

# **Russian Foreign Policy in Central Asia from 1991 to Present**

**Master Thesis**

**Yining Sun**

**Department of Slavic Languages & Literature**

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## Introduction

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, a huge empire stretching across Eurasia, was one of the greatest upheavals at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The dissolution marked the breakdown of traditional relations between Russia and Central Asian countries, a situation that Russia never faced during the Soviet era. As a result, Russia didn't have a consistent strategic plan in Central Asia immediately after the collapse of the USSR. Throughout the first several years of the 1990s, Russia actively engaged itself in trying to be recognized by the Western powers as their strategic partner, and thus largely ignored Central Asia. In the mid-1990s, Russia's conspicuous "return" to Central Asia under Putin as a result of repeated failure to integrate itself into the Western world and the loss of influence in its "backyard" coincided with China's rising status and the US's increasing military presence in Central Asia. With the three great powers, Russia, China and the United States, competing for military and economic interests, Central Asia did become a hotly contested spot for the major powers, a new battlefield for "Great Game" in Eurasia. The term "Great Game" originally refers to the nineteenth-century competition between the Russian and British empires for control over Central Asia.<sup>1</sup> Obtaining control over Central Asia became a key aspect of gaining control over the Eurasian continent. This is especially the case insofar as more attention is being paid by scholars to Russia's policies in Central Asia and Eurasian regionalism.

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Cooley. *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3

After examining the shifts and continuity of Russia's policies in Central Asia, certain questions arise: How did Russian strategies in Central Asia evolve throughout the three terms of the post-Soviet presidencies of Yeltsin, Putin and Medvedev? What are the key changes and points of continuity? How did Russian national interests and a shifting international environment shape such evolution? What is the prospect of a new “Great Game” in Central Asia? To answer these questions, this paper strives to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the evolution of Russia’s foreign policy towards Central Asia from 1991 to present. This paper argues for the rising importance of Central Asia in Russia’s global strategy for being recognized as a substantial regional power and then a global power, as well as a multipolar competition in Central Asia in the future. In other words, even though Russia tends to attach increasing importance to Central Asia, Russia’s hegemony there is gone.

This paper is especially interested in evaluating this argument by discussing the major events and characteristics of specific periods of the evolution of post-Soviet Russian foreign policy in the region. The paper proposes to divided the whole period into three subfields in order to better map key transitions and changes: the period of “Indifference” (1991-1995), during which Central Asia occupied a subordinate position in Russia’s global strategy and was given only limited attention; the period of “Return” (1995-2001), during which Russia’s “one-sided” pro-Western policy was officially ended and the Commonwealth of Independent States occupied a priority status in Russia’s foreign policy; and the period of “Rehabilitation” (2001- Present), during which Central Asia became the pivot of Russia’s foreign policy and a contested

spot for a new round of the “Great Game” among Russia, China and the United States. The reasons and crucial events in identifying the three periods will be analyzed in detail in this paper.

The three most dynamic aspects of Russian foreign policy - security, politics and economics - will be the focal points of this paper. The economically backward Central Asian countries during the early stage after the dissolution of the USSR were seen by Russia’s “Westernizers” as a burden to Russia,<sup>2</sup> as Yeltsin’s government actively sought to integrate the countries into the Western-dominated international economic sphere. The failure of the “one-side” pro-Western policy and the Western world’s constant refusal to acknowledge Russia as its strategic partner resulted in Russia’s reevaluation of its Eurasian policies. The *Decree on The Establishment of the Strategic Course of the Russian Federation with Member States of the CIS*, released on Sep.14 1995, marked Russia’s “return” to Central Asia, especially in terms of economic cooperation. The decree clearly stated that the CIS countries should occupy a priority status in Russia’s global strategy. Yeltsin also set economic mutual benefits as the fundamental prerequisite for resolving disputes among CIS countries, encouraging bilateral and multilateral collaboration within the context of economic union. Entering the 21st century, the prospect of regional economic integration initiated by Russia became clearer. The Customs Union<sup>3</sup>, the Shanghai Cooperation

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<sup>2</sup> According to Russian scholar A.V. Torkunov, fiscal subsidy from the Soviet Central government accounted for 40% of the Central Asian republics’ total budget. See A.B.Торкунов, *Современные международные отношения*, Москва, 1998г., с.438

<sup>3</sup> The creation of the Eurasian Customs Union was guaranteed by three different treaties signed in 1995, 1999 and 2007. The first treaty in 1995 guaranteeing its creation, the second in 1999 guaranteeing its formation, and the third in 2007 announced the establishment of a common customs territory and the formation of the customs union.

Organization (SCO)<sup>4</sup> and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)<sup>5</sup> all serve to promote the increasingly tightening economic relations among Russia and the Central Asian countries.

Unlike its shifting economic policy, Russia's policies with regard to security in its southern neighborhood remained relatively consistent. Well aware of threats of extreme Islamist terrorism from their borderland with Afghanistan, the Central Asian countries sought for military cooperation and so did the Russians. The establishment of military bases by the US in Central Asia further compounded the Kremlin's worry about its traditional security zone. The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the SCO, with the participation of China, are largely viewed as effective instances of collective regional collaboration in counter-terrorism and resistance to NATO expansion eastward. This paper thus argues that Russia's economic policy in Central Asia shifted from strategic rupture to active cooperation, from indifference to priority. On the other hand, its security policy has remained relatively consistent and effective, and has had the tendency of intensifying over time.

The paper will also offer a brief analysis of the challenges that Russia faces in its future policy in Central Asia, as well as the boundaries of Russia's expanding influence there in the conclusion, by discussing the "Great Game" among China, the U.S. and Russia. Like Russia, China is also experiencing frustrating terrorist threats in

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<sup>4</sup> The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is a Eurasian political, economic and military organization which was founded in 2001 in Shanghai by the leaders of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. These countries, except for Uzbekistan, had been members of the Shanghai Five, founded in 1996; after the inclusion of Uzbekistan in 2001, the members renamed the organization. On July 10, 2015, the SCO decided to admit India and Pakistan as full members, and they are expected to join by 2016.

<sup>5</sup> The Eurasian Economic Union is an economic union of states located primarily in northern Eurasia. A treaty aiming for the establishment of the EEU was signed on 29 May 2014 by the leaders of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia, and came into force on 1 January 2015.

its borderland Xinjiang, the settlement of which can only be achieved by counter-terrorist cooperation with Central Asia. There China and Russia find their common ground. Nevertheless, the two great regional powers simultaneously seek exclusive economic benefits in Central Asia, especially energy resources, which might result in future conflicts of interests. To avoid direct competition with Russia for regional economic dominance, China has sought to establish direct economic partnership with Central Asian countries, for instance signing natural gas exporting treaties, building up pipelines bypassing Russian territory, enhancing bilateral cooperation in infrastructure, etc. The “Silk Road Economic Belt” project, strongly supported by the Chinese government in recent years, serves as a vivid example. In terms of the US blueprint in Central Asia, a detailed analysis of the “5+1” mechanism in Central Asia and the “New Silk Road Initiative” in Afghanistan, which demonstrate the US government’s ambition for further exerting influence in the Eurasian zone in “post-Afghanistan war era”, will be presented in this paper.

Official documents and reports issued by the Russia, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Turkmen, Uzbek, Chinese and the US governments will be the most important primary sources of this paper, including official announcements, decrees, news release, annual statistics, speeches and foreign ministers’ answers to media questions. Most of them are digital sources. The Russian language sources are from the websites of the foreign ministry of Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, the office of the President of Russia, Carnegie Moscow Center, and the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences. The English

language sources are from the websites of the National Security Archive. The Chinese language sources are from the websites of the Foreign Ministry of China, the Chinese Academy of Social Science. Secondary resources include books and papers written by Chinese, American, Russian and Kazakh scholars. Diverse and reliable resources from all involved countries will help to ensure an unbiased analysis and defensible conclusions.

Analysis of statistics and documents will be the basic approach to the questions this paper is trying to answer. The paper divides post-Soviet Russian foreign policy in Central Asia into three stages: the period of “Indifference” (1991-1995), the period of “Return” (1995-2001) and the period of “Rehabilitation” (2001- Present). The economic and security policies, major issues, achievements and challenges of each stage will be discussed in detail in order to portray characteristics and focuses of its foreign policy during these periods.

Nevertheless, certain limitations in sources and scopes might somehow constrain the results. Since this is a relatively new topic, little previous work has been done in this field and there is hardly any agreement on dividing post-Soviet foreign policy into periods, which complicates the drawing of persuasive conclusions. Moreover, due to the fact that this paper analyzes long-term strategies, information and documents are so overwhelming in their scope that it would be impossible to explain all events; instead we shall examine selected main issues, such as the signing of important inter-government agreements, the establishment of crucial regional organizations and major events that had global impact. The treaties and agreements selected are



government-issued ones that had the original transcripts on governments' websites, and the events selected were all reported by mainstream media, which are representative and reliable. In this sense, the aforementioned boundaries can be compensated for. Given enough time and space, the author would like to extend the discussion of Sino-Russian cooperation and conflicts of interests in Central Asia to broader aspects of international relations.

## **Historical Background**

### **A. Geopolitical thinking in Russia's foreign policy.**

Historically, Russia has been considered situated between the West and the East, facing challenges from both Europe and the Orient, which is broadly defined as non-European countries of Eurasia. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian elites proposed the long-term objective of rehabilitating former Soviet regional political influence and establishing Russia as a global power, which could only be achieved by integrating the Commonwealth of Independent States into Russia's orbit and consolidating Russia's leading position in Eurasia.<sup>6</sup> The Kremlin leaders have an ambition of establishing Russia's unchallengeable control in its historical borderlands, mainly among the CIS.

However, Russia faces even more complex geopolitical circumstances than did its predecessor. The former Soviet republics have now become free-standing sovereign

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<sup>6</sup> Dmitri Trenin. "Russia and Central Asia." in *Central Asia: Views from Washington, Moscow, and Beijing* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2007), 81.

states, who may choose their own developing pattern and may not necessarily fall into Russia's geopolitical orbit. The continuing NATO expansion and the pro-Western regimes' coming into power in Georgia and Ukraine sent an alarming signal to the Kremlin: its "Soviet brothers" now have plenty of choices, instead of solely listening to Moscow's commands.

