in the short to medium-term. Nazarbayev still holds power through a series of extra-constitutional and constitutional positions and his informal power and influence is all encompassing. Moreover, Tokayev is committed to maintaining Nazarbayev's policies, especially as they pertain to Kazakh–Russian relations and the broader foreign policy agenda of 'multi-vectorism'. Within that agenda, however, there remain significant tensions in Kazakh–Russian relations, especially as they relate to questions of security and Russian soft-power. One important legacy of the Kazakh model of presidential transition is the extent to which it represents an exemplar for other post-Soviet authoritarian leaders to follow whereby they give up the office of president, but not power.

The Nazarbayev–Tokayev Transition: Stability and Continuity

The clearest thing to note about Kazakhstan's transition from Nazarbayev to Tokayev is that very little has changed or will change in the short to medium-term. Nazarbayev may have left the presidency but he has not left power. Nazarbayev continues to hold the title of *Elbasi*, leader of the nation, remains head of the *Nur Otan* (Light of Fatherland) party, is the lifelong head of the National Security Council, he still represents Kazakhstan on the world stage, and continues to possess far reaching powers to appoint ministers and leading state officials.¹ Nazarbayev's position is much like that of the Roman Emperors as described by Edward Gibbon: 'although the sovereign of Rome, in compliance with an obsolete prejudice, abstained from the name of the King, he possessed the full measure of regal power'.²

If stability and continuity are the bywords of the transition, then what was the purpose of the transition? Nazarbayev had been seeking to move on from the presidency for some time; his age and securing his legacy the principle reasons for doing so. There had been rumours that the transition had been planned for 2014, but had been scuppered by Russia's annexation of Crimea. Nazarbayev could not move on with such potential instability and conflict in a nearby region. Kazakhstan shares

a 6800-kilometre border with Russia and has a sizeable ethnic Russian population who are citizens of the Kazakh state. There were fears that should Nazarbayev resign in 2014 Kazakhstan could be next in line to see its territorial integrity questioned by Russian great power play in the region. The death of long-serving Uzbek president Islam Karimov in 2016 sharpened Nazarbayev's focus on his mortality and the need to secure his legacy as Kazakhstan's great national leader, a modern-day Atatürk. Slowly the plan was put in place. In 2017, the president went on TV to announce constitutional reform which sought to divest powers from the president to the prime minister and parliament, while Nazarbayev's position was to be refashioned as the 'supreme arbiter' overseeing defence, security and foreign policy.³ A year later in March 2018 legislation was passed through the *Mazhilis* (parliament), which made Nazarbayev chairman of Kazakhstan's National Security Council for life and also elevated the body from an advisory to a constitutional status.⁴ The on-going crackdown of political opposition, independent media, journalists and social media sites during this time created a sterile political environment, which sought to minimise any threat to political stability while the Nazarbayev regime enacted its carefully choreographed transition plan that unfolded with Nazarbayev's resignation live on TV on the eve-

1 Lillis, J. (2019) 'Nazarbayev Takes Back Control', Eurasianet, 21 October. Accessed 20 January 2020; Sputnik (2019) 'Mudryi politik': kak otreagirovali na otstavky Nazarbayeva v stranakh SNG', Sputnik, 19 March. Accessed 20 January 2020

2 Gibbon, E. (1995[1776]) *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* Volume 1. London: Penguin Books. p. 147.

3 Pistan, C (2017) '2017 Constitutional Reform in Kazakhstan: increasing democracy without political pluralism?' Constitution.net, 28 March. Accessed 21 January 2020

4 Uraliev, S. (2018) 'Zakonoproekt x pravom pozhiznennno vozglavalat' Sovbez', Radio Azattyk 5 February. Accessed 21 January 2020

ning of 19th March 2019 and Tokayev taking the oath of office the following day. Arguably, Nazarbayev and Tokayev are operating in a loose tandem. Tokayev takes responsibility for domestic economic and social policy, while Nazarbayev floats above domestic politics as the ‘supreme arbiter’, directing broader state strategy as it pertains to the international sphere, and to some extent the domestic sphere too. Effectively, Nazarbayev has abdicated himself from frontline responsibility for Kazakhstan’s economic and social problems. Instead he is bathing in the spotlight of the international stage, promoting Kazakhstan’s economic and political interests abroad.

Tokayev and the Multi-Vector Foreign Policy

Tokayev was the rational choice to replace Nazarbayev. He lacks charisma, is dependable and safe. With Tokayev there would be no ruptures, no surprises and no quick move towards democratic reform which would jeopardise Nazarbayev’s legacy of stability or relations with Russia. The meagre tilt towards political reform Tokayev has promised regarding the registration of political parties and the right to free public assembly attest to the fact he is not going to rock the boat.⁵ Such reforms represent only an incremental effort to liberalise the politics of the country. Thus, Tokayev represents not a coloured revolution, but rather a ‘beige transition’. And Tokayev, as Nazarbayev’s replacement, is perhaps the best-case scenario for the interests of the Russian government. The rumours that Nazarbayev had even consulted with Putin over his plans for succession were somewhat confirmed by the official reporting of a telephone conversation between the two leaders prior to Nazarbayev’s resignation.⁶ Tokayev was a known quantity to Russian officials. His long career in Kazakhstani politics, serving as Foreign Minister (twice), Prime Minister, Chairman of the Kazakh Senate (twice) as well as Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva, means he had experience of working with Russian foreign policy makers. From the outset, the new president, Tokayev, was viewed from the perspective of senior Russian politicians as a ‘safe pair of hands’ and someone ‘who will

continue the course laid down by the first president of Kazakhstan’.⁷ Indeed, Tokayev’s first international visit two weeks after taking up the reins of the presidency was to Moscow to meet with Putin. At the meeting Tokayev declared that he was committed to guaranteeing ‘the continuity of the policy of the First President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev, as well as to continue working on the comprehensive and active development of Kazakhstan–Russian cooperation’.⁸

