

## **RUSSIA: THE TRADITIONAL HEGEMON IN CENTRAL ASIA**

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### **Abstract**

*After the collapse of Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Russia leaned towards the West, but West's cool response in providing economic aid and regional developments forced Russia to pay attention to the Central Asian Republics (CARs). Russia has made efforts to keep the CARs in its sphere of influence by increasing its control on the CARs' energy resources, deploying its troops in the CARs and establishing regional groups. Russia has also exploited the threat of extremism in the CARs. While allying itself with United States (US) on its war on terrorism and cooperating with North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Russia is strengthening itself internally and externally. Russia would like to see undemocratic and fragile CARs in the fields of defense and the economy to maintain its hold on the CARs. Weak CARs are in Russia's interests to keep them dependent on Russia.*

### **Key Words**

Russia and the West, Russia's foreign policy, Central Asia.

Russia has a huge territorial size. It is bordered by Norway and Finland in the northwest, Estonia, Latvia, Belarus, Ukraine, Poland and Lithuania in the west; Georgia and Azerbaijan in the southwest; and the Central Asian Republics (CARs) along the southern border. The reluctance of the Western world to accept Russia as a pure European state makes Russia apart from the West. Too, pro-Western gestures undermine Russia's image as a major power which has its own strategic and economic interests. As Russian President Dmitri Medvedev asserts "if we had not taken a strong line on some questions, Russia would still be treated like a third rank state".<sup>1</sup>

For several centuries, Russia has played the role of an autonomous great power in the global system despite its relative economic backwardness. There are different factors which help Russia to maintain its position as an

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Monaghan, "An Enemy at the Gates or 'from Victory to Victory'? Russian Foreign Policy", *International Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 4 (2008), p. 721.

autonomous great power. Russia's large geographical size and remoteness from attacking powers; its strong control over resources and society exercised by its centralized state and its low level of dependence on the world economy, make Russia an autonomous player in world politics despite its relative backwardness.<sup>2</sup> Due to its unique status, its soft policies vis-à-vis different regional and global issues have come under criticism. Russia could not check the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) bombing campaign against Serbs in 1999 and thought it better to negotiate for a ceasefire, which was considered an act of weakness. Now, Russia does not want to repeat that experience by facilitating independence for Kosovo. A threatening sign of Russia's growing tension with the West was Vladimir Putin's announcement on 14 July 2007 that Russia planned to withdraw within five months from the 1999 Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty. This treaty committed signatories, both Russia and members of the NATO alliance, to limit number of tanks and combat aircrafts deployed in Europe. Putin's announcement was the result of Russia's grievance in respect to the US decision in 2002 that it was withdrawing from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty that was signifying the end of Cold War. In 2007, the US also sought to install a radar unit in the Czech Republic and an actual battery of antiballistic missiles in Poland. Russians criticized the US official stance that this ABM system was intended to protect the West from Iran and North Korea not against Russia. NATO had already broken its promise that former members of the Warsaw Pact would not be given membership of NATO. It also pledged it would not station offensive military forces in Eastern Europe (as it then did in Bulgaria and Romania). In presence of such a record, Russians suspect a supposedly anti-Iranian, anti-North Korean system would in fact turn out to be an anti-Russian system.<sup>3</sup> The view that the West ruthlessly exploited Russia's obliging attitude now spills over into an exaggerated fear that Russia's soft stances will be interpreted by the West as its submission. NATO's enlargement in 2004, accompanied by European Union's (EU) enlargements in 2004 and 2007, has increased fear in Russia and considered it a part of West's strategy to contain Russia. So Russia is neither an automatic foe nor a natural friend of the West.<sup>4</sup> It needs different policies for both regions i.e. Europe and Asia.

After the collapse of the Union of Socialist Republics, Russia and the CARs were experiencing different kinds of transformations simultaneously.

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<sup>2</sup> See: Jack Snyder, "Russia: Responses to Relative Decline," in T.V. Paul and John A. Hall, *International Order and Future of World Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp.146-148.

<sup>3</sup> Marshall I. Goldman, "Russia and the West: Mutually Assured Distrust", *Current History*, Vol.106, No. 702 (October 2007), p. 315.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Sakwa, "New Cold War or Twenty Years' Crisis?: Russia and International Politics", *International Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 2 (2008), p. 263.

They had to initiate economic and political reforms. Russia had to develop its image as a moderate non-colonialist power to avoid any chance of political and economic clash with the Western world as had happened during Cold War confrontation between United States and USSR. Only then a weak Russia could strengthen its economy and its territorial integrity. Otherwise, a clash with the US or the West could increase the chance of Russia's further dismemberment. As we saw in 1994, a struggle against Russian rule started in Chechnya where most of the population was living below the poverty line. Besides Chechnya, republics like Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia and Tatarstan had strong Muslim populations. Independence of Chechnya from Russia would have had severe implications for the territorial integrity of Russia.

In 1991 when Russia emerged as successor of the USSR, an intellectual debate arose over what path Russia should take so that it might retain its glory. Russian scholar Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote in 1991 that the CARs were a liability for Russia, and Russia should let the CARs to do their own business to escape from their burden. That was the time when Russia's economy had collapsed. The price of ruble was 60 to one dollar in December 1991 and more than 1000 rubles to a dollar in June 1993.<sup>5</sup> Russia badly needed economic assistance and could not afford any foreign obligation. Russia's new power brokers were very optimistic about Western financial aid to Russia. Russia tilted towards the West and asked for financial aid. Western countries announced a five-year, \$24 billion aid package for Russia, which was very small when compared to the huge requirement to rebuild Russia's economy. It is pertinent to mention that Germany was spending \$90 to \$100 billion each year on its eastern parts of country.<sup>6</sup> After the collapse of the USSR, David Roche of Morgan Stanley International, calculated that Russia required between \$76 to \$167 billion each year to reform its economic and social system.<sup>7</sup> For a country which was, and still is the largest country in the world in terms of area and ranked seventh in terms of population in the world, \$24 billion was a very small amount.