The "loss" of Georgia, the political instability in Ukraine and the process of NATO expansion eastward transferred Russia's strategic focus to its southern façade. Today, from Moscow's perspective, post-Soviet Russia is experiencing a renaissance of traditional geopolitics, which, due to Russia's series of failures to counter European and NATO expansion, involves the Central Asian states as Russia's principal battlefields against pro-Western democratic waves.<sup>7</sup>

No longer acting solely as Russia's "Soviet brothers," the Central Asian states currently are far from an integrated community characterized by unified pattern of development and dependence on Russia. The five countries pursue different strategies towards Russia and Russia's ambition in reestablishing its regional control: Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan continue to work closely with Russia in the economic and political spheres; the Uzbek government has a strong sense of national independence and stands against Russia's expanding influence; while Turkmenistan announced a neutral position and has seceded from Russia's orbit. To make the situation even more complex, in the context of escalating anti-terrorist operations in the Middle East and the opening of the enormous energy market in Central Asia, US

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<sup>7</sup> Евгений Вертлип, "Геостратегические Вызовы Безопасности и Стабильности Странам Центральноазиатского Региона", last modified 24 January 2006, <http://www.regnum.ru>.

and Chinese influence have gradually seeped into Central Asia as part of the competition known historically as “the Great Game”. The three great powers have their own interests in Central Asia: the US wishes to promote democratic reforms in Central Asian states and establish military bases there for anti-terrorist operations; China values the rich oil and gas reserves in Central Asia in order to attenuate China’s dependence on Russia’s energy. Meanwhile Central Asia’s proximity to Xinjiang makes it an ideal place for China to tackle separatist and terrorist groups there. China and the US steps into Central Asia brought significant changes to the status quo and have broken the traditional Russia-dominated equilibrium. Thus, Moscow finds itself situated in an increasingly complicated geopolitical circumstance in Central Asia, with a US military presence that endangers security along Russia’s historical borderlands and a Chinese one that challenges Russia for economic profits.

## **B. Strategic change of Russian foreign policy: Russia’s Central Asia pivot**

Since the dissolution of the USSR, Russia has made several shifts in its foreign policy, especially with regard to Central Asia. Generally, scholars agree that shortly after the collapse, the Russian government pursued a pro-Western policy, largely cutting off financial aid to Central Asian states.<sup>8</sup> To Russia, those Central Asian states, which had just experienced huge financial losses after the collapse of the USSR, were nothing more than “poor relatives”, an economic burden that Russia strove to shake off in order to join the West-dominated world. Thus, at the early stage of Soviet

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<sup>8</sup> Fenghua, Liu, “Russia in Central Asia: The Evolution of Policies,” *International Politics Studies* (2007), 151

dissolution, Russia barely had effective relationships with Central Asia, particularly in the economic sphere.

Russia's integration into the Western orbit turned out to be unsuccessful. Russia was disappointed to see the United States' and Europe's refusal to recognize it a major great power, not to mention recruit Russia as their strategic partner. Yeltsin's "one-side" policy was received coldly in the West; at the same time, it became clear to Russia that NATO expansion into the erstwhile Soviet sphere of influence was unstoppable.<sup>9</sup> As a result, Yeltsin and the Russian elites<sup>10</sup> realized that it was impossible, at least for the time being, for Russia to be recognized as a Western power. Thus, Russia shifted its "one-sidedness" to a pragmatic Eurasianism. As advocated by Alexander Dugin, Eurasianism pursues a more practical foreign policy, aiming at restoring Russia's historical influence in the post-Soviet region. Russia should not expect to be either a Western or an Eastern power, but rather a special Eurasian state that should establish itself a regional power and include all geopolitically related countries, mostly the CIS countries, into its own orbit.

Russia thus realized the importance of its backyard, the CIS, which had significantly changed because of Russia's earlier indifference. In addition to economic recovery in Central Asian states, what worried Russia most were the democratic reforms promoted by the West that greatly challenged Russia's political interests in this area. For a time even Uzbekistan began to pursue pro-Western but anti-Russian foreign policies. Such irreversible changes complicated Russia's later "return" to

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<sup>9</sup> On March 12, 1999 three East European countries, Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic, were included into the NATO.

<sup>10</sup> The most famous scholar among Russia elites who advocates a Russia-oriented Eurasia is Alexander Dugin.

Central Asia.

Entering the new era, two major factors strengthened Russia's determination to stick to Eurasianism and rehabilitate its influence in historically Soviet territory: the rise of China in Eurasia and the long-term US military presence in Central Asia. China's rapid economic growth and entry in the World Trade Organization (WTO) made it an important exporter and importer in global markets. China signed plenty of bilateral or multilateral treaties with the five Central Asian countries, especially in the area of energy resources, with the purpose of taking advantage of the huge oil and natural gas market in Eurasia and reducing its dependence on energy imports from Russia. China's other concern is building cooperation with Central Asian states in countering "three evils" (terrorism, separatism and extremism)<sup>11</sup> in its borderlands, which is a chief internal security problem for the Chinese government. As compared to China, the US has more obvious political objectives in Central Asia. On one hand, Central Asia's proximity to Afghanistan qualifies it an ideal place for the US to establish military bases and transfer supplies. On the other hand, the US supports democratic infiltration and pro-Western regimes in Central Asia, hoping to overthrow the Russia-dominated political pattern there.

Russian foreign policy has experienced a switch from an initially one-sided pro-Western strategy to a more practical Eurasia-oriented style, which emphasizes the Asian pivot to counter NATO expansion and the necessity to expand multilevel cooperation with Central Asian states.

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<sup>11</sup> The Three Evils are defined by the Chinese government as "terrorism, separatism and religious extremism". The phrase is frequently used when referring to counter-terrorism operations undertaken by China, the Central Asian republics, and Russia.

### C. The importance of Central Asia to Russia

Historically, Central Asia was Imperial Russia's last territorial acquisition; it was only by 1895 that the peaceful annexation of the region was complete. Only sporadic interest was given to Central Asia during the first several years after the dissolution of the USSR.<sup>12</sup> For Moscow's Western-oriented reforms, Central Asia hardly bore any value. Worth mentioning is the fact that even though Russia foresaw the prospect of agreeing with Ukraine and Belarus to dismantle the Soviet Union and establish the Commonwealth of Independent States by signing the "Belavezha Accords"<sup>13</sup>, Russia originally showed no interest in affiliating the Central Asian states into this organization. Only on Dec.21<sup>st</sup> 1991, 13 days after the signing of the "Belavezha Accords" did Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan sign "Alma-Ata Protocol"<sup>14</sup> to join the CIS. Instead of creating a "Great Soviet-style Russia", Russia opted for a "little Russia".

The "9/11" incident in 2001 significantly changed the traditional geopolitics in Central Asia. To support US military intervention in Afghanistan, Washington established direct collaboration with Central Asian states, especially Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, to use military bases<sup>15</sup>, with an explicit commitment for a long-term US

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<sup>12</sup> Dmitri Trenin. "Russia and Central Asia." in *Central Asia: Views from Washington, Moscow, and Beijing* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2007), 77.

<sup>13</sup> The Belavezha Accords is the agreement that declared the Soviet Union effectively dissolved and established the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in its place.

<sup>14</sup> On 21 December 1991, the leaders of eight former Soviet Republics – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan – signed the Alma-Ata Protocol which can either be interpreted as expanding the CIS to these states or the proper foundation or re-foundation date of the CIS, thus bringing the number of participating countries to 11.

<sup>15</sup> Between 2001 and 2005 the United States Army, Air Force and Marine Corps used the Karshi-Khanabad base (K2) in Uzbekistan for supporting missions against al-Qaeda in neighboring Afghanistan. The Manas base was opened in December 2001 in Kyrgyzstan to support U.S. military operations against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

military presence. Since Putin has essentially claimed that a third-party military presence in CIS countries was only acceptable if it was conducted in the framework of Russia-led security system, the US military presence in Central Asia was regarded as a signal denoting US interference in Russia's core security interests there. Having experienced the detachment of Georgia and Ukraine from the CIS system, Putin took Central Asia as a base for countering the expansion of US influence.

The founding of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a major regional organization led by China, further compounded Russia's worry about losing Central Asia to other great powers. Putin clearly knows that losing Central Asia equals losing the last defensive line of border security as well as losing the dominant position in post-Soviet areas. There are also internal security considerations for Russia, considering that about 15% of the population of Russia is Muslim and growing fast.

Needless to say, the US military presence and China's increasing economic influence in Central Asia sent signals to the Kremlin leaders: Russia should intensify cooperation and communication with Central Asian states in multiple spheres and increase financial aid to these countries in order to preserve Russia's dominant position in the region.

#### **D. The periodization of post-Soviet Russian foreign policy in Central Asia**

Even though scholars generally hold that Russian foreign policy in Central Asia went through an evolution from indifference to intensive cooperation, from economic abandonment to integration coupled with "securitization", Russia's foreign policy has

not been consistent in every sphere. While Russia gradually sought to cut off economic relations with Central Asian states during the early post-Soviet years, it still maintained tight collaboration in the security and political fields.

The author thus attaches great importance to identifying the chronological demarcation lines and major characteristics by discussing major events in economic, political and security spheres, respectively, in each period. In this way, the reader is presented with the evolution and consistency of policies over time. This paper proposes to divide the evolution of Russian foreign policy in Central Asia into three main stages: the period of “Indifference”, 1991-1995; the period of “Return”, 1995-2001 and the period of “Rehabilitation”, 2001-Present.