It should be no surprise that Tokayev will continue to follow Nazarbayev’s so-called ‘multi-vector’ foreign policy whereby Kazakhstan seeks to balance ties with Russia and China (and to some extent the US and Europe) underpinned by a drive to integrate Kazakhstan into global and regional markets.⁹ Aside from Nazarbayev’s continued presence and oversight of Kazakhstan’s foreign policy, Tokayev was largely responsible for drawing up the ‘multi-vector’ policy during his first stint as Foreign Minister from 1994 to 1999 and the idea remains fundamental to Kazakhstan’s current Foreign Policy Concept.¹⁰ From the outset of taking up the presidency, Tokayev has been keen to reassure Russian officials that Russia remains at the heart of Kazakhstan’s ‘multi-vector’ foreign policy. In his first speech as president Tokayev noted that he would give additional impetus to the development of bilateral cooperation between Russia and Kazakhstan.¹¹ When he met with Putin in April Tokayev declared that he would do everything to reinforce the ties between Russia and Kazakhstan and emphasised the ‘special relationship’ between the two countries.¹² In his speech at the Valdai Discussion Club in Sochi in October 2019, Tokayev lavishly praised Russia as a ‘great state’ and that ‘in the modern world no key problem, be it global or regional, can be solved without the constructive participation of Russia’.¹³

Such an approach by Tokayev is rational given Kazakhstan’s geographic, historical, economic and cultural ties with Russia. Sharing such a long contiguous border and with 4 million ethnic Russians living in Kazakhstan, Tokayev (and Nazarbayev) will continue to hold close to Russia in order to ‘prevent all possible

5 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (2019) ‘Kazakh President Suggests Reforming Rules On Protests, Political Parties’. 20 December 2019. Accessed 7 February 2020

6 UAWire (2019) ‘Nazarbayev called Putin before resignation’ UAWire, 25 March. Accessed 21 January 2020

7 Sputnik (2019) ‘Mudryi politik’: kak otreagirovali na ostavky Nazarbayeva v stranakh SNG’, Sputnik, 19 March. Accessed 20 January 2020

8 Akorda (2019) ‘Meeting with Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation’, Akorda, 3 April. Accessed 20 January 2020

9 Kassenova, N. (2019) ‘The Elections and Kazakhstan’s Foreign Policy: Continuity But For How Long?’ PONARS Eurasia 25 June. Accessed 21 January 2020

10 Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2014) ‘Foreign Policy Concept for 2014 – 2020 Republic of Kazakhstan’, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Accessed 21 January 2020

11 Startsev, O. (2019) ‘Kursom elbasy’, Versia, 2 December. Accessed 20 January

12 Efe (2019) ‘Tokayev pledges to do “everything possible” to strengthen ties with Russia’, Efe, 3 April. Accessed 21 January 2020

13 Kuyanshbek, K. (2019) ‘Laviruya mezhdru Kitaem i Rossei. Tokayev i ego slova o Tsentral’noi Azii’, Radio Azattyk October 9. Accessed 21 January 2020 <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-tokayev-about-central-asia-russia-china/30206917.html>

threats from the Russian side'.¹⁴ No doubt Russia's swallowing up of Crimea and the on-going conflict in Donbass continues to loom large in Kazakh foreign policy thinking in terms of any Russian threat to its security and territorial sovereignty. It perhaps explains Tokayev's remarks in December 2019 that in Kazakhstan they don't consider what happened to Crimea as annexation.¹⁵ The Tokayev–Nazarbayev tandem is unlikely to imbalance relations with Russia. Thus, the duo will ensure Kazakhstan remains a key ally, partner and supporter of Russia. The strategy has produced some immediate returns. Trade between the two countries continues to grow, reaching \$13.6 billion for the first 9 months of 2019, an increase of \$2 billion from 2018,¹⁶ driven partly by both countries' membership of the Eurasian Economic Union, an organisation in which Russia dominates.¹⁷ But Russia has also signalled a willingness to build a nuclear power plant in the Almaty region, something Kazakh officials have long sought.

