

DOES RUSSIA HAVE A STRATEGY FOR CENTRAL ASIA?

Yulia Nikitina
MGIMO University, Russia

Central Asia is the only sub-region of Eurasia that appears in Russian official documents as a coherent region. The other sub-regions are not singled out – the documents simply list the states. However, can we say that Russia really has a separate regional strategy for Central Asia?

It should be noted that no consolidated community or a single region with a common identity on the basis of the entire post-Soviet space ever emerged since 1991. On the one hand, it was assumed that the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as an organization had sufficient political and economic opportunities to influence regional and world politics, to participate in political and economic processes developing in the world. The CIS is an indispensable and sought after partner of various international organizations, including the United Nations, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and others, and is capable of making a due contribution to maintaining international security and stability in the region and the world. The CIS can be considered as a kind of a "bridge" between Europe and the Asia-Pacific region. On the other hand, for most of its member states, the benefits of consolidated interventions in the international arena are far from obvious. As a result, although the CIS has an international legal personality from the formal point of view, it is practically absent in the international arena as an independent actor. This radically distinguishes the CIS from structures such as the European Union (EU) or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in terms of the possible impact on the international political order in Eurasia and the world.

It is clear why it is difficult to unite Eurasia into one region in terms of security – different sets of threats dominate three different subregional groups (European, Caucasian and Central Asian). Each of them faces specific security challenges and threats:

- For the European region – challenges and uncertainties (creating potential problems for some countries or, conversely, prospects for others) related to NATO and EU expansion;
- For the Caucasus region – ethnic conflicts, separatism and the emergence of interstate conflicts on that basis;
- For the Central Asian region – religious extremism, border problems, problems of illegal migration, drug trafficking, uneven economic development.

Only Russia is present in all three regions, which makes all three key sets of threats relevant to it. The Eurasian states are rather interested in the activities of regional organizations that have limited membership: the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). At the same time, it is important to take into account incoherence of various multilateral cooperation mechanisms (CSTO, CIS, SCO, EAEU, Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) operating in autonomous mode in the Eurasian space, whose mandates often coincide, overlap and conflict with each other in several areas.

Given the observed variety of plans and actions as well as the incoherence of positions of regional organizations operating in the Central Asian direction, it seems that the necessary measures should be taken for their organizational convergence in the affairs of the region, primarily taking into account the actual identity of the composition of these structures and the proximity of their approaches to solving regional problems. In particular, there seems to be no obstacle for these organizations (EAEU, SCO, CSTO, CICA) to act within the framework of coordinated and better yet – integrated programmes on such issues as combating terrorism and organized crime, illegal migration and human trafficking, non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, ensuring the security of transport systems, strengthening the external borders and so on. In practical terms, these tasks could be more successfully accomplished if a coordination mechanism for regional interaction involving the (executive) secretaries-general of the EAEU, SCO, CSTO, CIS, and CICA were created and successfully launched.

In addition to the problem of coordination of activities of various regional organizations, there is also a problem of coordination of cooperation within organizations: some Central Asian sources characterized the CSTO as an "insolvent" organization because of "serious problems" and even conflicts existing between member states. Indeed, some time ago, other participants were dissatisfied with what they viewed as unconstructive behaviour of Uzbekistan within the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) and CSTO, in which Uzbekistan suspended its participation. Although after 2016 Uzbekistan pursues a more open policy but does not hurry to return to regional structures, preferring bilateral relations.

Nevertheless, retrospectively, we can highlight positive aspects of the situation. Numerous studies of the behaviour of various social groups show that intra-group conflicts and clashes become more frequent as the group grows more organized, i.e., the more cohesive a group is, the more conflicts will be in it. Thus, for example, the growth of conflict within the CSTO during the period of Uzbekistan's membership indirectly demonstrated that owing to Uzbekistan, other members of the CSTO, at last, began to realize a real, rather than a declarative, community of interests and goals. The painful reaction to Tashkent's behaviour shows that the CSTO is indeed an integrated group with quite stable links between its members.

Summing up, we can note that the problem of unity within regional and subregional organizations in the post-Soviet space undoubtedly exists. At the same time, even the presence of intra-group conflicts demonstrates rather that interests of these associations have formed, that there is a subject matter of conflict, i.e. member states have clear positions on certain issues. It means that the next step should be seeking solutions by coordinating these interests.