Looking for help from August 1991 to October 1993, no specific foreign policy vis-à-vis the CARs was adopted by Russia's Boris Yeltsin government. In fact, in late 1992 there were different institutions like Russian military, Russian Security Council and Council on Foreign Policy Making which were involved in foreign policy making. Lack of consensus among them and a

<sup>5</sup> Martha Brill Olcott, "Russia's Place in the CIS", *Current History*, Vol. 94, No. 594 (October 1995), p. 317.

<sup>6</sup> Henry Kissinger, "On Forging a Realistic American Policy for Russia", *Dawn*, 28 April 1993, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> "Russia Looks at the World: Westward No?", *The Economist*, 4 July 1992, p. 18.

power struggle between President Yeltsin and parliament led Russia without any clear foreign policy towards Central Asia and other ex-Soviet republics. In fact, Russia's foreign policy revolved around its domestic needs.

Historically Russia was influenced by three cultures during its geographical expansion. First is the Orthodox Byzantine tradition in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). After choosing Orthodox Christianity by Russian rulers, Russia got linked with it. Second is the Latin culture of Western Europe, and third is the Islamic culture of West and Central Asia. Modern Russia is an assorted Eurasian entity influenced by several cultures.<sup>8</sup>

Russia's foreign policy has also been influenced by three schools of thought. One wants to develop Russia according to the Western model, as Peter the Great (1682-1725) tried to modernize Russia following the West. They are called Westernizers. Another wants to modernize Russia according to pure Russian ideas and culture called Slavophiles. The third one envisions Russia as a European, as well as an Asian power and wants to maintain a balanced position in both Europe and Asia. These are called Eurasianists. These conflicting ideas have also been a contributing factor in the diversity of Russian foreign policy. Russian ideologues, historians, geographers and proponents of Eurasianist ideas see for Russia a civilizing role in Central Asia.<sup>9</sup> After 1993, Russia gradually tilted towards these ideas. Now it is quite vigorously involved in the CARs.

### **Russia's interests in Central Asia**

Russia's long-term interests in Central Asia are very clear and unambiguous. Russia wants to maintain stability in Central Asia to avoid any spill over effects. Conflicts in Central Asia would create a power vacuum that could develop security challenges for Russia. Stability in Central Asia is also a prerequisite for the smooth import of oil and gas from Central Asia. Russia desires to keep the CARs in its sphere of influence to ensure their cooperation, not only in energy supply, but also in other areas of strategic importance. The CARs' oil and gas pipelines links with other regional states like Turkey, Pakistan, Iran and China and will integrate the CARs with these regional states which will hurt Russia's long term strategic and economic interests. For instance, if the CARs succeed in transporting their energy

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<sup>8</sup> Maqbool Ahmad.Bhatty, "European Union-Russia Relations: Political, Economic and Strategic Aspects", *Journal of European Studies*, Vol. 16&17, No. 1&2 (July 2000-January 2001), p. 36.

<sup>9</sup> Hafeez Malik., "Central Asia's Geopolitical Significance and Problems of Independence: an Introduction," in Hafeez Malik, *Central Asia: Its Strategic Importance and Future Prospects*, London, MacMillan Press, 1994, p. 3.

resources through Turkey, Pakistan or Iran excluding Russia, it will result in large revenues in the CARs which they will use in establishing their independent forces and stable economies. Then, their dependence on Russia will decrease and Russia will always discourage such kind of developments. As a part of long-term strategy, Russia wants to counter any penetration by the US, US dominated institutions like NATO and regional powers.

In this paper it is argued that by strengthening its influence on the CARs' energy resources, deploying its troops in CARs, exploiting the threat of extremism and strengthening different pro-Russia regional blocs, Russia has tried to maintain its hegemony on the CARs. In Russia's hegemonic designs democratic CARs do not fit. Here we discuss how Russia is manipulating its policies to acquire its interests.

### **Russia and CARs' Energy Resources**

Russia's active involvement in the CARs is very important for its own stability and for smooth import of energy from the CARs. Export of oil and gas accounts for about 60% of Russia's federal budget revenues and two thirds of its exports.<sup>10</sup> Despite the fact that Russia has rich oil and gas resources, it imports huge quantities of oil and gas from the CARs at low prices to supply it to the lucrative European markets. By exploiting its position as a transit country for energy supply to Europe, Russia has signed different agreements with the CARs in field of energy. For the six years from 1994 to 2000, Russia did not buy Turkmen gas; as Gazprom, the Russian energy giant (which deals 20% of world gas), thought it unprofitable to purchase it at the price asked by Turkmenistan. In a dispute with Turkmenistan, Moscow cut off the new state pipelines that flow to European markets in 1997. In 2003 circumstances forced Turkmenistan to sign a 25 years working agreement with Gazprom in order to export gas via Russia to Ukraine and Europe; but the agreement signed in 2003 lasted just over a year before Ashgabat cut off supplies in attempt to get higher energy prices. In September 2006, Gazprom agreed to a 50% price increase for Turkmen gas deliveries at the cost of \$100 per 1000 cubic meters. The previously agreed price was \$65/1000 cubic meters. In exchange, Gazprom gained access to the rich Yolotan natural gas field of Turkmenistan. Gazprom also acquired de facto control of Turkmenistan's export routes and surplus potential until 2009.<sup>11</sup> In November 2007, Gazprom

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Walker, "CIS: The Emerging Post-Soviet Petro-State", 3 February 2007, at <[www.eurasianet.org/departments/business/articles/pp020307.shtml](http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/business/articles/pp020307.shtml)>.