Russian–Kazakhstan Foreign Policy Tensions

Nevertheless, any assessment of Russia–Kazakhstan relations in this period of transition needs to consider points of on-going tension,¹⁸ and the fact that the relationship is not based simply on Kazakhstan slavishly following the will of Russian interests.¹⁹ First among these tensions is the extent to which Russian influence brings into question Kazakhstani sovereignty. This appears notably in material and security terms by way of the large Russian ethnic minority in Kazakhstan. The Russian ethnic minority, while gradually decreasing, continues to provide Russia with leverage over Kazakhstan in terms of questions of security.²⁰ Second, there have been concerns in Astana, and the broader public sphere in Kazakhstan, regarding Russia's broader cultural influence. Russian-language broadcast and written media is perceived as dominating Kazakhstan's media space. Local journal-

ist Sergei Duvanov has claimed Russian media resembles a 'fifth column', which Kazakhstanis are 'forced to eat'.²¹ Russian media in Kazakhstan is largely loyal to Astana and the Nazarbayev regime, but it tends to disseminate an anti-Western position, something Nargis Kassenova suggests sits uneasily with Astana's commitment to 'multi-vectorism'.²² When Kazakhstan is seeking to face all directions and present an outward facing posture to other major world powers, a domestic media space dominated by Russian anti-Western polemics is a source of frustration to Kazakhstani officials. Countering Russian soft power has entailed a more robust Kazakhstani-ization of the state via discursive nation-building efforts through TV programmes and films,²³ a law extending the amount of Television programmes which are required to be nationally produced,²⁴ the further promotion of the Kazakh language (and English too) and the long-promised shift from a Cyrillic to a Latin alphabet.

In the short to medium term, the Tokayev–Nazarbayev tandem will continue to pursue a dual strategy of involvement in two integrative projects: The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The EAEU had been a long-held dream of Nazarbayev's, but the slow pace of its development, and difficulties which are being faced in integrating frameworks and regulations of very different economies, alongside Russia's dominance and occasional unilateral approach to decision-making within the organisation, will serve to be a base for future tensions between Kazakhstan and Russia.²⁵ In the meantime, Kazakhstan continues to build ties with China through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and through the investment it is receiving as a consequence of BRI. Neither Kazakhstan's participation in the SCO, nor BRI is likely to undermine Kazakhstani–Russian relations. Russia adopts a more careful approach to relations with China than it does with Kazakhstan's Western allies. Moreover, China does not present any

14 Kuyanshbek, K. (2019) 'Laviruya mezhdru Kitaem i Rossei. Tokaev i ego slova o Tsentral'noi Azii', Radio Azattyk October 9. Accessed 21 January 2020 <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-tokayev-about-central-asia-russia-china/30206917.html>

15 Nemtsova, Z. (2019) 'My ne nazyvaem to, chto proizoshlo v krymy anneksiei', Deutsche Welle, 4 December. Accessed 21 January 2020

16 Startsev, O. (2019) 'Kursom elbasy', Versia, 2 December. Accessed 20 January

17 Bhutia, S. (2019) 'Russia dominates Eurasian Union trade. Here are the numbers' Eurasianet, 18 October. Accessed 22 January 2020

18 Kassenova, N. (2019) 'Relations with Russia and China' in Kazakhstan Tested by Transition. Chatham House Report. London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs.

19 Laruelle, M. Royce, D. and Beyssembayev, S. (2019) 'Untangling the puzzle of "Russia's influence" in Kazakhstan, Eurasian Geography and Economics, 60, (2): 211–243.

20 Kassenova, N. (2019) 'Relations with Russia and China' in Kazakhstan Tested by Transition. Chatham House Report. London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs., p. 89.

21 Toguzabaev, K. (2014) 'Rossiiskie SMI v Kazakhstane posle Kryma', Radio Azattyk, 26 November. Accessed 22 January 2020

22 Kassenova, N. (2019) 'The Elections and Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy: Continuity But For How Long?' PONARS Eurasia 25 June. Accessed 21 January 2020

23 Isaacs, R. (2018) *Film and Identity in Kazakhstan: Soviet and post-Soviet Culture*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2018.

24 Zakon.kz. 'V Kazakhstane vveden v deistvie Zakon RK O telegradioveshchani' Zakon.kz. 12 March. Accessed 23 January 2020

25 Kassenova, N. (2019) 'Relations with Russia and China' in Kazakhstan Tested by Transition. Chatham House Report. London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, p. 94.

ideological or normative threat in Kazakhstan like US or European partners who are seeking to promote political reform. While greater Chinese investment is a boon to Kazakhstan's growth prospects and further integration into the broader regional economy, it is also a source of domestic tension, with anti-Chinese attitudes on the rise in Kazakhstan. Largely this has been directed at Chinese workers in the oil industry, but there is also considerable public disquiet regarding the stories of ethnic Kazakhs being held in Chinese internment camps in Xinjiang.

It is important, however, to remember that Russia–Kazakhstan relations are not just a one-way street. It is true that Russia is highly influential in Kazakhstan not least because of geographic, demographic and cultural reasons, but also at the same time Russia needs Kazakhstan. Since relations with Ukraine are at an all-time low, Russia needs a reliable supporter in the former Soviet Union. Kazakhstan is Russia's number-one ally in the region. Thus, as much as Tokayev may feel the need to offer cloy words and sentiments from the outset of his presidency towards Russia and Putin, Russian policy makers would do well to keep the Kazakhs on-side. Demographic and cultural shifts over the decades to come will see Russia's soft power decrease in Kazakhstan. It will then become the economic and material benefits of Kazakhstan's relationship with Russia which will matter most. If they fail to materialise in sufficient number then Moscow could see Kazakhstani support for Russian interests and policy wither.