At the same time, from Russia's point of view, the states of the region elevate their national sovereignty to the highest principle of priority of national security (as opposed to collective or group security), while the local elites expect mainly economic and other benefits (such as preferential arms supplies from Russia) from collective security.

It could be stated that the Central Asian vector of Russia's foreign policy has not yet brought the expected results. To a large extent, this is due to the fact that the Russian Federation is still unable to offer the region its own, specific version of development radically different from those offered by the EU countries, the Asia-Pacific region or the Islamic world. At the same time, Russia's ability to use "soft power" (non-traditional force and influence factors) here is limited and usually comes down to reliance on residual elements of the Soviet past.

The activities of extra-regional international organizations in Central Asia are generally understood and supported, based on the available assessments of experts from the region. The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) appears to be attractive due to infrastructure construction. The EU's demand for energy resources in the region "postulates" its interest in maintaining the stability and sustainability of the Central Asian regimes. As for NATO, the geopolitical role of the alliance in the region must first be viewed through the prism of the international anti-terrorist coalition's needs in Afghanistan. At the same time, there is a subtle development of processes leading as a result of purposeful steps taken by the alliance and the US towards creating alternative structures to existing ones in Central Asia, which objectively destroy the already very fragile unity of the post-Soviet space (C5+1). Furthermore, the BRI is not regarded by Russian elites as a project that is "pulling apart" the post-Soviet space, because they managed to sign an agreement on its interlinking with the EAEU.

The Afghan issue is closely related to the topic of security in Central Asia. How the Afghan settlement process evolves largely determines how regional security is ensured and strengthened. However, not only is the situation in Afghanistan not improving, but it is also continuing to deteriorate. The year 2014, as a time frame, has not brought significant changes in the security environment. There is a growing concern that drug traffickers have turned the Central Asian region into a major transit corridor for Afghan drugs to the CIS countries, primarily to Russia and further to Europe. If the situation in Afghanistan continues to stay the same, the Central Asian states, especially those bordering Afghanistan, will not feel truly secure.

The most significant feature of the current geopolitical situation in Central Asia, which affects the relations of the region's countries with the outside world and determines the style of behaviour of external actors, continues to be the actual fragmentation of the Central Asian space, the lack of unity of actions of regional states in the political and economic spheres, which undoubtedly creates tangible obstacles to ensuring a cumulative effect in the socio-economic development of the region. Suffice it to say that the volume and quality of ties between the Central Asian states are much lower than their individual ties with Russia and even with foreign countries.

Hence, it could be concluded that the states of the region need coordinated efforts and an action plan to overcome the existing contradictions and controversial problems in Central Asia, which should be addressed, first of all, through the development and implementation of long-term multilateral programs of economic development of the entire region. Consultative Meetings of Heads of States of Central Asia – a "dialogue platform" established in 2018 – are working in this direction. Experts noted the constructive atmosphere of the second summit held in 2019. However, it seems that these summits still have limited functionality. Perhaps, based on the results of future meetings, it would make sense to create conciliatory commissions, which would work to resolve specific problematic and conflict situations in relations between the Central Asian states.

As for the social and economic development of the region, it would make sense to create an international consortium with a broad membership of Central Asian states, Russia, the countries neighbouring Central Asia (China, India, Iran, and Turkey), perhaps also the European Union, Japan, South Korea, and the USA. Through such an association, the "informal" locomotive of which would be Kazakhstan (given its considerable economic and political potential), large-scale intra-regional investment projects would be implemented, and the necessary infrastructure would be created for the activities of large and medium-sized businesses, both local and extra-regional, using the considerable human resources of the Central Asian states. From Russia's point of view, these processes could be incorporated into the concept of a "Greater Eurasian Partnership" (the idea of "integration of integrations").

As for the prospects of closed regional integration in the military, political and economic spheres, there is a risk of "autonomization" of the region on this path, its alienation from its partner – Russia. Therefore, it is important to develop integration processes and strengthen intraregional ties mainly within the framework of existing international structures: the EAEU, SCO, CSTO, as well as the Greater Eurasian Partnership project.

Noting the obvious increase in economic and political activity of extra-regional actors in the affairs of the Central Asian region, it is necessary to recognize the futility of any attempts to remove these extra-regional forces from the Central Asian stage. It is necessary to look for a modus operandi in relations with external players such as the PRC, EU, NATO, USA, Japan, Turkey and others. In particular, it is desirable to agree with them on some common programmes (plans) of action, on the participation of Russia and structures established under its aegis in the realization of projects implemented by these actors. In a word, acting on the field of competitors, it is necessary to create conditions for a real competition for influence in the region and for securing economic and other interests of Central Asian states. From the organizational point of view, it would be possible, with the involvement of the UN, to create a kind of advisory council of all international structures and individual states operating in the Central Asian space to coordinate or conduct collective actions in terms of promoting socio-economic development of the region, ensuring its security and stability.

