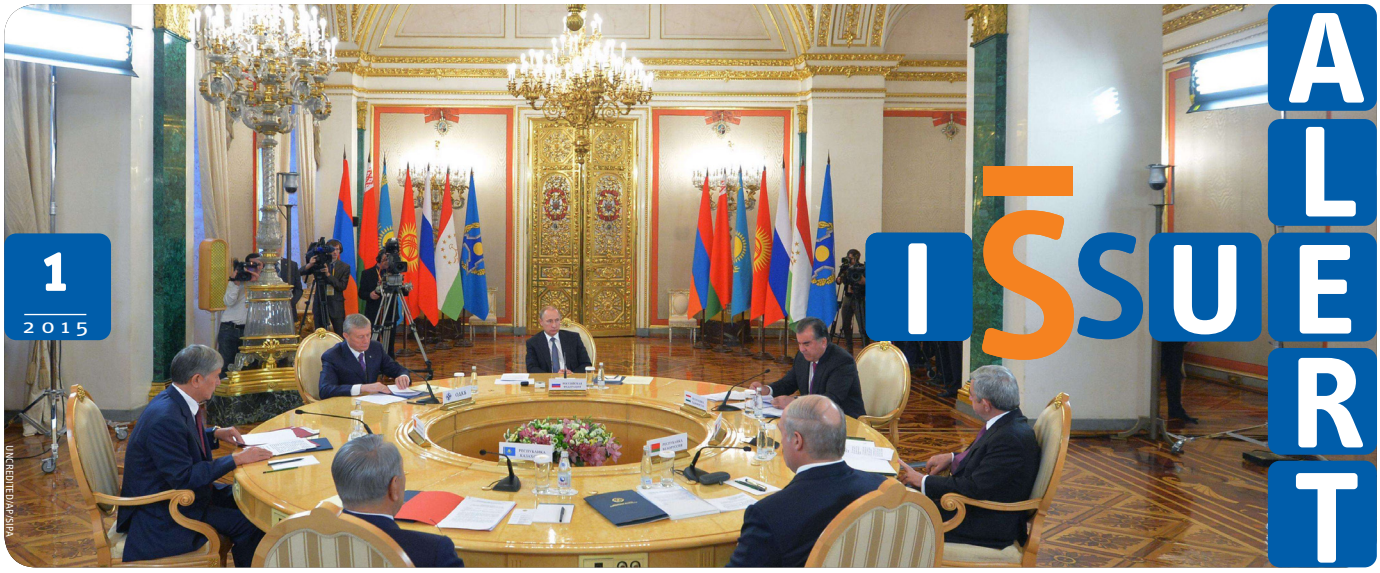

Central Asia: the view from Russia

by Józef Lang and Nicu Popescu

Stability is a buzzword for Central Asia watchers. Regional governments and foreign powers swear by it, and seek to use this alleged common interest to retain order in a fragile and often dysfunctional part of the world. Yet this apparently shared vision has not (yet) led to any major cooperative effort to get Central Asia on the right track.

Moscow's attitudes and interests

Russia's overarching foreign policy goal is the establishment of a multipolar world in which Moscow is one of the leading powers. From its standpoint, what transforms a big country into a great power is the ability to wield influence abroad – or even better, to create a *sphere* of influence. It is through this prism which Moscow views Central Asia and other post-Soviet territories. Russia thus performs a difficult balancing act, fostering minimum levels of stability while seeking to retain and expand its political and economic sway. At the same time, Moscow seeks to minimise challenges to its perceived interests from either Central Asian states themselves or other great powers – such as China, the US and, to a lesser extent, the EU.

The states of the region face serious threats to stability, most of which are internal: weak and corrupt governments, divided societies, drug trafficking and its corrosive effects on state institutions, radicalised groups and widespread poverty. Strengthening these states so that they are in a position to tackle such issues is not high on Russia's list of priorities. Instead, Moscow prefers to navigate the murky waters of 'managed instability', dealing with neighbouring states that are weak enough to be influenced but strong enough to stay afloat. Russia has found this method to be a useful policy tool in many parts of the post-Soviet space – in Georgia, Moldova and, now, eastern Ukraine. In Central Asia, Moscow is not actively fostering instability – there is already enough of it locally – but it has nevertheless long sought to retain its influence rather than improve the capacities of local governments.