Concluding Remarks

In the short to medium term, the 'beige transition' from Nazarbayev to Tokayev changes little both domestically and internationally. At home, Tokayev is promising some modicum of political reform regarding the right to freedom of assembly and the ability for organ-

isations to register as political parties. But this does not provide the necessary radical changes required to transform the authoritarian system in Kazakhstan. Moreover, Nazarbayev remains powerful and the key decision-maker in terms of broader state strategy. Internationally, such limited domestic reform in Kazakhstan suits Moscow. Kazakhstan will continue a foreign policy which is aimed at balancing the interests of Russia, China and other key players. But close ties with Russia and the Putin regime will remain sacrosanct for the meantime.

Perhaps the greatest significance of Nazarbayev's half-departure is the new constitutional model it provides authoritarian leaders as they seek to leave office, but remain influential and ultimately in power. Such efforts have been described by scholars as a form of charismatic routinization.²⁶ This is the process whereby political leadership premised on the sheer magnetism, charisma and personality of a leader is transferred into the political institutions of the state. This is the model Nazarbayev is trying to pursue, but while ostensibly institutions like the presidency and parliament are formally supposed to hold power, in fact ultimate power resides informally in the personality of Nazarbayev and the extra-constitutional positions he has created for himself as 'leader of the nation' and life chair of the National Security Council. One can't help but think the way in which Nazarbayev has managed to maintain influence and control in Kazakhstan despite leaving the office of president is influencing Putin's recent proposals for constitutional change. Putin's desire to establish a management structure for running the country in which he is less directly involved, but at the same time floating above it as the 'supreme arbiter' are evidently inspired by the model put in place by Nazarbayev in 2019. This form of 'authoritarian diffusion' will perhaps be the most significant legacy of Kazakhstan's 'beige transition'.

About the Author

Rico Isaacs is an Associate Professor of Politics at the University of Lincoln in the School of Social and Political Sciences.

26 Isaacs, R. (2015) 'The Routinization of Charisma in Central Asia: The cases of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan'. *Studies in Transition States and Societies*, 7 (1): 58–76.

How is Russia Responding to China's Creeping Security Presence in Tajikistan?

By Edward Lemon (Daniel Morgan Graduate School, Washington D.C.) and Bradley Jardine (Wilson Center, Washington D.C.)

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Abstract

Tajikistan, the former Soviet Union's poorest republic, remains dependent on Russia. One-third of its economy is based on remittances from migrant workers in Russia, and Moscow continues to act as Tajikistan's security guarantor by stationing its largest overseas base outside of Syria in the country. Increasingly, however, China is becoming a bigger political and economic player in Tajikistan. Concerned about the threat of conflict spillover from Afghanistan into its restive Xinjiang province, the Chinese government has opted to enter Tajikistan as a security partner. So far, Russia and China share a common interest in Tajik stability, but Moscow is clearly showing signs of unease at Beijing's expanding security presence.

Tajikistan's Economic Dependence on Russia and China

Wracked by economic crises at home and as Central Asia increasingly looks to China for trade and investment, Russia's economic relations with Central Asia have weakened in recent years. Russia–Central Asia trade today stands at around \$18.6 billion, two thirds of Beijing's and a far cry from the 1990s when it accounted for 80 percent of the region's trade (\$110 billion). Trade with Tajikistan remains robust, however. Russia continues to be the leading exporter of goods to Tajikistan, accounting for 30 percent of its imports between January and October 2019. More significantly, Russia remains the key destination for Tajikistan's sizable community of labor migrants. Over one million Tajik citizens currently travel to Russia for employment each year, according to the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs. The remittances sent back by this group accounted for nearly half of Tajikistan's GDP in 2013, but decreased sharply following Russia's 2014 economic crisis, and by 2018 had been reduced to just 30 percent of GDP (US \$2.2 billion).

For China, Central Asia has acted as a place for it to offload its excess capacity in order to prop up its State-Owned Enterprises, and to secure its restive Xinjiang province. Beijing's economic rise across the region has been dramatic, with China–Central Asia trade growing from a total of \$1 billion in the 1990s to over \$28 billion today. Thanks to its sprawling Belt and Road Initiative—comprised of a series of land and sea routes to connect Chinese manufacturers to global markets—China has displaced Russia as the region's largest source of foreign direct investment. Though Russia remains dominant in Tajikistan, China has become the country's second-largest trade partner and largest source of

investment. The relationship is beginning to look more like one of dependence, however.

Tajikistan's external debt has doubled during the past decades, with China owning \$1.2 billion, just under half of the total debt. Principal and interest payments amount to \$600 million per year, with the World Bank classifying the country as at “high” risk of debt distress. To continue its spending, Tajikistan's leaders have been gradually ceding control of the country's territory and resources to China. As part of a 2011 border deal, for example, Tajikistan gave 0.6% of its territory to China. In October, Tajikistan's parliament approved a contract signed by the government and China's Kashgar Xinyi Dadi Mining Investment Company to develop the Yak-jilva silver deposit near the Chinese border in the Pamirs. It has built schools across the country, paved new roads, and provided the government with police cars courtesy of “China Aid”.

Tajikistan's leadership appears to be the immediate beneficiary, with convenient Chinese investment going to the country's ruling family. China has given Tajikistan \$230 million to build a new parliament to replace the current Soviet-era one and in October it allocated another \$360 million to repair the road linking the two countries. Kleptocratic elites have benefitted from such lending in the past. After China lent the Tajik government \$296 million to repair the road connecting its two largest cities in 2006, toll booths started to appear along the new road. The company that had won the lucrative tender to manage the road was the previously unknown Innovative Road Solutions, registered in the British Virgin Islands and controlled by the president's son in law, Jamoliddin Nuraliyev. While the government had to pay back the loan, the presidential family received an estimated \$200 million in revenues from road users.