<sup>11</sup> Dr. Federico Bordonaro, "Moscow Moves to Consolidate Control in Belarus and Turkmenistan", 5 January 2007 at <[www.pinr.com/reprot/php?ac=view\\_report&report\\_id=598&language\\_id=1](http://www.pinr.com/reprot/php?ac=view_report&report_id=598&language_id=1)>.

again revised its price mechanism and agreed to give \$130/1000 cubic meters for Turkmen and Uzbek gas. Turkmenistan exports about 50 billion cubic meters (bcm) gas/year to Russia. Export of natural gas to Russia accounted for 85% of Turkmen gas. Russia then sells it to Ukraine on higher prices.<sup>12</sup>

China has also signed energy import agreements with Turkmenistan. Chinese officials signed an agreement with Turkmenistan to import 30 bcm gas per year for 30 years starting in 2009. To meet the energy requirements of China is a challenge for Turkmenistan as there are different geographical, technical and financial problems in that respect. Turkmenistan is also exporting gas to Iran. By signing gas export agreements with regional countries, Turkmenistan is putting itself in a bargaining position with Russia and other energy hungry states. Working on that strategy, Turkmenistan has been able to get increased prices of its gas exported to Russia in recent years.

The US is also vowing to aid in the diversification of the CARs' oil and gas export routes through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC), Trans-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TAP) and Trans-Caspian Pipelines (TCP). It will enable Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to export their energy to the West and Asian markets bypassing Russia. But it is not clear whether Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan will have enough oil and gas to pipe it through these pipelines as Russia is importing most of the CARs' energy resources. In 2002 Gazprom and Kazakhstan's gas firm KazMunaygas signed an agreement to increase gas supply from Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan through Kazakhstan to Russia so that it might be exported to Europe. In 2004, the Russian oil company Lukoil signed with Uzbekistan a \$1 billion Production Sharing Agreement (PSA) for 35 years to develop Uzbekistan's natural gas deposits. Under PSA, Lukoil agreed to develop Kandym, the Khauzak and Shady fields in southern Uzbekistan. Lukoil acquired a 90% share in that project with Uzbekneftegaz which is an Uzbeki state gas firm. Gazprom also signed an agreement with Uzbekistan in April 2004 to provide \$200 million for the development of Uzbekistan's natural gas reserves.<sup>13</sup> In April 2006 Uzbekneftegaz and Gazprom started a \$1 billion project to explore and development of oil and gas deposits in Ustyurt, a part of Uzbekistan's western autonomous region of Karakalpakstan which borders the Aral sea. Under a deal with Gazprom, Uzbekneftegaz is bound to supply 3.5 million cubic meters of gas to southern Kazakhstan and the same amount of gas will be shipped to Russia from Karachaganak by a

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Boucek, "Energy Security Implications of Post-Niyazov Turkmenistan", 10 January 2007 at <[www.cacianalyst.org/view\\_article.php?articleid=4643](http://www.cacianalyst.org/view_article.php?articleid=4643)>.

<sup>13</sup> Sergei Blagov, "Uzbekistan and Russia Sign Mutual Defense Pact", *Eurasianet*, 5 November 2005 at <[www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav111505.shtml](http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav111505.shtml)>.

Kazakh company KazMunaiGaz. On 5 February 2007, the Uzbekistan state owned oil and gas company announced a PSA with Soyuzneftegaz Vostok Ltd. which is a subsidiary of the Russian gas company Soyuzneftegaz. They agreed for a five year joint exploration plan and a 36 year development program for central Ustyurt's south-western Guisar hydrocarbon deposits. That agreement substituted a 2001 PSA signed between Uabekneftegaz and British registered UzPEC.<sup>14</sup> Overall Uzbekistan sends over half of its natural gas export to Russia and the remainder to the CARs. On 6 July 2005 Russian President Vladimir Putin and Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev signed a 55 year production sharing agreement for the Kurmangazy oil field in the Caspian Sea. That same year, Russia and Kazakhstan also agreed to develop another Caspian oilfield of Khvalynskoye.<sup>15</sup>

According to press reports, 2009 gas deliveries from Turkmenistan to Russia will range from 60-70 bcm per year. A big share of that supply (42-51 bcm per year) will go farther on to Ukraine. Turkmenistan was not supplying gas to Ukraine directly in 2006, but rather to the energy company RosUkrEnergo, which is an intermediary in Russia-Ukraine gas deals. RosUkrEnergo signed contract for the import of 42 bcm per year of gas with Turkmenistan, 8.5 bcm/year with Kazakhstan and 7 bcm per year with Uzbekistan for 2007.<sup>16</sup>

Russia is also investing in nuclear sector of the CARs. In February 2002 Russia offered to revitalize plans to construct a nuclear power plant at Balkhash, roughly 400 km north of Almaty. In July 2006, Russia and Kazakhstan agreed to start three joint projects of uranium mining and enrichment as well as a venture to start new types of nuclear reactors for domestic use and for export. The total cost for these ventures is estimated at about \$10 billion.<sup>17</sup> With Uzbekistan, Russia has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to develop Uzbekistan's Aktan uranium deposits with estimated resources of nearly 4500 tons of uranium.<sup>18</sup>

By developing the nuclear energy sector of the CARs, Russia is guarding its interests. If the CARs nuclear energy production increases,

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<sup>14</sup> Sergei Blagov, "Uzbekistan Harbors Energy Development Plan: Russia Ready to Help", *Eurasianet*, 15 February 2007 at <[www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav021507a.shtml](http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav021507a.shtml)>.