## **The Period of “Indifference”: 1991-1995**

During the early years after the dissolution of the USSR, there were two antagonistic theories about Central Asia in Russia. The Westernizers held the view that the awful economic status quo in Central Asia was a burden for Russia’s economic recovery, a barrier to democratic reform as well as an obstacle to Russia’s integration into Western civilization.<sup>16</sup> Russia should thus withdraw its financial aid and minimize its presence in Central Asia. The Eurasianists, on the other hand, maintained a moderate attitude towards Russia’s “Soviet brothers”. They proposed to retain the Soviet policy in Central Asia and to maintain political stability there so as to

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<sup>16</sup> Д.Малышева, “Центральная Азия-Мусульманский Вызов России?”, *Международная Экономика и Международные Отношения*, No.12 1993г. 55



avoid radical Islamic threats from the Middle East.<sup>17</sup> Due to Russia's turbulent domestic situation and the lack of capital for social reforms, the Russian government was in desperate need of foreign aid from the West. The Russian government thus pursued a generally one-sided pro-Western foreign policy, setting the West as the top priority for Russia and stressing the identity of Western and Russian interests. The Yeltsin government implemented an economic policy of "shaking off the burden" but at the same time pursued a security policy of establishing a collective security system in Central Asia.

**1. Economy:** Russia's economic abandonment of Central Asia was mostly reflected in its economic policy, including: 1) cancelling financial subsidies typical of the Soviet period, thereby dramatically reducing the supply of raw materials to the region. The ratio of Russia's export to CIS countries to Russia's total export dropped from 21.5% in 1994 to 18.5% in 1995, while the ratio of Russia's export to non-CIS countries increased from 78.5% to 81.5%.<sup>18</sup> Table 1 shows the decline of official aid received by the Kazakh government from 1991 to 1992, of which the biggest contributor was Russia. Though the volume of foreign aid to Kazakhstan has gradually increased since 1993, it did not recover to the 1991 level until 1997. 2) In 1992 Russia implemented the drastic "Shock Therapy" economic reform, which meant a sudden release of price and currency controls, withdrawal of state subsidies, and immediate trade liberalization within a country, usually including large-scale privatization of

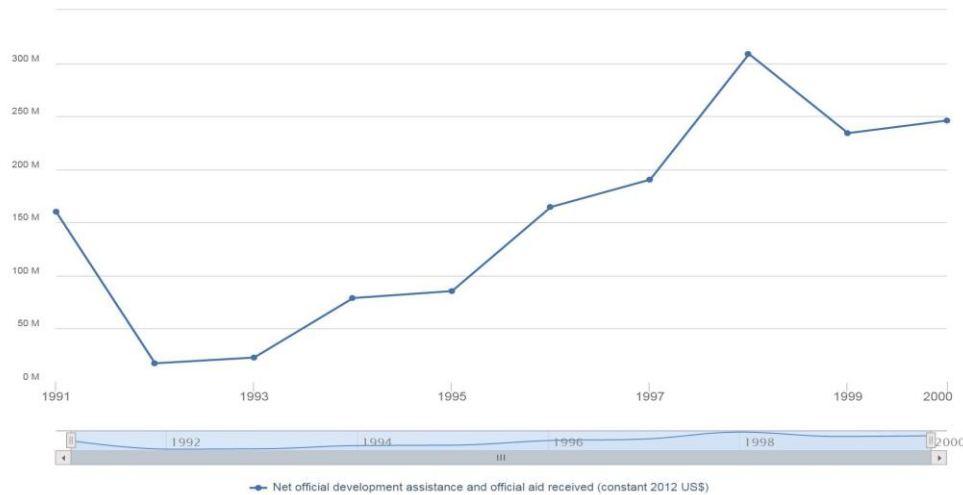
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<sup>17</sup> Hooman Peimani. *Regional Security and the Future of Central Asia: The Competition of Iran, Turkey, and Russia*. (Praeger, 1998), 120

<sup>18</sup> International Monetary Fund country report, Russian Federation: Selected Issues and Statistical Appendix, April 2002

previously public-owned assets; moreover, Russia did so without informing the Central Asian states. The implementation of rapid economic liberalization and loose

Table 1: Net official development assistance and official aid received by Kazakhstan, 1991-2000

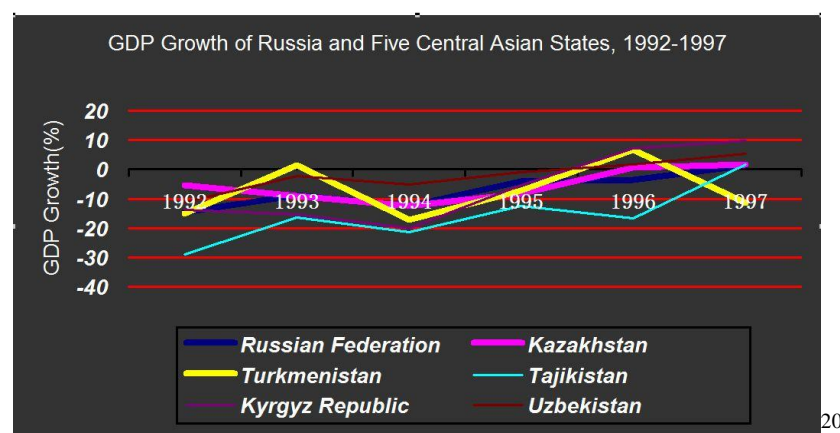


Source: World Development Indicators

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government control over the economy brought severe economic damages not only to Russia, but also to the Central Asian countries, which were then still in the “Ruble Zone”. It is obvious from Table 5 that during the period of “Indifference”, economies in Russia and Central Asia experienced a disastrous depression; in almost every year, the six countries had only negative GDP growth.

Table 2



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<sup>19</sup> Data from: <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=2&country=KAZ&series=&period=>, accessed on February 23, 2016

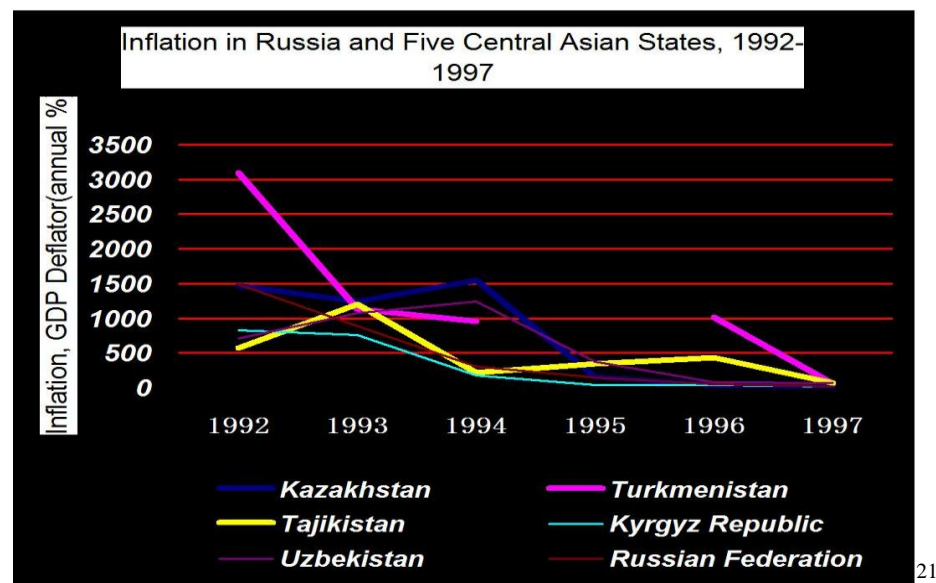
The rapid shift towards privatization and the liberalization of 90% of CPI caused the Russian government's lack of control over the prices of goods; meanwhile the rampant growing of the black market further contributed to the economic disorder. The Central Asian countries, who were still in the "Ruble Zone" but were not informed in advance of the radical economic reform, went through sharp economic decline, as indicated in Table 5. Their economies, still in the process of transition, were nearly at the edge of collapse. Such awful economic condition recovered only by 1996, two years after Yeltsin's public declaration of abandoning the "Shock Therapy".

3) Russia expelled the Central Asian states from the "Ruble Zone" in 1993. Even though exit cases have happened before in the ruble zone, just like Guinea's and Mali's exits from the franc zone, the Central Asian states originally wished to remain in the Russia-dominated ruble zone. To be swept away from the ruble zone contributed to the economic depression in Central Asia. The inflation in Central Asia was as severe as that in Russia, as shown in Table 7. By 1993, the Russian government was no longer willing to sacrifice for the sake of preserving the

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<sup>20</sup> Data from: <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/>, accessed on February 27, 2016.

Table 3



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previous ruble zone. Eventually, Russia decided to relinquish its regional monetary hegemony and expelled the Central Asian members from the ruble zone. By doing so, Russia automatically abandoned its ruling economic position in at least half of the post-Soviet area and reduced its economic influence there. The demise of the Russia-dominated “Ruble Zone” and the members’ exits accelerated the breakdown of mutual economic relations and forced the five countries to issue their own currencies.

4) Mutual trade experienced a sharp drop, enhanced by Russia’s shift towards the Western markets. In 1990, Russia occupied 44.8% of Central Asia’s total volume of trade. By 1997, this percentage fell to 26%, while Central Asia’s ratio of Russian foreign trade dropped from 12.7% in 1990 to 5.8% in 1997.<sup>22</sup> Russia’s “shaking off the burden” policy reinforced centrifugal economic forces within the Eurasian zone and deprived Central Asia of its principal partner in foreign trade as well as its most

<sup>21</sup> Data from: <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/>, accessed on March 1, 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Fenghua, Liu, “Russia in Central Asia: The Evolution of Policies,” *International Politics Studies* (2007), 153

important source of income. Only then did the Central Asian states realize that their trading partners should be diversified in order to reduce financial dependence on Russia.