Despite its growing economic and security presence in Tajikistan, China lags behind Russia in its ability to project “soft power”. While Russia is viewed by many as a benevolent partner, dependence on China is viewed with greater suspicion. A 2014 poll indicated that 85% of Tajiks approved of Russia’s leadership, as opposed to one quarter for the U.S. and one third for China. Demand for Russian-language education remains high, with 10 of the country’s 32 Russian-language schools having been built in the past two years, with another five planned. Three Russian universities have campuses in Dushanbe, with 24,000 Tajiks studying in Russia. Although demand for Chinese-language education is increasing, it still lags behind, with 3,000 Tajik students currently in China.

Tajikistan’s Sino–Russian Security Nexus

Moscow has been Dushanbe’s primary security guarantor since the collapse of the Soviet Union and intervened to back the ruling regime during the country’s civil war (1992–1997). Tajikistan is also home to the 201st Motor Rifle Division military base, Russia’s largest foreign military facility outside Syria, at which Moscow has played an active role in training local officers. Since 2014, over 1,000 Tajik military officers have trained there (over 5 percent of the total), in addition to Tajik special operations forces, with over 70 percent have attended training at Russian military institutes. Russia has also increased its supply of arms to the Central Asian republic in recent years, providing \$122 million in equipment in 2019. The SIPRI Arms Transfers Database indicates that Tajikistan has imported 95 percent of its weapons from Russia since 1991. Tajikistan is a member of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization and Commonwealth of Independent States, although it has thus far opted not to join the Eurasian Economic Union, a move that Russia seems ambivalent about due to Tajikistan’s small economy and low trade volumes.

Tajikistan’s 1,357 kilometer border with Afghanistan has been the principle concern for Russia, with officials frequently warning of the threat posed by Tajikistan’s conflict-ridden southern neighbor. Russian border guards directly patrolled the Tajik–Afghan border until 2004. It still maintains a Border Coordination Task Force in the country, which includes advisors stationed on the border. Violent incidents on the border have doubled since 2010, as militant groups have taken control of districts on the border. In August 2018, a series of airstrikes by Russian forces based in Tajikistan killed six drug traffickers on the Afghan side of the border, its first armed intervention in Afghanistan since the Soviet Union withdrew its forces in 1989. Russia remains fixated on the spectre of Islamic terror more than the region’s lucrative opium trade however.

Since the Islamic State (IS) appeared in Afghanistan in 2015, Russian officials have consistently framed it as the biggest threat to the region. Islamic State in Khurasan Province, IS’s Afghan affiliate, has seen its numbers swell to an estimated 5,000 with the influx of new fighters from the Syrian conflict. On a visit to Tajikistan in May, Russia’s top intelligence official, FSB chief Alexander Bortnikov said that these militants posed a threat to the Central Asian republics. The U.S. government has accused Russia of over-exaggerating this threat. Shortly before he relinquished command of U.S. forces in Afghanistan in September 2018, General John Nicholson claimed that “ISIS-K is not growing”. Earlier that year, Nicholson stated that Russia had been supplying an unrevealed number of arms to the Taliban from its base in Tajikistan in an effort to undermine the NATO operations there.

China appears to accept Russia’s assessment. In last year’s leaked “Xinjiang Papers”, it was revealed that Chinese President Xi Jinping has been concerned about Central Asia’s stability for the past five years. “After the United States pulls out of Afghanistan, terrorist organizations positioned on the frontiers of Afghanistan and Pakistan may quickly infiltrate into Central Asia”, he said in a series of secret speeches issued after several violent attacks rocked Xinjiang in 2014. In response to this, China has begun to view Tajikistan as an important barrier against potential spillover entering its westernmost province of Xinjiang from Afghanistan. The two countries conducted their first bilateral military exercise in 2016, involving some 10,000 troops. China has also been investing in capacity-building, with reports suggesting Beijing has issued grants for the construction of up to 40 new border posts in Tajikistan since 2016. In addition, new equipment has been provided to Tajik border guards, including mine-resistant patrol vehicles. In addition, China has even begun deploying its own forces to the country. This capacity-building also extends to surveillance technology. In 2013, the government paid \$22 million to Huawei to install CCTV cameras in Tajikistan’s capital city. For five years, Dushanbe has been cooperating with China to build a “Safe City” project with the stated aim of reducing traffic violations. By 2018, the technology had helped identify 1.7 million offenses and 445 traffic accidents, reducing total violations by around 20 percent. But such Safe City projects also benefit China’s surveillance state, allowing it to monitor the cross-border movements it has identified as a strategic threat. Autocrats in Dushanbe have long admired China’s Sharp Eyes surveillance techniques and have sought to replicate them. In February 2019, Eurasianet reported that the government announced a new identification system requiring mobile phone users to provide biometric information in exchange for SIM cards.