<sup>15</sup> Sergei Blagov, "Russia Eyes Stronger Clout in Caspian Region", *Eurasianet*, 15 July 2005 at <[www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav071505.shtml](http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav071505.shtml)>.

<sup>16</sup> At: <[www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/index.html](http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/index.html)>. Energy Information Administration, US Department of Energy, accessed on 19 March 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Sergei Blagov, "Nazarbayev Reassures Russia on Energy Cooperation", *Eurasianet*, 20 March 2007 at <[www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav032007a.shtml](http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav032007a.shtml)>.

<sup>18</sup> Blagov, "Uzbekistan Harbors Energy Development Plan: Russia Ready to Help".

there will be less scarcity of energy, as nuclear energy can fulfill the shortage of energy in the CARs' domestic markets. Then, Russia will be able to get the CARs' oil and gas more easily. Investment in uranium enrichment also gives benefit to the Russian nuclear industry which may import uranium from the CARs. If Russia does not invest in that sector, other states like China, India and Iran may invest in that sensitive area which will be against Russian interests. There is also a possibility of the supply of prohibited nuclear material from the CARs to other neighboring countries. At the end of December 2007, a dangerous level of the radioactive substance cesium-137 was discovered aboard a freight train from Kyrgyzstan to Iran. On its discovery, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) made a request to the Kyrgyz government for the provision of details.<sup>19</sup> So a lack of funds for the development of uranium resources can force impoverished republics like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to sell it secretly to any other country. Therefore Russia's involvement in the CARs nuclear sector is important not only for the CARs, but also for regional countries. In the nuclear field, Russia and the US share common interests.

### **Russia's Involvement in the CARs' Security and Economy: A Quest for Retaining Power in Central Asia**

Russia has significant economic, security and political interests in Central Asia. Russia is on the receiving end of transnational threats such as narcotics trafficking, weapons smuggling, transnational crimes and terrorism that come from Central Asia. To keep the CARs in its sphere of influence, Russia is maintaining its presence in the CARs. For this purpose, Russia has signed different agreements with the CARs for the deployments of troops and the leasing of their bases. About 14,000 Russian soldiers are stationed in republics of Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.<sup>20</sup> Russia's 201st Motorized Rifle Division in Tajikistan is the largest Russian deployment outside its borders. More than 5000 Russian troops are stationed in the Dushanbe, Kurgan-Tube and Kulab regions.

To maintain its strong presence in Central Asia, Russia has provided economic assistance to the CARs and has used the CARs' liabilities to Russia as strategic assets. In 1993 for example, Russia provided \$17 billion in aid to ex-Soviet republics at concessionary subsidized prices and it was the single

<sup>19</sup> Jeffery Donovan, "Kyrgyzstan: IAEA Seeks Answers to Radioactive Seizures", *Eurasianet*, 16 January 2008 at <[www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/pp011608.shtml](http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/pp011608.shtml)>.

<sup>20</sup> Marcin Kaczmarek, "Russia Creates a New Security System to Replace the CIS", *Eurasianet*, 11 January 2006 at <[www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/pp11106.shtml](http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/pp11106.shtml)>.

largest aid donor to ex-Soviet republics in that year.<sup>21</sup> But for the recovery of its debt from the CARs, it was decided in April 1996, that Russia will get a share in Kyrgyz industry as a repayment of debt owed by Kyrgyzstan to Russia. Russia postponed the repayment of Kyrgyz debt until 2002. Later Putin provided economic support to Kyrgyzstan and Kyrgyz debt repayment of \$170 million was extended for 20 years. Kyrgyzstan has been unable even to pay the interest on the credit received.<sup>22</sup> Uzbekistan, which owed \$500 million to Russia, transferred property on the Black Sea to Russia to repay debt in October 1996. In November 2006, Russian officials proposed to shift a joint Uzbek-Russia aircraft production factory from Tashkent to Russia by showing concern over slow aircraft production.<sup>23</sup> Kazakhstan, which also owed debt to Russia, agreed to export Russia wheat in exchange of repayment of that debt to Russia in 1996.<sup>24</sup>

Russia signed the Status of Forces Treaty in 1993 with Tajikistan, and revised it in April 1999. But many issues resurfaced including the complete write off of Tajikistan's Soviet-era \$300 million debt to Russia.<sup>25</sup> Tajikistan was also not funding 50% of the expenses of Russian forces in Tajikistan. Under the 1993 treaty the funding for Russian forces in Tajikistan was supposed to be shared 50:50 by Russia and Tajikistan. However, Tajikistan did not pay more than 5% of the cost. In 2004, under Russia's influence, Tajikistan confirmed Russia's ownership of a space control centre at Nurek. In June 2004, Russia succeeded in reaching an agreement with Tajikistan to convert Russia's previous military deployment into a permanent base. Russian President Vladimir Putin and Tajik President Imomali Rakhmanov met on 4 June 2004 and decided that Russia would use Tajik bases without payment and time specification. In exchange, it was concluded that Tajikistan's remaining \$250 million debt would be written off.<sup>26</sup> On 16 June 2004, Putin visited Uzbekistan and a strategic-partnership agreement was signed between Uzbekistan and Russia. Both countries pledged to cooperate against terrorism. Uzbekistan agreed that Russia may use its bases and installations if it required. Russia took responsibility to defend Uzbek air space. Russia has also access to the Uzbek airfield at Navai. Russia will always have the right to use it in case of emergencies. In return, Russia will provide Uzbekistan

<sup>21</sup> Karen Dawisha Karen, "Russian Foreign Policy in the Near Abroad and Beyond", *Current History*, Vol.95, No. 603 (October 1996), p. 332.