The five countries started to build links with other countries, especially Turkey. Sharing a common language, social and cultural background, Central Asia and Turkey viewed each other as “close brothers” with a common origin. Turkey was the first country to recognize the independence of the Central Asian states after the dissolution of the USSR and supported the recognition of the five young Turkic countries in the international community. When Central Asia was almost “abandoned” by Russia in the early 1990s, Ankara, as a substitute for Russia in Central Asia, attempted to deepen bilateral and multilateral relations through increasing the number of official and diplomatic exchanges, announcing potential trade deals, promising free capital flows, and pursuing a general deepening of economic cooperation. Scholarships to study in Turkey were awarded, while Turkish satellite TV was broadcast into the region and more frequent flights established. Central to this engagement was the establishment of the Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) in 1992, in the framework of which a very large amount of Turkey’s oversea aids went to the Central Asian region. Except for financial help, during those years, many projects and activities in the fields of education, health, restoration, agricultural development, finance, tourism, and industry were realized by TIKA. In addition, the first of the TIKA Programme Coordination Offices was inaugurated in Turkmenistan; later on,

the number of the offices located in the Eurasian area increased to six.<sup>23</sup>

To compensate for Russia's "shaking off the burden" policy and the huge economic loss brought by that, the Central Asian states actively sought to expand external communication and diversify economic connections with the outside world. The Central Asian states thus enthusiastically welcomed non-Russian foreign investment and tried to become better integrated into world markets.

**Politics:** Economic "divorce" did not, however, impact negatively on political cooperation between Russia and Central Asia. Being clearly aware of Central Asia's proximity to Russia and the necessity of Central Asia's support in regional affairs, Russia still maintained a close political relationship with these states. In just one year, from 1992 to 1993, Russia signed a bilateral *Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance* with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, respectively. As indicated by the treaties, Russia achieved agreement and cooperation with Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan in the various areas, such as protection of citizens' rights, guarantee of cross-border travelling, respect for religious freedom and legal rights of the minorities, enhancing bilateral economic and technological collaboration, implementation of consistent custom policy in the framework of the Custom Union, guarantee of favorable environment for foreign investment, strengthening cooperation in astronautics, energy and telecommunication, promoting teaching of Russian language, intensify humanitarian and education exchanges, deepen cooperation in counterterrorism in the framework of the CIS system, etc.

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<sup>23</sup> Thomas Wheeler, "Turkey's Role and Interests in Central Asia", *Safeworld*, October 2013.

The treaty with Kazakhstan demonstrated that the two sides had broader intentions that included political unification similar to the articles that Russia has signed with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the Russian and Kazakh government agreed on: 1) establishing collaborative foreign policy; 2) assuring joint use of military bases in both countries; 3) supporting the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; 4) establishing a bilateral committee for human rights; 5) allowing overall development and promotion of all national languages and cultures; 6) guaranteeing free access to mass media in both countries; and 7) promoting a joint effort for the technical advancement of the Baikonur cosmodrome. Needless to say, Russia and Kazakhstan had the most common ground for building up a shared community in post-Soviet areas. Kazakhstan's centripetal force was highly valued by Russia because of Kazakhstan's leading economic position among Central Asian countries and its legacy of important Soviet military bases and nuclear weapons. The agreement on non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in article 8 revealed Russia's worry about the existence of nuclear power in its near abroad and indicated Russia's later determination to persuade Kazakhstan to abandon its nuclear weapons, done by 1995 with U.S. cooperation. Russia's active engagement in the technological advancement of the Baikonur cosmodrome suggested Kazakhstan's strategic importance for Russia in military issues. Likewise, cultural seepage by means of language teaching and mass media demonstrated that bilateral communication between Russia and Kazakhstan was not limited to security issues, but included the cultural sphere as well.

As compared to other Central Asian countries, Uzbekistan was more cautious and

reserved in signing treaties with Russia. Clearly, Uzbekistan was resistant to Russia's cultural infiltration and expected to reduce Russia's political influence inside the country. Uzbekistan was the only one among the four countries that did not agree to open a Slavic university together with the Russia government.<sup>24</sup> In addition, the treaty that Uzbekistan and Russia signed did not include much cultural communication or bilateral exchange programs. Rather, Uzbekistan was more concerned with Russia's help in the joint defense of its borderlands and collaborative exploitation of oil and natural resources. Also expecting a joint defense of borderlands was Turkmenistan, which signed the *Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation and the Status of Soldiers of Russian Federation's Frontier Troops in Turkmenistan* with Russia on Dec.23 1993. The treaty confirmed Russia's and Turkmenistan's wish for a joint defense of Turkmenistan's borderlands and the determination to implement a consistent border policy. This treaty provided a legal basis for Russia's military presence in Turkmenistan and an effective approach to enhance military cooperation with Turkmenistan, since the United Nations had recognized Turkmenistan permanently neutral on Dec.12<sup>th</sup> 1995. Turkmenistan would thus be a special case that could not be treated the same as other Central Asian states.

To protect the rights of Russian citizens, Russia signed the *Treaty Between the Russian Federation and Turkmenistan on the Legal Status of Russian Citizens Permanently Residing in Turkmenistan and Turkmen Citizens Permanently Residing in the Territory of the Russian Federation* with Turkmenistan on May. 18 1995, which

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<sup>24</sup> Treaty between the Russian and Uzbek Governments of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, May 30, 1992, *Dokipedia*.



defined the legal status of permanent residents in both countries, as well as regulated the rights and obligations of those residents. On Sep.7 1995, Russia and Tajikistan signed the *Treaty Between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Tajikistan for the Settlement of Issues of Dual Citizenship* in Moscow, acknowledging the legal status of people holding dual citizenships and identifying their rights and obligations.

Though Russia had an ambitious blueprint of maintaining its highly strategic partnerships with Central Asian states, only a few treaties were executed fully. Because of the poor economic situation and its initially Western-oriented foreign policy, Russia itself hardly had enough capital for fulfilling all the plans and agreements. In addition, Russia failed to protect the interests of the ethnic Russians living in Central Asia. The newly independent Central Asian states all implemented nationalization policies, under which the more than 10 million Russian people there experienced a sharp drop of living conditions and social status.<sup>25</sup> In spite of Russia's active engagement in promoting "Dual Citizenship" with Central Asian states, only Tajikistan agreed to sign such a protocol.

**Security:** Yeltsin knew well how important was the stability in Central Asia to Russia's border security. The overthrow of the Najibullah puppet regime and the founding of the Islamic State of Afghanistan in 1992 rid Afghanistan of Soviet and Russian control.<sup>26</sup> In the same year, civil war broke out in Tajikistan. Such turbulence worried Yeltsin about security in Central Asia; Russia subsequently worked towards

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<sup>25</sup> A.M. Vasil'ev, *Central Asia: Political and Economic Challenges in the Post-Soviet Era* (London: Saqi, 2001), 56.

<sup>26</sup> Mohammad Najibullah Ahmadzai, commonly known as Najibullah or Najib, was the President of Afghanistan from 1987 until 1992. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991, Najibullah was left without foreign aid. This, coupled with the internal collapse of his government, led to his ousting from power in April 1992.

the creation of an effective system for collective security. On May 15<sup>th</sup> 1992, in Tashkent, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Armenia signed the *Treaty of Collective Security (TCS)*, defining the obligation of every member state to provide military assistance whenever any member country is invaded. The member states, in accordance with article 2 of the TCS, took upon themselves the obligation to consult each other on all important international security issues in their interests, and to coordinate their positions. In case of the emergence of a threat to the security, territorial integrity and sovereignty of one or several of the states, the treaty members will immediately enact the mechanism of joint consultations in order to coordinate their positions and apply measures for elimination of the threat. Of fundamental importance is article 4 of the TCS, according to which an aggression against one of the parties to the Treaty will be regarded as an aggression against all states parties to TCS: In the case of an act of aggression against any of the member states, all other member states will provide to it all necessary assistance, including military assistance, and will as well support it with all available means in the implementation of the collective defense rights in accordance with the Article 51 of the UN Charter.<sup>27</sup>

By comparing article 4 of the TCS and article 5 of the NATO treaty, it is obvious that the two organizations, to some extent, resemble each other in their purpose of establishment. Like article 4 of the TCS, article 5 of the NATO treaty emphasizes that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an

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<sup>27</sup> Anatoliy A.Rozanov, Elena F. Dovgan, *Collective Security Treaty Organization 2002-2009*, The Geneva Center for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2010. 12

armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defense recognized by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.<sup>28</sup> In this sense, the Treaty of Collective Security was established, in essence, as a regional “defensive” organization. In 1993, defensive ministers of the member states signed the convention on establishing a unified air defense and missile attack warning systems.

Although the TCS was the only regional security cooperation organization in the mid-1990s, in practice, it had a very limited function and was far from being a mature, efficient security mechanism. The post-Soviet area lacked clear unifying external threats that should be countered in the framework of collective security cooperation. Meanwhile, also hindering the effectiveness of the TCS was the disagreement among the member states on several issues, which meant the TCS should, first of all, settle “internal” disputes before being fully put into function. Also lacking was the trust of these newly independent countries in Russia’s long-term objectives in the region; these were often seen through the prism of the possible recurrence of traditional “Russian imperialism”.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, the inefficiency of the TCS in regional affairs and the limited attention it received from the Central Asian states can be explained from a geopolitical perspective. Internally, Ukraine, a country hosting one of the largest

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<sup>28</sup> The North Atlantic Treaty, April 4 1949: [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_17120.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm)

<sup>29</sup> Anatoliy A. Rozanov, Elena F. Dovgan, *Collective Security Treaty Organization 2002-2009*, The Geneva Center for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2010. 14

military-industrial centers of the USSR which inherited infrastructure for production of various types of weapon (“heavy” intercontinental ballistic missiles, aircraft carrying cruisers, military transport aircraft, main battle tanks, etc.), was not a participant of the TCS. Two geopolitically strategic countries in the Caucasus, Azerbaijan and Georgia joined the organization in 1993 but renounced their membership in 1999. In the course of the Baltic countries’ rapid integration into the US-dominated security system, the TCS lost its military bases in the Baltic region. The low strategic importance of the TCS was only partially compensated by the participation of Belarus and Kazakhstan, since the former had a compact, capable armed force on the old Soviet western borderlands, while the latter possessed a huge military-strategic infrastructure, such as the Baikonur Cosmodrome, inherited from the former USSR. Externally, in the first half of the 1990s, thanks to the process of actively improving relations with NATO, the European Union (EU) and China, the post-Soviet areas did not experience serious external security threats. The most major alarming challenges were related to regional border disputes in Tajikistan, the Caucasus and Transnistria, the awful domestic economic conditions, the widespread decline of living standards and the aggravation of interethnic conflicts, which were not intended to be solved in the framework of the Treaty of Collective Security. In this sense, even though Moscow took active initiatives in enhancing regional security partnerships and building up collective military organizations, these were not mature enough to act as effectively as Russia has expected. In practice, during the period of “Indifference”, the multilateral security system was quite “loose” and disorganized.