When considering issues related to Russian policy in the region, it would be useful to highlight the following points:

- Over the past three decades, Russia's integration into the region has weakened significantly in almost all areas. Moreover, it took place against the background of obvious reorientation of the states of the region towards non-CIS countries.
- The main reason for this situation lies in the uncoordinated efforts within the Russian Federation in maintaining ties with Central Asian states and the lack of integral state policy towards this region.

The potential of Russia's cooperation with Central Asian states can be realized only if there are an officially authorized state strategy and a certain plan of action with respect to the Central Asian states, with specific instructions to federal executive and legislative bodies and set deadlines for their implementation. This strategy should contain a substantiation of integration priorities both with respect to individual states of this region and in multilateral cooperation projects. Such a strategy would likely have the following points as the core goals of Russia in Central Asia:

- Prevention of the creation of alternative security systems in Central Asia without Russia's participation and countering attempts to consolidate the military presence of third countries;
- Expansion of the position of Russian capital in key sectors of the Central Asian economies and ensuring the smooth functioning of transport corridors and communications;
- Comprehensive protection of the rights and interests of Russian citizens and compatriots living in Central Asia;
- Consolidation of multilateral structures with Russia's participation, strengthening their key importance in ensuring stability and security on the southern borders;
- Creation of a friendly environment in the Central Asian direction.

As a follow-up to the above recommendations, it should be recognized that the most important factor in restoring and strengthening Russia's role in the region should be the active introduction of large Russian capital into large-scale economic projects: construction of main motorway junctions, large energy facilities, extraction of energy and mineral resources and others.

No less important, including from the social and economic point of view, for the countries of the region would be the transfer of a number of labour-intensive industries from Russia to the labour-abundant countries of Central Asia, with appropriate investments, personnel training system and the creation of housing and communal infrastructure there. The most promising in this respect are the textile production, fruit and vegetable farming in the context of a single market with Russia.

Taking into account the current trends in Russia's relations with Central Asian countries, it is necessary to continue paying attention to the regulation of migration flows to Russia (despite the improvement of the situation once the EAEU began functioning), which should be determined by the state strategy that provides for the transition to more civilizational forms of training and use of human resources in the Russian Federation from the states of the region. At the same time, the training of human resources for the needs of the Russian economy should be carried out in the Central Asian states, which in itself could help strengthen Russia's position in the region. Closely linked to these plans are measures to spread the Russian language in the countries of Central Asia, which is rapidly losing its position there. To rectify this situation, it is extremely important to allocate the necessary financial and expert resources for the newly created network of cultural and linguistic centres in Central Asia, including training future labour migrants for Russia. The latter is one of the conditions for the restoration of a strong Russian presence in the political life of Central Asian states.

About the author

Dr Yulia Nikitina is Associate Professor of World Politics and Leading Research Fellow at the Center for the Post-Soviet Studies at the Moscow State University of International Relations (MGIMO). She is a specialist of security politics in Eurasia with a focus on regional organizations and Russian approaches to conflict-settlement. She is the author of the handbook Introduction to World Politics and International Relations (2018, 4th ed., in Russian). Recently, Yulia Nikitina co-authored the FES report "Islands of cooperation" (2018) and the RAND-FES report "Getting Out from "In-Between": Perspectives on the Regional Order in Post-Soviet Europe and Eurasia" (2018). She was also a co-editor of the 2019 RAND-FES report "A Consensus Proposal for a Revised Regional Order in Post-Soviet Europe and Eurasia".



Crossroads Central Asia is an independent research institute based in Bishkek. Crossroads Central Asia promotes and practices professional research and analysis for the purpose of open, secure and prospering Central Asia. More at <https://www.crossroads-ca.org/>.



the Hollings Center
for international dialogue

The policy paper is produced as part of a project "Debating International Relations in Central Asia: Regional Developments and Extra-Regional Actors". The project is led by Shairbek Dzhuraev and Eric McGlinchey with support of the Hollings Center for International Dialogue.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of Crossroads Central Asia or the Hollings Center for International Dialogue.