<sup>22</sup> Jim Nichal, "Central Asia's New States: Political Development and Implications for US Interests", CRS Brief, 19 December 1996 at <[www.fas.org/man/crs/93-108.htm](http://www.fas.org/man/crs/93-108.htm)> and Sergei Mironov, "Kyrgyzstan on the Threshold of Inter-Religious and Inter-Ethnic Confrontation", *Russia and the Muslim World*, Vol. 117, No. 3 (2002), p. 33.

<sup>23</sup> Blagov, "Uzbekistan Harbors Energy Development Plan: Russia Ready to Help".

<sup>24</sup> Nichal, "Central Asia's New States: Political Development and Implications for US Interests".

<sup>25</sup> Leszek Buszynski, "Russia's New Role in Central Asia", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (July/August 2005), p. 558.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.558-559.

modern navigation systems and air defense weapons. Russia's access to Uzbek bases may help the Russian military create a regional headquarters for a unified air defense system; which may become a part of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) unified air defense system. The structure of that system will be reminiscent to that of the Soviet era.<sup>27</sup> Kyrgyzstan has been under similar Russian influence. According to an agreement signed between Russia and Kyrgyzstan in September 2003, Russia took control of Kant air base for 15 years beginning 23 October 2003, and allocated \$3.5 million for the expansion of the base. In October 2005, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on his tour of the CARs, pressed for the establishment of a Caspian Basin Security Force which would comprise military contingents from all littoral states including Iran.<sup>28</sup> Russia has tried to form a unified military group to lessen foreign influence through NATO.

In different public statements Vladimir Putin as Russian president insisted that Russia's foreign policy had to be subordinated to domestic economic interests. In a address on 26 January 2001, Putin emphasized that Russian strategic objectives are interlinked within a working community. In the age of globalization, the promotion of Russian economic interests abroad should be the main pillar of foreign policy.<sup>29</sup> By investing in countries like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and expanding its influence, Russia has tried to impress other CARs, and presented itself as a main option for the CARs to develop their resources and infrastructure.

### **Democratic CARs and Russia's Interests**

Russia wants to maintain status quo in the CARs. The CARs' authoritarian rulers of the communist era are quite helpful in keeping the status quo in the region. A democratic government which is elected by the masses is more answerable to the people and to civil society. Any step which people consider harmful to national interests, could be challenged. Any sort of authoritarian government has no close contact with the people, and takes little interest in public opinion on national and international issues.

Moreover, in a democratic government, the economy is more open for trade and investment. Political, economic and legal systems of the state are supposed to provide a more favourable environment for foreign trade

<sup>27</sup> Stephen Blank, "An Uzbek Air Base: Russia's Newest Achievement in Central Asia", *Eurasianet*, 11 January 2007 at <[www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav011107a.shtml](http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav011107a.shtml)>.

<sup>28</sup> Sergei Blagov, "Russia Seeks to Keep Pressure on U.S in Central Asia", *Daily Times*, 27 October 2005, p.10.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Sakwa, *Putin: Russia's Choice*, London, Routledge, 2004, p. 210.

that is based on competition. Such states attract more capital as a result of lower trade restrictions. In Western Europe, the struggle for open trade by the middle class played an important role in the development of democratic governments; which were in turn helpful in lifting different restrictions on trade. In democratic CARs, Western countries would have more opportunities to invest in their economies which are heavily dependent on oil and gas exports. Foreign investment will not only help to diversify the CARs' economies, but will also facilitate in maintaining the West's influence in the CARs. It will nourish a new capitalist class whose interest will be linked with the West.

In that perspective, the Western democratic agenda posed a fundamental threat to the survival of the authoritarian regimes of the CARs. It has encouraged "colour revolutions" in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan and has replaced the pro-Russia rulers of these republics. In the CARs, the US and EU are both eager to increase their leverage, which may be maintained easily if the CARs were more open and democratic. Russia has contested the spread of transatlantic democratic institutions, criticizing this as unjustified Western geopolitical encroachment within the former Soviet space. Supporting opposition forces in the CARs, where existing authoritarian regimes are quite favourable for Russia, is not a suitable option for Russia. Russia suspects geopolitical motivations behind the regime change strategy which includes a long term US geostrategic presence and greater control over natural resources in the region. To counter these moves, Russia despite having its own vast deposits of energy, is purchasing large quantities of the CARs' oil and gas resources at lucrative prices. It provides the CARs' authoritarian rulers a breathing space that is very crucial for their survival. According to the NGO Freedom House's 2008 survey of political trends in Eurasia, energy related revenues are encouraging the consolidation of authoritarian practices in both Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan.<sup>30</sup>

How undemocratic CARs are advantageous for Russia directly or indirectly can also be assessed by the EU move in 2006 when it banned direct purchase of gas from Turkmenistan on human rights grounds. However, EU states then bought Turkmen gas indirectly via Russia's state owned Gazprom after Turkmenistan sold it to the Russian firm. So, Russia would not prefer the emergence of democratic CARs which may have less dependence on Russia.

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<sup>30</sup> Alexander Cooley, "Principles in the Pipeline: Managing Transatlantic Values and Interests in Central Asia", *International Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 6 (November 2008), p. 1182.

## US Presence in the Region and Russia's Strategy

The US involvement in Afghanistan and Central Asia has entirely changed regional dynamics. Where US presence has provided Russia short-term benefits, its presence has also posed geopolitical challenges for Russia in the region. When the US started its war on terrorism by attacking Afghanistan in October 2001, Russia decided to play its role in regional security. It deployed its troops on the CARs-Afghan borders and strongly supported the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance which was based in north Afghanistan. Russia's direct involvement in Afghanistan could have incited sentiments of the CARs' Muslims and the Muslims within Russia, especially the Chechens. So it remained at bay from direct involvement in Afghanistan.