Russia also attempts to limit the footprint of other great powers in the region. This is true, first and foremost, with regard to any Western (i.e. American and European) energy and security-related projects, which Moscow has continuously opposed since the Central Asian states gained independence. While Russia does not view China's involvement in the region favourably, it does not oppose it openly. Moscow is hardly capable of effectively freezing out China, and in any case views any potential disputes in the region as a localised rivalry which should not undermine its strategic relations with Beijing.

Not all Central Asian states are treated by Moscow in the same way and, except for Kazakhstan, are not of major strategic importance to Russia.

Instead, they are viewed from a narrower, mostly tactical perspective. Consequently, Russia is mostly engaged in relatively low-cost attempts to influence the region, favouring proactive diplomacy and institution-building rather than heavy-handed military action (as in Georgia or Ukraine) or substantial economic assistance (as in Belarus).

Regional stability and security

Russia tries to achieve its political goals through a combination of diplomatic, economic and security initiatives. In the security field, its main instrument is the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) – whose Central Asian members include Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (Uzbekistan left the body in 2012). In terms of economics, the key organisation is the Eurasian Economic Union, launched on 1 January 2015, which already involves Kazakhstan and is likely to soon include Kyrgyzstan and, eventually, Tajikistan.

Moscow has positioned itself as the only actor capable of countering regional security threats through the CSTO and its own military presence in the region (Russia has military bases in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan). In a number of recent crises, however, Russia was unable – or chose not to act – to promote regional stability. Examples include the ethnic conflict in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010 or the ongoing border disputes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In the first case, the CSTO did not intervene despite Kyrgyz requests, and Moscow displayed a clear reluctance to be dragged into a domestic conflict which did not pose any direct threat to Russia. In the second instance, Russia has made no significant effort to mediate between its two CSTO allies. In fact, Moscow has even supplied both parties with substantial military aid – $1.2 billion for Kyrgyzstan and $300 million for Tajikistan.

A similarly 'selfish' approach seems to underpin the freshly inaugurated Eurasian Economic Union. This project is an attempt to reboot another initiative, the Eurasian Economic Community, which largely failed following its launch in 2000. Through the creation of a single market and the encouragment of the free movement of labour, Russia hopes to retain and possibly increase its economic influence in the region. Russia is willing to invest in the project, mainly through subsidies to Central Asia's smaller and poorer states. But Moscow will not shower them with money. It prefers instead to dangle the carrot of access to the Russian market in front of the many would-be migrants from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan who wish to work in Russia. At the same time, in trade terms, Russia has now been replaced by China and/or the EU as the biggest trading partner of the Central Asian states.

Country	Top trading partners 2012 (excluding Russia)	Trade with Russia 2012 (% of foreign trade)
Kazakhstan	EU (32%) China (23%)	19
Kyrgyzstan	China (51%) Kazakhstan (7%)	17
Tajikistan	China (36%) Turkey (10%)	14
Turkmenistan	China (45%) EU (12%)	6.8
Uzbekistan	US (14%) China (12%)	9.7

Between Moscow and Beijing

From a broader perspective, it is its *security* involvement in Central Asia that is vital to Russia's plans for the region. Moscow is neither able nor willing to compete economically with Beijing. However, it is capable of creating a de facto Chinese-Russian condominium in Central Asia. In such a scenario, China would be free to benefit financially from the region while Russia would retain decisive influence on the political and strategic behaviour of local governments through its role as a security guarantor.

From Moscow's viewpoint, such a setup would secure its core interests of creating a sphere of influence and limiting the West's involvement in the region. It would also allow Russia to avoid paying the extra costs needed to prevent any of the Central Asian states from collapsing. Instead, those would be borne by China through a combination of infrastructure projects, investments, and loans.

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