Finally, China has been engaging in multilateral cooperation to bolster its regional defense strategy. Traditionally, China has relied on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which emerged from border talks between China and its former Soviet neighbors in the 1990s. The body, which includes Russia, has focused on countering the ‘Three Evils’: terrorism, extremism and separatism. But recently, Beijing has departed from this model by creating its own organizations without Russia. The most prominent has been the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM) established between China, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan in 2016, and is charged with boosting their respective security. The organization hosts annual meetings of security chiefs. In another break with Moscow, China has even begun deploying strategic forces in the region. Since 2017, the Communist Party’s paramilitary wing, the People’s Armed Police Force, has been monitoring the country’s Afghan border from a military outpost in Tajikistan’s Pamir Mountains. The base is one of three overseas strategic facilities administered by Chinese forces that remain shrouded in secrecy, the others being in Sri Lanka and Djibouti. The opening of overseas military facilities became possible following the adoption of a new anti-terrorism law in 2015.

China’s Growing Shadow

To a degree, Central Asia is something of a testing ground for China, where it can experiment with new forums such as the QSSM and SCO, but also test Russia’s red lines and calibrate its partnership with its neighbor. Part of this willingness to experiment comes from Russia’s growing dependence on China. At the time of the Soviet collapse, the USSR’s economy stood at double that of China’s. Today, China’s GDP (adjusted for PPP) is six times larger than Russia’s. Following its annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia has become something of a captive market for Chinese investment and has since signed a number of deals benefiting Beijing, such as the US\$400 billion “Power of Siberia” gas pipeline. Moscow has also become a major supplier of high-end military technology to China, removing all prior restrictions and selling valuable equipment like its S-400 anti-aircraft system to Beijing.

Despite this dependence, China’s growing security clout in the Pamirs appears to have had a marked impact on Russia’s regional strategy. After announcing that it would decrease its troop deployments in Tajikistan in 2016, Russia made a start about-turn. In 2018, Russian Defense Minister, Sergei Shoigu paid a visit to Dushanbe’s Palace of Officers on a visit to Tajikistan to inspect the 7,000-strong 201st Motor Rifle Division, Russia’s largest foreign deployment. By October 2019, Russia had deployed its S-300 missile system in Tajikistan for the first time. In addition, Moscow has been ramping up its supply of lethal weapons to the country in recent years, including T72-B1 tanks and D-30 howitzers.

China, for its part, has been keen to ensure that Moscow is not left in the dark by its maneuvers. In 2017, China’s Development Research Center think tank called a group of Russian scholars to its office in Beijing. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss China’s presence in Tajikistan, and according to one of the attendees, to ensure Russia wasn’t left “blindsided” by developments. But for all China’s caution, Russian actions suggest a degree of wariness. Neither side has expressed any interest in cooperating and as China’s strategic interests in the Pamirs has grown, Russia has begun expanding its security operations to ensure that the Tajik military is dependent on Russia.

Russia seems to have cautiously accepted that China will play an increased role in Central Asian security, particularly in Tajikistan. The reasons for this are twofold. First, China does not look set to rival Russia’s dominance over Tajikistan’s security sector in the near future. Second, the two sides have convergent interests, including maintaining stability within Tajikistan, preventing spillovers from Afghanistan and resisting, albeit limited, U.S. encroachment into the country. In early February, the U.S. government unveiled its new Strategy for Central Asia, outlining its desire to strengthen Central Asia’s governments “independence from malign actors” by providing “a counterbalance to the influence of regional neighbors”. In the short term, this is more likely to unite Russia and China, and galvanize their desire to maintain Tajikistan within their sphere of influence.

About the Authors

Edward Lemon is Assistant Professor of Eurasian Studies at the Daniel Morgan Graduate School, Washington D.C. His research focuses on security issues in Central Asia. He is the editor of *Critical Approaches to Security in Central Asia* (2018) and his research has been published in *Journal of Democracy*, *Central Asian Survey*, *The RUSI Journal*, *Caucasus Survey* and *Central Asian Affairs*.

Bradley Jardine is a Global Fellow at the Wilson Center’s Kissinger Institute on China and the United States. His research focuses on Chinese surveillance technology and its use in the countries of the former Soviet Union. His work has been published in *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *Foreign Policy* and *The Guardian* among others

New Developments in Russo–Turkmen Relations

By Luca Anceschi (University of Glasgow)

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Abstract

This article traces recent evolutions in the interaction between Turkmenistan and the Russian Federation, arguing that the core of the bilateral relationship experienced, in the late 2010s, a significant transformation. As focus on energy cooperation wanes, security issues are currently featuring as the fulcrum on which Ashgabat and Moscow are developing their partnership.

Entrapped in one of the most oblique policy environments of the entire post-Soviet region, Turkmenistan's foreign policy remains a very complex framework to investigate. The hyper-authoritarian nature of Turkmen domestic politics has certainly subjugated the conduct of the state's international relations to the power agenda pursued by the regime currently headed by Gurbanguly M. Berdymukhammedov. At the same time, the persistently rentieristic configuration of the Turkmen economy has linked, perhaps inextricably, the full execution of the regime's international agenda with the maximisation of the export potential held by Turkmenistan's large natural gas reserves. The regime's logic of authoritarian control and its kleptocratic interpretation of Turkmenistan's gas 'clout' are in this sense the two most important drivers for the foreign policy-making mechanisms at play in Ashgabat. These distinct, yet by no means unrelated, drivers have long intersected within the multifaceted framework of relationships connecting post-Soviet Turkmenistan with the former centre of the Soviet Union.