Russia cooperated with the US in its war on terrorism in Afghanistan due to different reasons. First, while supporting the US, it sided with the international community which was condemning terrorism and supporting the US. Russia's association with the US in the war can also be explained in the context that Russia had reduced space to maneuver. The Taliban were dominating Afghanistan. The Pro-Russian Northern Alliance was occupying merely 5% of Afghan territory.<sup>31</sup> The Taliban, after controlling most of the area, were putting up a threat to the CARs and ultimately to Russia. The Taliban's elimination became necessary for Russia's own security.

Moreover, Putin's policies from 1999 to 2001 became an instrument in strengthening Russia's position and to avoid any clash. It adopted a defensive posture to reduce cost. It strengthened relations with China and tried to increase links with Pakistan and the Muslim world. Russia initiated a policy of appeasement towards the US and the West so that it might pay attention to internal threats to its security. In continuation of this policy, Russia cooperated with the US on its war on terrorism.<sup>32</sup>

The US war on terrorism has provided Russia an opportunity to appease the West and to send them a message that they are facing the same threat having the same interests in respect of the emergence of "Islamic extremism". Militant groups active in Chechnya and Xinjiang were getting support from Taliban government of Afghanistan. The US attack on Afghanistan broke the supply line to Chechens and Xinjiang's Uighurs. The Taliban's defeat psychologically degraded extremist groups active in the entire region and shattered their morale, which was also advantageous for Russia and China.

<sup>31</sup> Lena Jonson, *Vladimir Putin and Central Asia: The Shaping of Russian Foreign Policy*, New York, I.B. Tauris 2004, p. 172

<sup>32</sup> For a detailed study of Russia's policy change after 9/11 see: *Ibid.*, pp. 172-178.

Russia's cooperation with the US in the war on terrorism should not be considered as just Russia's effort to appease the US. In fact, cooperation is also a form of competition. States cooperate with each other to enhance their capabilities to compete with other states. Russia also entered into a cooperation mechanism with the US in this regard. While supporting the US, Russia has avoided becoming a bandwagon or a junior partner of the US and has also criticized US policies.

Though the emergence of extremism is also a threat for Russia, Russia has the opportunity to direct the Muslim's sentiments against the US and to get their sympathies. In 2003, ultranationalist leader of Russia Vladimir Zhirinovskiy openly supported US war against Iraq, arguing that Russia would benefit from it, as US would be weakened and while feeling hated for the US, the world community would look toward Russia for help.<sup>33</sup> Since 2001, and especially after 2003, the US is quite involved in Afghanistan and Iraq that has given much time to Russia to revive its power that it lost in the Cold War.<sup>34</sup> Russia wants to keep the US and NATO preoccupied. In fact Russia is following the old saying of the famous and earliest known writer on military strategy, Sun Tzu, who said 'the best way to win is to let your enemy defeat himself'.

In the CARs, by encouraging extremist groups clandestinely, Russia can force their authoritarian rulers to look towards Russia for help. Russia has shown no keen interest in providing assistance to crush extremist groups active in Central Asia. This gives a strong appearance that Russia is involved in encouraging these groups for its own vested interests in the region. For instance, Russia did not support Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan properly at the time of the infiltration made by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in 1999 and 2000. An article reproduced in the June 2001 issue of a Russian journal *Russia and the Muslim World* (Moscow), revealed that the IMU had its bases in Tajikistan which was ally of Russia. The IMU was patronized by high Tajik officials including special services, whereas wounded Islamic fighters were treated in hospital in Dushanbe.<sup>35</sup> In an interview with "Abdullah" the son of a man identified as Shaikh Ibrahim (the IMU leader Tahir Yuldotshev's second in command) said, Tahir rejected a proposal from

<sup>33</sup> General Mirza Aslam Beg, "Emerging Multi-Polar World Order", *The News*, 6 February 2003, p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> Former US national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski is also of the view that US government policies in respect of Iraq and Afghanistan are suicidal. See: Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Bush Policies of Suicidal Statecraft", *Daily Times*, 10 October 2005, p. 8.

<sup>35</sup> "Islamic Fighters Step up their Operations in Countries of Central Asia", *Russia and the Muslim World*, Vol. 109, No. 7 (2001), pp. 44-45.

an unknown Russian who offered him a deal to finance him and supply of arms and ammunition to fight against the US in Afghanistan.<sup>36</sup>

By exploiting the threat of extremism in Central Asia, Russia has compelled the CARs to look for Russia's help. Russia's alleged hand in support of militants fighting against US provides Russia an opportunity to make the US engaged in a volatile Afghanistan and to take a revenge of the USSR's defeat in Afghanistan which was made possible with US weapons and dollars. So Russia is using its cards to maintain its influence in the region.

It is pertinent to mention that if the Taliban would have reached at the border of the CARs, then the CARs had to come under the full fledged military shelter of Russia. The US attack on Afghanistan and the Taliban's defeat indirectly contributed to reduce the chance of complete Russian control over the CARs security system. The US tried to fill the power vacuum which Russia may have filled. After the US attack on Afghanistan, the US established its bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. By supporting a pro-US government of Hamid Karzai, the US has used its influence to segregate the main pro-Russia Northern Alliance position holders from the Afghan government's key posts. It has compelled Russia to develop more understandings with the core ethnic Tajik and Uzbek groups of Afghanistan. Russia may openly support Afghan-Tajiks and Uzbeks to oppose US presence in the region if the US harms Russia's interest.