Realizing the limitations of multilateral security cooperation, Russia instead turned to bilateral military collaboration, hoping thereby to promote the military unification of post-Soviet Eurasia. To achieve that long-term goal, Russia did the following: 1) from 1992 to 1994 Russia signed bilateral pacts with Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan for collectively safeguarding the southern border of the CIS. Russia was given the right by those governments to assist Kazakhstan's and Uzbekistan's frontier garrisons, directly control Turkmenistan's and Kyrgyzstan's as well as take full responsibility for Tajikistan's 201st Motorized Rifle Division.<sup>30</sup>

2) Russia preserved its military presence in Central Asia in various ways, such as protecting borders together with Turkmenistan's and Uzbekistan's military troops, renting and assisting the Kazakh government in advancing the Baikonur cosmodrome, the formation of 201st Motor Rifle Division in the context of the Tajikistani civil war, etc.

3) Russia also took an active part in mediating the civil war in Tajikistan. With aid from the entrance of Russian and Uzbek military forces into Tajikistan, the Leninabadi-Kulyabi Popular Front forces successfully routed the opposition by late 1992. The CIS formed the Collective Peacekeeping Force in Tajikistan, which was the core of the 201<sup>st</sup> Motorized Rifle Division. On April 19, 1995, the 201st launched an offensive into Gorno-Badach and advanced 20 kilometers, forcing the Islamists out of several bases. Military assistance from the CIS and Russia thus played a crucial role in preserving Tajikistan's secular regime and countering the opposition party (United

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<sup>30</sup> Fenghua, Liu, "Russia in Central Asia: The Evolution of Policies," *International Politics Studies* (2007), 168

Tajik Opposition), without which it would have been extremely difficult for the Tajik government to withstand the rebellion.<sup>31</sup> Alongside the efforts to resist attacks from the opposition party, Russia actively promoted dialogue between the government and the opposition, which resulted in the peaceful conclusion of the civil war with the *General Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and National Accord in Tajikistan* and the *Moscow Protocol* signed on Jun.27, 1997 in Moscow. The 1997 Agreement granted amnesty to the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) members, incorporated large numbers of those who had fought in the war into the national armed forces, and offered 30% of government posts at every level to the opposition.

**Strategy:** Throughout the “Indifference Period”, Russia implemented its foreign policy in Central Asia in the framework of the CIS. The “West-Oriented” strategy placed Central Asia in a subordinate position in Russian foreign policy, which weakened Russia’s traditional influences in Central Asia and drove the Central Asian states to expand their economic cooperation with more partners, such as Turkey, the United States and the Europe. Shortly after the dissolution of the USSR, Central Asia was expecting to benefit from the Russia-led economic and political unification of the CIS, which was largely ignored and barely put into practice. Though still economically backward, disappointed by Russia’s abandonment, post-Soviet Central Asia began actively extending economic relationships with countries like the United States and Turkey in the context of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), founded in 1961.

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<sup>31</sup> Vitaly V. Naumkin, *Militant Islam in Central Asia: The Case of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan* (Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies Working Paper Series, 2003), 13.

Besides cooperating with the United States and other European countries in the framework of OECD, Central Asia actively sought to build up collaborative relationships with NATO through military cooperation on training, exercises, disaster planning, science and environmental issues, professionalization, and policy planning when Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan joined NATO's Partnership for Peace Program (PfP) in 1994.<sup>32</sup>

To foster the economic unification of Central Asian countries, in March 1994, Nursultan Nazarbayev, the President of Kazakhstan, considering the necessity of the joint decision of Central Asian regional problems and coordination of efforts of the states of region for ensuring efficient socio-economic development, put forward the idea of establishing an integrated economic space in Central Asia, which was supported by Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan but did not envisage Russia's participation. The idea was put into practice by signing the agreement about the creation of a uniform economic space on April 30 1994. Such centrifugal tendencies reflected Central Asia's disappointment with Russian foreign policy in the mid-1990s.

Overall, Russia's strategic interests in Central Asia were seriously weakened during the "Indifference Period". First, Central Asia changed from Soviet republics into five independent countries that had their own plan of development and could not be easily controlled by Russia. Second, each Central Asian state built up its own military forces, which attenuated Russia's military presence there. Third, though the Central Asian states formed the southern border of the Soviet Union, they hardly had the ability to

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<sup>32</sup> "NATO Relations with Kazakhstan": [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_49598.htm?selectedLocale=en](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_49598.htm?selectedLocale=en), accessed on March 17, 2016

preserve and check the threat from the south. To ensure border security and protect Central Asia from being threatened by Islamic radicalism, Russia had no choice but to assist Central Asia in defending their borderlands. Such military costs were a big burden on Russia, in light of the country's fragile economic condition. In addition, Russia's traditional economic relations with Central Asia were badly damaged, as a result of which Russia lost important trade partners.

Generally, the "Indifference Period" witnessed Russia's a huge loss of Russian influence in Central Asia and the entrance of Western powers there. This would greatly hamper Russia's later return to Central Asia.

## **The Period of "Return": 1995-2001**

Since the mid-1990s, changes in international politics and geopolitics in Central Asia required Russia to revise its foreign policy along its historical borderlands: 1) Russia's "one-sided" pro-Western policy failed to prevent the process of NATO expansion eastward and Russia was not successfully accepted by the Western world. As a result of a number of policy disagreements between the US and Russia, bilateral relations soon deteriorated. This failure induced Russia once to review its policy towards the CIS countries. Only by establishing a CIS military community could Russia manage to resist the impending threats from the West.

2) Together with Central Asia's recovering economy, the US and European powers gradually penetrated into Russia's backyard. Democratic reforms were implemented at a rapid pace there. Even Uzbekistan started to pursue pro-US and anti-Russian



policies, which significantly endangered Russia's interests in its sphere of influence.

3) The security condition around Central Asia began to deteriorate because of the revival of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Worried about the spread of Islamic radicalism to the southern part of Russia via Central Asia, it was urgent for Russia to intensify military cooperation with the Central Asian states in preparing to fight terrorism and to completely eradicate the possibility of the spread of Islamic radicalism.

The turning point in Russian foreign policy toward Central Asia came on Sep.14 1995, when Yeltsin approved the decree on *The Establishment of the Strategic Course of the Russian Federation with Member States of the CIS*. While many of the objectives set forth in Yeltsin's decree had previously appeared in some forms under the general banner of "CIS integration," never before had they been assembled in such a comprehensive format and given the force of presidential edict. It crystallized Russia's determined attitude in response to NATO expansion eastward, and lent credence to the position of the CIS in Russian foreign policy as well as Russia's resolution to promote CIS integration. Two central ideas were emphasized in the decree: first of all, Russia's vital interests are concentrated in the territory of the CIS; beyond that, the essence of Russia's relations with the CIS is "an important factor" in the former's position vis-à-vis the international community. Yeltsin also stressed the guarantee of the rights of Russian people living in CIS countries as a principal basis of Russia's national security.

By issuing the decree, Russia explicitly identified the prior status of the CIS

countries in Russia's foreign policy and the goal of these relations to create "an economically and politically integrated alliance of states capable of achieving a worthy place in world society."<sup>33</sup> Russia also specified its role of "leading power in the formation of a new system of inter-state political and economic relations over the territory of the post-Soviet space."<sup>34</sup> In this way, Russia showed that it now preferred power-based concepts of state interests to ideologically informed concepts focused on integration into liberal Western economic, political and security circles.

The new policy demonstrated that Central Asia was no longer regarded as "an economic burden" for Russia, but rather an asset for the revival of Russia's global status: 1) Central Asia connects Europe and Asia, occupying the heart of the Eurasian territory. By controlling Central Asia, Russia could easily assure its dominance of Eurasian affairs. 2) The rich reserves of oil and natural gas resources in Central Asia provide Russia with energy and raw materials for economic development. 3) Central Asia has a population of approximately 60 million, which is potentially a huge market for Russian exports. According to statistics released by IMF for the direction of trade in each Central Asian state in 1995, Russia ranked first only in Kyrgyzstan's export recipients.<sup>35</sup> Thus, in order to exert greater influence in Central Asia, Russia should be prepared to take more active part in Central Asia's market. 4) By building up military collaboration with Central Asian military forces, Russia had a better position in exerting its political influence both inside and outside Central Asia. 5) Central Asia

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<sup>33</sup> The Establishment of the Strategic Course of the Russian Federation with Member States of the CIS, 1995.

<sup>34</sup> The Establishment of the Strategic Course of the Russian Federation with Member States of the CIS, 1995.

<sup>35</sup> International Monetary Fund, Kyrgyz Republic: Selected Issues and Statistical Appendix, October 2000.

has several strong industries, which were the pillars for exporting and would support Russian - Central Asian cooperation in industrial spheres.

For instance, Uzbekistan's economy heavily depended on cotton, of which Uzbekistan was the world's fifth largest producer and second biggest exporter. Uzbekistan has been producing natural gas for a long time, ranking about tenth in world production, and has significant oil resources.<sup>36</sup> Gold was also an important export earner. Other major mineral resources for export included copper, molybdenum, tungsten, and uranium.