Despite ebb and flow, the Russo–Turkmen partnership has to be seen as the most telling component of the entire Turkmen foreign policy paradigm. For much of the 1990s and 2000s, the Russian Federation acted as a provider of critical support for the Turkmen leadership and a major buyer of Turkmen energy resources. Russia's oscillating centrality in the Turkmen gas trade system and the alternation of phases of political entanglement and disentanglement between the regimes in power in Ashgabat and Moscow surfaced as the two core forces regulating the intensity of the engagement between Turkmenistan and Russia in the first twenty years of the post-independence era. The last decade saw Russia's retract to the margins of Turkmenistan's commercial outlook, while the political relationship between the Kremlin and the Turkmen regime has entered a phase of diminished intensity, wherein Turkmenistan's increasing international isolation required a minimum level of engagement with the Kremlin to bolster the power of Berdymukhammedov and of his associates.

This short article intends to contribute to the broader debate on Russo–Turkmen relations by contextualising recent evolutions that have occurred in the energy and security realms, in order to highlight the profound transformations that the core of the bilateral relationship underwent at the end of the 2010s. The piece's empirical attention is devoted to tracing two main processes, which saw energy issues declining in importance for the relationship, while security matters associated with Turkmenistan's troublesome Afghan border emerged as Moscow's core concerns in its dealings with Turkmenistan.

Turkmenistan's Gas in the 2020s: *Gazprom* as a Low-Profile Actor

In early July 2019, *Gazprom* announced that its natural gas imports from Turkmenistan were to resume with immediate effect. As part of a wider energy deal with *Türkmengaz*—Turkmenistan's natural gas state conglomerate—*Gazprom* committed to import annual quotas less than 5.5 billion cubic meters [bcm] of gas until July 2024, at a price believed to be US\$110 per 1000 bcm. The terms of this deal capture better than any other indicator the substantially declining intensity of the Russo–Turkmen energy relationship.

On the one hand, the July 2019 deal certified *Gazprom's* return as an active trader on the Turkmen gas market, reinstating energy linkages that, until 2009, had sustained Turkmenistan's commercial activity and, indirectly, the Turkmen economy broadly defined. On the other, the negligible amount of gas volumes regulated by the deal signalled *Gazprom's* reluctance to engage with the Turkmen gas market with the same intensity that had characterised Russo–Turkmen energy trade in the 2000s. A closer look at historical gas quotas traded along the Central Asia–Centre [CA-C] pipeline—built in the Soviet era and connecting Turkmenistan's gas fields with the Russian pipeline network via Kazakhstan—lend further weight to the latter proposition.

Before the 2009 gas dispute—which culminated in the interruption of bilateral gas trade due to an explo-

sion in the Turkmen sector of the CA-C pipeline—*Gazprom* was purchasing 40 bcm of Turkmen gas annually, paying approximately US\$140 per 1000 bcm. In 2011, when gas trade along the CA-C pipeline had resumed, *Gazprom* officials announced their intention to limit gas trade with Turkmenistan to 11 bcm annually—a significant reduction from the 2008 baseline. Reduced trade continued until 2015, when *Gazprom* confirmed its intention to withdraw from the Turkmen gas market, eventually redirecting its Central Asian operations onto the commercialisation of Uzbekistan's natural gas reserves. At the moment of *Gazprom*'s withdrawal from Turkmenistan, Russian purchases of Turkmen gas did not exceed 4 bcm per year.

The 2019 gas deal was finalised in a commercial context deeply influenced by the establishment of a Chinese monopsony over Turkmenistan's gas reserves. Turkmenistan's long-term objective of export diversification—illusorily achieved after the China–Central Asia pipeline had come online in December 2009—may be said to have failed as trade with *Gazprom* progressively died out and the energy relationship with Iran became increasingly unreliable. Systemic over-reliance on Chinese gas purchases—with CNPC occupying, at the end of the 2010s, the same hegemonic position held by *Gazprom* in the prior decade—became a burden for Turkmenistan's rentier economy, mostly as a result of the pay-for-purchases deal finalised in the lead-up to the construction of the China–Central Asia pipeline. In the mid-2010s, with reducing gas revenues and a shrinking number of customers to buy the sole product exported by Turkmenistan, the Berdymukhammedov regime found itself in an uncomfortable economic position, which transformed the re-establishment of a functioning gas relationship with the Russian Federation into a pressing priority for Turkmenistan.

At current prices, Russian purchases of Turkmen gas seem nevertheless to make very little economic sense: the agreed purchase price, when added to the costs associated with the transport of Turkmen gas to Southern Russia, continues to be much higher than the costs of production incurred by *Gazprom* in its domestic operations. Structural growth in the Russo–Turkmen gas trade, therefore, appears a rather unlikely proposition, unless the Turkmen leadership is willing to commercialise its gas resources at more competitive prices.

Not even the recent finalisation of a convention regulating the status of the Caspian Sea has managed to increase the prospects for an expansion of the Russo–Turkmen energy partnership. Until now, Ashgabat and Moscow hold very diverging views about the development of energy transit infrastructure across the Caspian Sea. In its continuous search for new, viable routes to export Turkmen gas, the Berdymukhammedov regime

has expressed some interest in the construction of the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline [TCGP], a subsea pipeline initially connecting Türkmenbaşy (west Turkmenistan) with Baku, and eventually facilitating the commercialisation of Turkmen natural gas in the more lucrative—yet somehow less accessible—European markets. As its prospective route is planned to bypass the Russian territory, the TCGP may be seen as a direct challenge to Russia's status as a Eurasian energy superpower. The Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea, finalised in 2018 after innumerable rounds of negotiation, presents the Russian government with enough legal instruments to block the construction of the TCGP, a project that is arguably barely feasible due to the significant costs associated with the development phase, as well as the volatile gas strategy of Turkmenistan—the key provider of the natural gas to be pumped through the pipeline.