Some liberals in Russia are of the view that Russia should not oppose the American presence in Central Asia as the US has capabilities to protect the region from danger of terrorism and an American presence will work as a buffer between volatile Central Asia and Russia. But these liberal thoughts do not match with ground realities and psychological impact that US presence can have on Russians. The US presence in the region mitigates Russia's image as a great power. Expansion of NATO is a part of the strategy to increase US influence. The US and NATO's emergence in Afghanistan was acceptable for Russia because the rising danger of Islamic extremism was threatening the CARs' stability and ultimately Russia. But NATO's success in maintaining stability in Afghanistan will set an example for world in peace making outside Europe. If in the future any security threat emerges in the CARs, NATO may be used in maintaining peace and stability excluding any key role for Russia.

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<sup>36</sup> Daniel Kimmage, "Analysis: Extremist Threats, and Doubts in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan", *Eurasianet*, 24 July 2006 at <[www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/pp062407.shtml](http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/pp062407.shtml)>.

Russia has been unable to check burgeoning influence of NATO and the EU. NATO is not giving Russia any role in its decision making. In the words of Putin, the 'US treats Russia like the uninvited guest at a party'.<sup>37</sup> In the EU, Russia is not acceptable as its full member due to its large size. Psychologically the West has been afraid of Russia's potential of expanding its power and influence on the European continent. Its huge size mismatch with the main European contenders can disturb the balance of power in Europe. Due to Russia's status as an autonomous great power, it has also been reluctant to join different institutions where it does not have a decisive role in decision making. Moscow perceives the EU as backing the ambitions of US to achieve its regional and global interests. While economic compulsions will bring the EU and Russia close together, it is unlikely that Russia will integrate with the EU. Russian history, distinctive goals and Eurasian identity are some important factors that force Russia to pursue its own agenda instead of integrating with the EU.<sup>38</sup>

There is a view that China's growing strength in the east and the instability of the Islamic south meant that Russia's only geopolitical future lay with the West. But Russians are annoyed in thinking that even cooperation with the West has not yielded any positive results for Russia. In the 1990s, Russia's steps to check the effects of USSR's dismemberment were declared by the West as neo-imperialism. Even today the oversimplification of criticism on the same parameters is even worse than in the Cold War. To present himself as a democrat it has become a fashion to criticize or oppose the Russian president and the Kremlin policies. West Europe's failure to act as an autonomous power and intensified rivalry between the traditional West and energy producing countries for control of energy resources means that Russia has been forced by history into the centre of a new competitive struggle between the liberal-democratic and authoritarian models of capitalism.<sup>39</sup>

### **Russia and Regionalism in Central Asia**

Russia cannot afford the high financial cost for the sake of regional integration within the former Soviet republics. In February 2001, Sergei Ivanov, then the Secretary of Russia's Security Council, announced that previous efforts to integrate the region of the CIS had come at a very high price and that Russia must abandon the integration project in favour of a "pragmatic" course of bilateral relations. By the time this announcement

<sup>37</sup> Adi Ignatius, "A Tsar is Born", *Time*, Vol. 170, No. 26/27 (31 December 2007-7 January 2008), p. 26.

<sup>38</sup> Bhattu, "European Union-Russia Relations: Political, Economic and Strategic Aspects", p. 43, 45.

<sup>39</sup> Sakwa, "New Cold War or Twenty Years' Crisis?: Russia and International Politics", p. 254.

was made, the CIS states' debt to Russia had reached \$5.5 billion.<sup>40</sup> Keeping in mind such realities, the EU does not seem to be an appropriate model for integration of the CIS countries which have their own history, culture, geographical compulsions and economic conditions. There are different arguments which support that assertion. (i) If we look at the integration process in Europe we see that when that process started in Europe after World War II, no European-wide centralized government, authority or hegemonic power existed. But in the CIS until 1991, all the CIS members were under strong control of the centralized power structure of the Soviet regime. Today two decades after the USSR's collapse, Russia by virtue of its political, military and economic capabilities still stands as the unique, unrivalled hegemonic power in the region. (ii) Integration in Europe was originally an attempt to eradicate roots of war from Europe, especially between France and Germany through economic reconstruction, development and maintaining a balance of power. The situation within the CIS is different because it emerged from the collapse of USSR. (iii) In its present form the EU is composed of European countries whose culture, religion and life style are fairly similar. But in the CIS, the CARs' Islamic orientation sets them apart from Christian Russia. (iv) Before integration, the European countries were already stable nation states and they were at more or less a similar level of economic development. In the CIS, there is a big difference between the CARs and Russia's developmental level. Even within the CARs there are disparities. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are more developed as compare to Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. Moreover, the CARs economies are more competing than complementary. (v) Motives for cooperation in both the EU and the CIS differ. European integration occurred after war, while the CIS emerged after dismemberment of USSR.<sup>41</sup> (vi) To contain the communist USSR, US support for European integration also played an important role. Now, neither Russia nor the CARs are facing such threat, nor do they have support of a super power like the US for integration. (vii) After World War II, when the major European powers lost their foreign colonies, they thought it better to integrate themselves politically and economically. They saw economic, security and political benefits in integration after the loss of power. The decline of European imperialism forced the major European powers towards mutual cooperation. But in the CIS case, the Soviet republics got independence rather than the loss of power or colonies. The important principal of integration demands that it benefit all sides. Financial aid flows to the CARs from Russia and not the other way

<sup>40</sup> Andrei P. Tsygankov, "Projecting Confidence, Not Fear: Russia's Post-Imperial Assertiveness", *Orbis*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (Fall 2006), pp. 684-685.