Kazakhstan was the most economically developed country among the Central Asian states and thus has been relatively successful among CIS countries in attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), benefitting from its oil, gas and minerals sectors. As early as during the Soviet time, Chevron began negotiating for the Tengiz oil field in 1990, in what was the biggest FDI deal in the history of the USSR. The sales of 1995-1996, creation of a "one-stop" State Investment Committee in November 1996, and a generally more inviting environment encouraged greater FDI, which remained overwhelmingly in the energy and metals sectors. From 1996 to 2000 FDI exceeded a billion dollars a year and since 2001 it has exceeded two billion dollars, with over 85% going to natural-resource activities.<sup>37</sup> The most important sectors in industrial production are those based on the processing and use of fuel and mineral resources. First comes the fuel and power industry (42% in 1996); next place belongs to ferrous and non-ferrous metallurgy (23%). The third one is the food industry (14%), followed

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<sup>36</sup> Richard W.T. Pomfret, *The Economies of Central Asia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 69

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 79

by machine-building and metal works (7%), chemical and petrochemical industry (3.5%), production of construction materials (3.1%), light industry (2.4%) and timber and woodworking industry (0.9%).<sup>38</sup>

The political turbulence in Tajikistan during the civil war period, 1992-1997, had a significant negative effect on the country's national economy. Manufacturing output in 1997 was only 27% and agricultural output was only 50% of the 1990 level.<sup>39</sup> The output fell drastically especially for products requiring any kind of marketing chain, such as cotton, coal, cement, or commercially milled flour, and less pronounced for home-consumed crops, such as wheat. The only industrial enterprises that survived the 1990s were the aluminum smelter building as the centerpiece of the South Tajik Territorial Project in the final years of the Soviet Union, and the hydroelectric power generated from the Nurek power station, which was an important export.

Turkmenistan's economic growth was largely dependent on its rich oil and natural gas resources. Since neither Iran nor Russia has an interest in providing pipeline facilities for Turkmenistan's natural gas to become a competitor to their own natural-gas supplies to Turkish or European market, Turkmenistan still had to rely heavily on the Russian network to export natural gas to its destinations.

Kyrgyzstan's major natural resource is the water flowing down from some of the world's highest mountains, which made hydroelectric energy the main component of its export, accounting approximately 10-15%. Other industries ranking among the top

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<sup>38</sup> Richard W.T. Pomfret, *The Economies of Central Asia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 86

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 102

for export were machine building and food industry.<sup>40</sup>

Generally, during the “Return Period”, Russia pursued policies in Central Asia for promoting mainly bilateral cooperation with each state, with the ultimate goal of the economic and military unification in Eurasia. After carefully examining the different development patterns and conditions in each country, Russia no longer treated them as an undifferentiated whole but instead sought to apply deliberate and special strategies to each of them.

**Economy:** To compensate for the “economic loss” in Central Asia in the previous period, Russia expedited trade cooperation with the Central Asian states: 1) In October 1998, Russia signed the *Agreement on Economic Cooperation, 1998-2007* with Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, separately. Half a year later, the *Agreement on Inter-State Production Cooperation* and the *Agreement on Encouragement of Mutual Protection of Investment* was signed between Russia and Tajikistan. An *Agreement on Further Developing Mutual Trade, Technology and Humanitarian Communication* and *Agreement on Russian-Kyrgyzstan Economic Cooperation 2000-2007* were signed in 1999 and 2000, respectively. These agreements established the juridical basis for the development of mutual trade and technological, humanitarian exchanges between Russia and Central Asia. 2) Russia restored collaboration with Kyrgyzstan in uranium, nonferrous metals and rare metal industries, which were suspended after the dissolution of the USSR. Over 100 joint-venture enterprises were established in Tajikistan and 400 in Uzbekistan with the Russian government’s support.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 112

Being aware of the impossibility of CIS unification, Russia sought to expedite economic and humanitarian unification with Central Asian states: In March 1996, Russia signed the *Agreement on Promoting Unification in Economic and Humanitarian Spheres* with other Customs Union member, such as Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. This agreement reassured the four sides' consensus on the future establishment of a highly unified community among the member states. In November 1998, Tajikistan officially declared its intention to join the Customs Union. The financial crisis in 1998 throughout the whole world not only brought economic hardship, but also became a force propelling for economic unification within the Customs Union.

To mitigate the economic loss due to the financial crisis, Russia, together with other four countries, signed the *Agreement on A Customs Union and Common Economic Zone* in February 1999, in which they agreed to the following: (1) Common Economic Zone: the zone consisted of the territory of the Parties in which uniform mechanisms operate for regulating the economy, based on market principles and the application of harmonized legal norms; there is a single infrastructure, and a coordinated tax, monetary, credit, foreign exchange, financial, trade and customs policy applies, ensuring free movement of goods, services, capital and labor.

(2) Common Customs Zone: the zone consisted of the customs areas of the Parties, in respect of which the Parties apply a common customs tariff, uniform non-tariff regulatory measures and unified customs rules, and within which there is a single administration of customs services and customs controls on the internal customs

borders have been eliminated.

(3) Common (internal) market: the aggregate of economic relations in the Common Customs Zone;

(4) Common customs tariff: the coordinated schedule of uniform rates for import customs duties applied to goods imported into the customs areas of the States members of the Customs Union from third countries, systematized in conformity with the single nomenclature for goods applied in foreign economic activities by the Commonwealth of Independent States.

(5) Internal customs border: the limits of the customs area of each of the Parties that are at the same time the limits of the customs area of another of the Parties; (6) External customs border (external perimeter): the limits of the Common Customs Zone of the States members of the Customs Union which separate the areas of those States from those of States which are not members of the Customs Union.

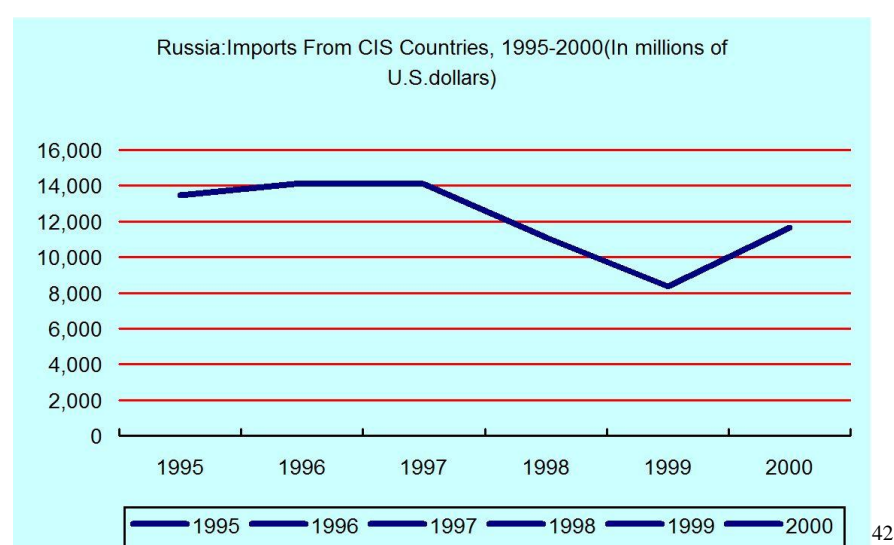
(7) Indirect taxes: value-added tax and excise duties on goods and services. In these ways, the infrastructure and principal terms of the Customs Union was settled. The structure of the Customs Union was the main framework for economic integration in post-Soviet areas and became a prototype for the later establishment of the Eurasian Economic Community. According to the principles of the Customs Union, the member states implemented a common tax rate and trading barriers for non-member countries. Thus the mutual gross trade rose from 13 billion US dollars in 1994 to 29 billion in 2000.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Richard W.T. Pomfret, *The Economies of Central Asia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 153

Clearly, the process of unification did not work smoothly. Certain problems kept occurring, such as the lack of efficiency in implementing rules, as well as some members' refusals to cooperate in specific events. The absence of an effective mechanism of cooperation prompted Russia to seek for a unification at higher level. In October 2000, Russia initiated the formation of the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC), creating common standards on import and export tariffs and trading legislation. Even though Russia's effort to promote a Eurasian economic community strengthened the economic relationship among member states, and to some extents, consolidated the centripetal force of Central Asian states towards Russian orbit, statistics showed that the tendency for economic unification was still uncertain. The volume of Russia's mutual trade with the Central Asian states even declined during the period of "Return". As shown in Table 4, Russia's imports from CIS declined from 1997 to 1999, and still hadn't recovered to the level in 1995 at the end of this period.

Table 4



<sup>42</sup> International Monetary Fund, *Russian Federation: Selected Issues and Statistical Appendix*, April 2002, 138



Since Belarus was the biggest contributor to this figure and Russia's imports from Belarus kept increasing from 1995 to 1998, Russia's economic loss in Central Asia was even greater. Figures from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the two major trading partner for Russia in Central Asia, spoke more directly to the problem.

Table 5



Table 6



Obviously, even though considerable effort has been devoted by the Russian

<sup>43</sup> International Monetary Fund, *Russian Federation: Selected Issues and Statistical Appendix*, April 2002, 145

<sup>44</sup> International Monetary Fund, *Kyrgyz Republic: Selected Issues and Statistical Appendix*, October 2000, 118

government to enhance multilateral and bilateral economic contacts, the worldwide 1998 financial crisis seriously stymied the process of economic unification. In this period, Russia had a more consistent economic plan in Central Asia and established several regional economic communities, which would be the main structure for promoting further economic cooperation in the Eurasian region. However, Russia failed to receive an immediate quid pro quo in this period as it had anticipated, largely because of the awful situation in domestic economies and the global market.

**Politics:** The loose connection among the CIS countries and the seemingly impossible unification in the post-Soviet area made the Kremlin realize that it was essential to apply different policies to each country according to their own domestic situation, rather than regarding all the post-Soviet republics as identical to each other. During this period, Russia didn't pursue its foreign policy to Central Asia within a multilateral CIS framework, but rather through a series of bilateral relationships. After the end of the Cold War, the five Central Asian had various developing patterns and different domestic political situations, which were carefully reexamined by Russia case by case. Being aware of its divergent interests in each country, Russia implemented different policies and mainly promoted bilateral cooperation, instead of multilateral.

Russia's return to Central Asia coincided chronologically with the appointment of Yevgeny Primakov as the Minister of Foreign Affairs in January 1996. Primakov's nomination marked a shift in Moscow's diplomatic priorities from West to East - to one that paid more attention to developing cooperation with the Central Asian states.