Rather than a signal for a more comprehensive energy partnership, the limited *Gazprom–Türkmengaz* gas deal finalised in 2019 is hence to be seen as a singular development in a declining relationship, representing in some sense one end of a wider *quid pro quo* between the regimes in Moscow and Ashgabat.

In exchange for *Gazprom* agreeing to actively return to the Turkmen energy markets, the government in Ashgabat accepted that it would contribute more functionally to Russian-led multilateralism, through more active participation in the CIS framework and Berdymukhammedov's decision to curb his public outbursts against the CIS, identify a solution to a longstanding dispute regarding the citizenship documents issued to Turkmenistan's Russian community, and work towards, as demonstrated in the next section of the paper, a more intense security cooperation with the Russian Federation.

Security Cooperation

The progressive deterioration of the security situation along the Turkmen–Afghan border—stretching for approximately 800 km—has to be seen as the most pressing security issue faced by the Turkmen government at the end of the 2010s. Continuous incursions by Afghan insurgents into Turkmen territory have been interpreted, in Ashgabat as well as in Moscow, as incontrovertible signals that the persistence of conflict dynamics in Afghanistan has the potential to cause regional destabilisation. As the Berdymukhammedov regime has struggled to respond to these incursions in a decisive fashion, a reluctant opening to military cooperation with foreign states came to be seen as the only solution available to Turkmenistan to stabilise its Afghan border areas. The Russian Federation emerged as the foreign partner most willing to engage with Ashgabat on this matter.

Since 2015, Russia has provided the Turkmen government with intelligence on activities in the Afghan

provinces neighbouring Turkmenistan, while the completion of two high-level visits to Turkmenistan by Russian security officials in 2016 and 2017 signalled an unprecedented willingness on the part of the Berdymukhammedov regime to share security information with Russia. Further signals that a somewhat structured security partnership with Russia emerged in the late 2010s and may well continue in the 2020s—despite Turkmenistan's repeated reluctance to admit its engagement in a security partnership with Russia, preferring to keep the appearance of the relationship as informal—have been offered by the joint exercises that the Russian military held in December 2018 with forces from Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and by the regular presence of issues related to Afghanistan in the agendas of the most recent bilateral meetings between Berdymukhammedov and Vladimir Putin. More recently, there have been unverified, yet by no means inconsistent, reports of Russian troops patrolling the Turkmen border with Afghanistan's Jowzjan province.

The intensification of security cooperation with Russia yet again demonstrates the flexibility with which the Turkmen regime continues to interpret its Doctrine of Positive Neutrality, the foreign policy framework that has regulated Turkmenistan's international activity since December 1995. The doctrine clearly pinpoints Turkmenistan's alignment with foreign military powers as an inconvenient posture for 'neutral' Turkmenistan, while Turkmen law categorically forbids army generals from discussing any military issues with foreign partners. The developing partnership with Russia may be said to have unfolded in clear departure from these established legal-policy postures.

Concluding Remarks

The preservation of a relationship of controlled engagement with the Russian Federation has been a long-term

objective for the normally idiosyncratic Turkmen regime, which pursued a calculated policy of international isolation both before and after the death of first-generation leader, S.A. Niyazov. In departure from the policy postures consolidated in the early Berdymukhammedov era, we have recently witnessed significant mutations in the core agenda underpinning the Russo–Turkmenistan relationship, while the long-term objective of resisting the Kremlin's aim of establishing a more structured partnership continues, at least nominally, to define Ashgabat's Russia policy.

As energy issues move away from the relationship's centre stage, the intensification of informal military ties have come to characterise the latest iteration of the Russo–Turkmen partnership. *Gazprom* is now a deliberately low-profile energy partner in the Turkmen gas markets; the Russian military, conversely, is believed to play an increasingly crucial role in overseeing the security dynamics at work within Turkmen territory. In other words, the equation governing the relationship, at the onset of a new decade, appears to be substantially different from that consolidated in the early Berdymukhammedov era. The long-term viability of the regime's energy strategy—can Turkmenistan's economy survive without increased *Gazprom* purchases?—and the regime's capacity to independently address the security questions raised by Afghanistan's protracted instability are the two variables that will determine whether this new equation underpinning Russo–Turkmen ties will allow Berdymukhammedov and his associates to regulate the intensity of their engagement with the Russian Federation.

About the Author

Luca Anceschi lectures in Central Asian Studies at the University of Glasgow (United Kingdom), where he also co-edits Europe-Asia Studies. He can be followed on Twitter @anceschistan

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ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

Editors: Stephen Aris, Matthias Neumann, Robert Orttung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder, Aglaya Snetkov

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Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen • Country Analytical Digests • Klagenfurter Str. 8 • 28359 Bremen • Germany

Phone: +49 421-218-69600 • Telefax: +49 421-218-69607 • e-mail: laender-analysen@uni-bremen.de • Internet: www.css.ethz.ch/en/publications/rad.html