<sup>41</sup> See: M. Mozaffari, "CIS' Southern Belt: Regional Cooperation and Integration," in Mehdi Mozaffari, *Security Politics in the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Southern Belt*, London, MacMillan Press, 1997, pp. 159-161.

round. Furthermore, the CARs have also become a buffer between Russia and an instable Afghanistan. For maintenance of stability in the region Russia will prefer hegemony over the CARs rather than integration.

Russia has tried to strengthen regional economic and security blocs in Central Asia so that the CARs may remain in its orbit instead of coming under US influence. Otherwise Russia may become a sandwich between EU-NATO and the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). Russia has tried to transform the CIS Collective Security Treaty into a multilateral regional security organization an alternative to NATO. Russia is giving more attention to Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and wants to make it a more articulated and integrated organization due to ineffectiveness of the CIS. To regain its lost influence in the post 9/11 security scenario, with Russia's efforts, on 7 October 2002 the presidents of Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan signed a charter and agreed on the legal status of the organization. The CSTO is the developed form of Tashkent Collective Security Treaty (CST) which was merely a consultative body. The spread of Islamic extremism was a major impetus behind the group's creation. Since 2005, Russia is trying to strengthen CSTO to deal with military issues. It is providing military aid to member states. By using the CSTO umbrella, Russia has tried to keep the CARs away from NATO's military mechanism. Russia's CSTO air defense initiative followed US moves to establish a missile defense shield across Eastern Europe. In fact, Russia wants to evolve CSTO on NATO's pattern which may have a mandate to defend its member states collectively against any external or internal military threat.

As compared to CSTO, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is a balanced forum and is not dominated by one power. That nature suits other smaller states. The Mission of the SCO is interpreted as an attempt in developing a multilateral, peaceful buffer in the Eurasian world.<sup>42</sup> It has played an important role in Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) among member states and in border demarcation. It is the platform of the SCO from where Russia and China have been demanding the US to withdraw its forces from Central Asia.

By forming different regional organizations, Russia has created choices for the CARs. The CSTO is organized to repel military attack, whereas SCO has focused on possible threats to member countries' security.

<sup>42</sup> Iwashita Akihiro, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its Implications for Eurasian Security: A New Dimensions of "Partnership" After the Post-Cold War Period", in Tabata Shinchiro and Iwasitita Akihiro (eds.), *Slavic Eurasia's Integration into the World Economy and Community*, Sapporo, Hokkaido University, 2004, p. 278.

The main attraction for CSTO membership for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan may simply be the Russian offer to sell military equipment directly to them at the prices which are offered to the Russian armed forces.

Russia has been disinclined in the creation of a supranational structure because Russia fears it may help to unite the major states of the CIS against Russia and it can be counterproductive. Hegemons by their nature avoid deep commitments to institutions that limit their chances of movement. Russia, in the CIS region like the US at global level, is reluctant to abandon its unilateralism, which makes its multilateral initiative doubtful.<sup>43</sup> That is also a reason regional organizations in Central Asia are not strong.

Russia and the US have supported regional organizations keeping focus on their own vested interests. The future of regionalism in Central Asia does not seem bright. Russia will always discourage formation of any bloc in which it would not be included. When the CARs were becoming members of ECO in 1992, Russia showed reservations to the CARs and other founding members of the ECO. The ECO ensured Russia that it did not have any political or security agenda in the region which might hurt Russia's interests. Russia must develop attraction for the CARs to integrate under its umbrella. Otherwise regional organizations will not evolve to become like the EU or NATO.

## **Conclusion**

Russia, due to its economic and geographical compulsions and Eurasian identity, is forced to look toward both the regions of Europe and Asia. While supporting the West's policies, it would not like to lose its status as an autonomous great power which has its own regional and global interests. Though Russia is working alongside the Western dominated institutions NATO and the EU, it would not integrate itself with them. Russia would encourage those regional groups in which it would have decisive role. While appeasing the West and the US it is also trying to increase its power and retaining its unique status as autonomous great power.

To maintain its influence on the southern border, Russia would like to see the CARs as its economic periphery which remain dependent on it. If industries are developed in the CARs, it would not only hurt Russia's corporate interests, but also the interests of authoritarian rulers of the CARs.

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<sup>43</sup> Roy Allison, "Security Management in Central Asia", *International Affairs*, Vol. 80, No.3 (May 2004), p. 468.

Obviously Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan need to establish textile industries and oil refineries in their own countries. If the CARs' authoritarian rulers build up the textile industry in their republics, Russia will be unable to find cheap cotton from the CARs and Russian textile industry will be affected. Industrialization will also give birth to a middle class which is very conscious of their political, social and economic rights. Such a class can be dangerous for the CARs' communist turned leaders, and then for authoritarian Russia which is a federation of several republics. That capitalist class will also be instrumental in developing links with the West.

Russia's interests in fields of security, economy and energy require a rapid reciprocal response from the CARs' governments to materialize different deals between Russia and the CARs. In the CARs authoritarian rulers that are heading the states are more helpful for Russia in safeguarding its vested interests. Therefore, democratic CARs are not in Russia's interests. Militarily weak CARs will provide Russia an opportunity for the deployment of its troops and Russia's influence will always remain intact in the CARs with the presence of a security threat. Internally weak CARs with underdeveloped economies will always suit Russian interests. By exploiting the backwardness of the CARs, Russia can keep them under its thumb so that they may remain dependent on Russia for the export of their energy and other economic and security matters. Russia does not want to integrate the CARs with itself on EU lines. Russia can only support CARs' unity when it would see that a united Central Asia can work as a bulwark against external involvement. Russia will not encourage such developments on its peripheries which may damage its own national interests and may pose a challenge to Russia's influence in the region. It will always try to keep the CARs dependent on it for their security, economic development and energy supply.