Economic difficulties in the second half of the 1990s drew Russia and the Central Asian states closer to each other politically, especially in the sphere of high-level visits.

1) Beginning in 1998, we see an increasing number of high-level exchanges and treaties signed by both sides. Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan signed the *Agreement on Deepening Unification in Economic and Humanitarian Spheres*, reiterating the four countries' belief in promoting regional integration and determination to expand their consensus in economy, politics, foreign policy, science, cultures and social construction. The four sides reached agreement on establishing a joint committee for integration, aiming at improving living standards, accelerating social progress, establishing common economic zone, protecting citizens' rights.

Meanwhile, the governments achieved consensus on a common direction, pace and length for economic reforms, identical policy of price formation, the elimination of price discrimination as well as the stabilization of exchange rates. On Oct.18<sup>th</sup> 1996, the Russian government signed several treaties with the Kazakh government on renting the Sary-Shagan, Emba testing grounds, the battle fields in No.929 national flight testing center, as well as the battle fields in No.4 national central interspecific range of Russia, located in the territory of Kazakhstan. The treaties stipulated the obligations and rights of the two sides, including establishing a joint committee by both sides, deadlines and methods for paying the rental, approaches and mechanism for settling down disputes, and shared ownership of all the outcomes produced by the testing grounds. On Jul.6<sup>th</sup> 1998, Russia and Kazakhstan signed the *Declaration on*

*Eternal Friendship and Alliance Aimed for the XXI Century*. Both sides' intention for deepening mutual trust was confirmed upon President Putin's first official visit to Kazakhstan in 2000.

Entering the period of "Return", the Uzbek government enhanced its contact with the Russians. The visit of the Russian Prime Minister, Viktor Chernomyrdin, to the republic in July 1995 was without doubt of immense political importance. Firstly, it partly neutralized the Uzbek leadership's "feelings of jealousy" towards Kazakhstan, which enjoys priority status for Moscow in its relationships with the Central Asian states.<sup>45</sup> Secondly, some of the fifteen documents signed during the visit paid special attention to the protocol on military cooperation. For example, consider the article on supplies of Russian arms and military hardware for the Uzbek army, which was already well-equipped: this allowed Turkmenistan to "inherit" Soviet weapons and munitions located in the Turkestan military district which, after the republic proclaimed independence, was transformed into the national armed forces, with its Tashkent headquarters becoming the Ministry of Defense of the republic. Some other agreements deserved mention: on the basic principles and directions of economic cooperation in 1996-1997; on the creation of an international radio-astronomic observatory and transnational Ilyushin financial-industrial group; on cooperation in the sphere of higher education; on combating crime; on the protection of industrial property; and on quality control of products supplied for the armed forces of Uzbekistan and Russia.

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<sup>45</sup> A.M. Vasil'ev, *Central Asia: Political and Economic Challenges in the Post-Soviet Era* (London: Saqi, 2001), 89

In March 1997, the Prime Ministers of Uzbekistan and Russia, Viktor Chernomyrdin and Utkir Sultanov, met in Moscow and signed an agreement on the basic principles and directions of the economic cooperation between Russia and Uzbekistan in 1998-2000, which included cooperation in agriculture, chemical and petrochemical industries, and non-ferrous metals. In early May 1998, President Karimov paid an official visit to Moscow, signing agreements on the 10-year program of economic cooperation and on Russia's purchase of 120 IL-76 and IL-114T cargo planes, manufactured in Uzbekistan.<sup>46</sup> Tashkent was especially active in building up bilateral cooperation and organizing high-level negotiations with Moscow, with the purpose of achieving economic prosperousness and to be recognized as a major power in Central Asia.

2) Settling controversial issues and enhancing mutual trust: Russia and Kazakhstan achieved consensus on simplifying the process of joint citizenship in 1995. In July 1998, when the presidents of both sides met in Moscow, they managed to sign an agreement on the delimitation of the northern part of the Caspian. But the Caspian issue, which was then the most acute problem between the two sides, was still far from being settled. Both parties divided only the seabed, leaving its surface under common control.

3) Russia actively expanded military and technological cooperation with Central Asian states. As a result of the two terrorist attacks in 1999 and 2000, Kyrgyzstan enhanced cooperation with Russia in counterterrorism in pursuit of more military aid

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<sup>46</sup> A.M. Vasil'ev, *Central Asia: Political and Economic Challenges in the Post-Soviet Era* (London: Saqi, 2001), 91

from Russia. Tajikistan also expected more military protection. In April 1999, Russia and Tajikistan signed the *Treaty on The Status and Conditions of Russian Military Bases in Tajikistan*. Two years later, Rahmon and Putin reached agreement on establishing Russian military bases in Tajikistan.

4) Russia's mediation in the Tajik civil war facilitated reconciliation and peace in Tajikistan. In December 1996, the Tajik government and the opposition party signed the *Protocol about the Function and Authority of the Committee of National Reconciliation* in Moscow. On Jun.27<sup>th</sup> in the same year, the *General Agreement on Peace and National Reconciliation* was signed in Moscow<sup>47</sup>, which marked the end of the civil war in Tajikistan. Undeniably, the Russian government played the principal role in preserving national stability in Tajikistan.

Since Uzbek citizens had strong feelings of nationalism and strove to get rid of Russian interference in domestic affairs, Russia treated Uzbekistan differently from other Central Asian states, with a more cautious attitude. To prevent losing Uzbekistan to other great powers, mainly the United States, Russia insisted on maintaining friendly partnership with Uzbekistan. Since 1994, after stabilizing its domestic political condition, Uzbekistan pursued pro-US policies and isolated itself from Russia's orbit. Since then, Russian-Uzbek relationship experienced an unstable circle of "alienation-intimacy-alienation". From 1995 to 1999, due to Russia's awful economic situation and the inability to provide financial aid, Uzbekistan started to move closer to the United States. The deadlock was broken in October 1998, when

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<sup>47</sup> Also known as the *Moscow Protocol*.

President Yeltsin first officially visited Uzbekistan and the two sides signed the *Agreement on Russian-Uzbek Eternal Friendship*. Meanwhile Russia, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan together issued the *Declaration on Cooperation in Striking Religious Radicalism*, agreeing on a joint effort to counter regional religious radicalism. However, Yeltsin's goodwill gesture didn't succeed in changing Uzbekistan's attitude towards Russia. In April 1999, Uzbekistan withdrew from the *Collective Security Treaty Organization*, which was a strong sign that it was breaking away from a Russia-oriented security system. The Batken terrorist attack in Kyrgyzstan in August 1999 alerted Uzbekistan about potential threat from Islamic radicalism, on which Uzbekistan could not work alone without Russia's assistance. Thus Russia began to rehabilitate its military and technological cooperation with Uzbek military forces in counterterrorism. Russian-Uzbek relation gradually began to improve after that.

Following the "thaw", in December 1999, the two countries signed the *Treaty on Deepening Bilateral Cooperation in Military Technologies*, as a compensation for the loss of military contact with Russia and other Central Asian states after its withdrawal from the CSTO. The treaty proposed bilateral cooperation in military-technological, military-cosmonautic, military-education spheres. However, the treaty was still a very rough framework and was far from practical, since it only demonstrated the two sides' general intention for military cooperation and assumption of further partnership in the security sphere, but it mentioned little about pragmatic military exercises or communication. No specific method for enhancing exchange for military education, no concrete mechanism for protecting the rights of the soldiers and their families, no

juridical regulation for preserving each side's military confidentiality was promised in this treaty. Against this background, the treaty did little to restore Uzbekistan's military connection with Russia and other Central Asian countries. Though Uzbekistan was reluctant to return to Russia's orbit, the Russian government didn't give up establishing close partnership with the Uzbek government. In 2000, when Vladimir Putin was elected as the Russian president, he first visited Uzbekistan and achieved agreement for mutual assistance with president Karimov in national defense and security affairs. But what Russia could provide was far from Uzbekistan's expectation. Most of the military aid were limited to small-scale weapons or ammunition. As a result of that, Russian - Uzbek relationship again cooled down. The turning point occurred at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: Uzbekistan started to take part in military exercises held on Russia's initiative and under Russia's command, together with other three Central Asian members of the *Collective Security Treaty Organization*. Upon president Karimov's visit to Russia in 2000, he emphasized that Russia was still Uzbekistan's principal strategic partner.

The situation in Turkmenistan was totally different from other Central Asian states. Since Turkmenistan had declared itself to be permanently neutral in global affairs, it automatically isolated itself from the CIS system and other regional organizations initiated by Russia. To exert its influence, Russia chose to expand economic cooperation with Turkmenistan, especially in oil and natural gas transport and border defense. At the same time, Turkmenistan sought to lessen Russia's impact on exactly these two aspects. In September 1999, Turkmenistan unilaterally denied the



effectiveness of Russian-Turkmenistan treaties on the joint defense of Turkmenistan's borderlands, which was signed by both sides in 1993. In the same year, Russian military forces withdrew from Turkmenistan. To weaken dependence on Russia for oil and gas transport, Turkmenistan hoped to build up new pipelines, bypassing Russia's territory. On February 19, 1999, PSG International, a global pipeline development company, signed an agreement with the government of Turkmenistan to lead the development of the \$2.5 billion Trans-Caspian pipeline project. The Government of Turkmenistan selected the company as consortium leader in cooperation with the Government of Turkey.<sup>48</sup> PSG International, jointly owned by GE Capital Structured Finance Group and Bechtel Enterprises, was designated to lead the project to develop, finance, build, operate, and maintain a major Trans-Caspian gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to Turkey via the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Bechtel was designated to provide engineering, procurement, and construction services and GE Capital Structured Finance Group was designated to provide financing services. The Turkmen and Turkish presidents and Turkey's Minister of Fuel and Energy Resources also signed a separate agreement on natural gas exports to Turkey beginning in 2002. Turkmenistan was eventually to export 30 billion cubic meters of gas annually via the Trans-Caspian pipeline, of which 14 billion cubic meters was destined for European markets. However, such attempts were obstructed by Russia's "Energy Diplomacy" with countries like Azerbaijan and Turkey. Because of Russian and Iranian opposition to the project, an unresolved legal dispute over Caspian Sea territorial boundaries and

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<sup>48</sup> Richard W.T. Pomfret, *The Economies of Central Asia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 31

a gas discovery on Azerbaijan's Shah Deniz field, the submarine pipeline project was shelved in the summer of 2000 and only the South Caucasus Pipeline project continued. Russia's "Energy Diplomacy" in the "Trans-Caspian Pipeline" event demonstrated Russia's uncompromising policy in Turkmenistan to prevent it from escaping Russia's control on Eurasian regional affairs.

**Security:** More than five years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the former Soviet republics pursued divergent strategies and foreign policies in terms of regional security issues. Countries like Georgia and Ukraine were actively seeking to be integrated into the Western world and shake off Russia's intervention in its domestic or foreign affairs. Being clearly aware of the impossibility of the unification of CIS countries in the short term, Russia began to attach more and more importance to the establishment of a unified community with Central Asian countries. Thus the *Treaty of Collective Security* began to create institutions that were independent from the CIS system. Except for the Council of Collective Security (CCS) established earlier, the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs (CMFA), the Council of Ministers of Defense (CMD), the Committee of Secretaries of the Security Councils (CSSC) and the Secretary-General were built up one after the other. In April 1999, the Protocol on prolongation of the Collective Security Treaty and the plan for the basic measures of the second phase of forming the collective security system was signed by six of the TCS members (except for Azerbaijan, Georgia and Uzbekistan). In 1999 and 2000, the number of serious religious radicalism attacks in Central Asia increased sharply, which demonstrated the Central Asian states' lack of ability to maintain national

stability and regional security. The Russian government took the opportunity to expand counterterrorist cooperation with these countries in the framework of TCS. In the autumn of 1999 and spring of 2000, the TCS members held two large-scale joint anti-terrorist military exercises in southern Kyrgyzstan.

In May 2000, the Minsk meeting among member states set striking terrorism, radicalism, drug smuggling and transnational crimes as the principal missions for the TCS. A new negotiation institution - the Secretariat of International Security Meeting, was also established in Minsk. The new institution was devoted to coordinate issues on countering international or transnational terrorism. In the Bishkek session of the Collective Security Council in 2000, the parties signed an agreement on the status of the forces of the collective security system and adopted a plan for the main activities in the creation of the collective security system 2001-2005.<sup>49</sup> The agreement regulates the legal aspects of hosting collective forces on the territories of the states participating in the framework of *Treaty on Collective Security*. The plan was a complex of interconnected steps in key area, such as in political and military-organizational spheres, for implementation of the treaty and for cooperation in countering new threats and challenges.

In the Yerevan session of the Collective Security Council in May 2001, the heads of states of the Protocol signed an essential document on the procedures for creation and function of the forces of the collective security system. In this regard, the member states decided to establish an intergovernmental body for military command of the

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<sup>49</sup> Anatoliy A. Rozanov, Elena F. Dovgan, *Collective Security Treaty Organization 2002-2009*, The Geneva Center for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2010, 18.

collective security system. This body was designed to solve problems in the practical creation of the regional systems for collective security and the organization of their interaction.

**Strategy:** Russia's "one-sidedness" in the previous period proved to be far from successful. Russia failed to be accepted by the United States or Europe and wasn't even recognized as their strategic partner in the international arena. Such unsuccessful pro-Western policy made Russia again turn to its neighbors – the "post-Soviet" states.

But the Russia-dominated CIS system did not evolve towards unification as Russia expected. At the end of the "Indifference Period", after a brief time of economic recovery and adjustment to international society, the interests of each former Soviet republic began to diverge. They implemented different foreign policies with regards to their own interest in both international and domestic affairs. Russia realized the strong centrifugal force within the CIS system and its inability to integrate the whole post-Soviet territory. Against the background of the impossibility of creating a "Great Russia" in the short term, Russia opted for a smaller "Eurasian community", which included its principal and loyal partners like Belarus, Armenia and the Central Asian countries. Thus, Russia has paid more attention to preserve close bilateral partnerships and strategic relationships with the several Central Asian states.

In the "Return Period", Central Asia was no longer treated as just a part of the CIS system, but rather a vital region that Russia could not afford to lose. Different policies were implemented by Russia according to the specific economic, political and security situation in each country. For Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, who were

quite close partners, Russia reinforced multilevel cooperation, together with other partners such as Belarus. Russia exerted significant effort in promoting regional unification among those countries, especially in developing a common economic zone and reaching consensus on a consistent foreign policy. Though Uzbekistan, which was originally resistant to Russia's impact, was unstoppable in leaving the Russia-dominated collective security system, Russia still took advantage of Uzbekistan's fragile defensive capability and tried to prevent it from moving closer to the United States by prompting military-technical cooperation. Even though the signing of the *Russian-Uzbek Agreement on Military-Technical Cooperation* was far from practical, the two sides at least demonstrated interest in long-term collaboration in military training and technological exchanges. For Turkmenistan, which had declared itself permanently neutral, Russia actively made use of its military forces to help Turkmenistan defend its borderlands. Russia was also uncompromising in the way that it prevented Turkmenistan from becoming independent of Russia's oil and natural gas pipelines.

Generally, Russia was in desperate need of Central Asia's support to revive its great power in the international stage, hoping to build up a Eurasian community, over which Russia has absolute control. Even though Central Asian states have been more or less successfully in shaking off Russia's influence, the unstable economy and vulnerable border were their "Achilles' Heels". So Central Asia was still lying under Russia's dominance.

## **The Period of “Rehabilitation”: 2001- Present**

Entering the new century, the terrorist attack in the United States on September 11 2001 shocked the whole world. President Putin was the first to call President Bush and promised to provide military assistance if needed. With Russia’s permission, the US military forces were allowed to enter Central Asia and build up transportation for military supply to Afghanistan. However, President Putin did not foresee that the US entrance into Russia’s backyard would later so radically change the geopolitics there.

After negotiation, Russia and the Central Asian states issued a joint declaration allowing US and its allies’ troops to use air corridors and airports for humanitarian aid, rescue or military investigation. According to Karimov, by publicly supporting Central Asia’s granting military access rights to the United States, Putin wanted to mediate US-Central Asian cooperation in the hope of gaining concessions on issues such as its war in Chechnya and US plans for National Missile Defense.<sup>50</sup> Central Asia was expecting quid pro quo from the United States. Among them, Uzbekistan was the most eager state, for the sake of pursuing security cooperation with the United States in its battle with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a militant Islamic group that had forged ties to Al-Qaeda during the rise of the Taliban. Other Central Asian states also anticipated economic incentives and support of the political status quo by the United States.

To Putin’s disappointment, the United States and allies did not conduct their

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<sup>50</sup> Dmitri Trenin. "Russia and Central Asia." in *Central Asia: Views from Washington, Moscow, and Beijing* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2007), 103

anti-terrorist operations in the framework of the *Collective Security Treaty Organization*, but instead, created direct military cooperation with Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Russia's affirmative attitude towards the US military presence in Central Asia was soon replaced by a deep anxiety about the rapidly increasing military threats to Russia. To make the situation worse, in 2002 the United States withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, despite vocal Russian objections. At the Prague Summit in 2002, NATO made the decision to admit seven new members, including Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, which became the first post-Soviet states to join a West-led military alliance.

The issue of "international terrorism" presented a unique opportunity for reestablishing close ties with the Central Asian states. Not only had Russia launched its new military campaign in Chechnya under the banner of fighting terrorism, but the 1999 incursions of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) into Batken, Kyrgyzstan, and the Taliban's gains in Afghanistan were causing grave concern throughout the region. To demonstrate its unshakeable position in Central Asian security system, Russia continued to promote anti-terrorist military exercises in the framework of the *Collective Security Treaty Organization*. Moscow also took advantage of the terrorism issue as a platform to reengage with Uzbekistan, which had been trying to escape from Russia's orbit for some time. However, Russia failed to create a counterterrorist union for the CIS, nor did the CIS antiterrorist center, located in Moscow, function effectively. The continuously expanding US military presence in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and the increasing amount of financial aid to

Central Asia consolidated the United States' influence there. The fragile Russian-Uzbekistan relationship began to deteriorate while Russia's faithful partner Tajikistan also implemented a more pragmatic and balanced policy towards the US.<sup>51</sup>

The "9/11" event was a principal incident that fundamentally changed Russia's strategic relations with Central Asian states in the following ways: 1) "9•11" made antiterrorism the single most important goal of foreign policy for the United States. Putin's cooperative attitude confirmed the US military forces' entrance into the Central Asian region.

2) The United States, taking advantage of this opportunity, consolidated its military presence in Central Asia, which had significantly altered the geopolitics in the Eurasian zone. Central Asia has provided the US military bases, transit routes for fuel and supplies, and border cooperation for Operation Enduring Freedom. Thus Central Asia was no longer simply a Russian-dominated security system, but one with considerable U.S. influence as well.

3) The external security condition improved after the collapse of Taliban regime in Afghanistan, which, to great extent, weakened Central Asia's dependence on Russian in terms of border security. Against such background, Central Asian states started to implement a more balanced and pragmatic foreign policy. Russia's superiority in Central Asia's foreign policy declined.

The US's ambitious venture into Eurasia induced Russia to adjust its policy in Central Asia, as it aimed to strengthen bilateral and multilateral military cooperation

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<sup>51</sup> Fenghua, Liu, "Russia in Central Asia: The Evolution of Policies," *International Politics Studies* (2007), 178



in the framework of the CSTO; maintain Russia's dominant role in Central Asian affairs; reinforce economic, political and security collaboration with Central Asia to counter the US's expanding influence; and support Central Asia in resisting the "Color Revolution" promoted by the US, thereby preserving the status quo.

The year 2001 was be an unusual period for both Russia and Central Asia. In September 2001, China was admitted to the World Trade Organization (WTO), which marked the beginning of China's rapid integration into the world market. The economic boom in the beginning of the new era enabled China to seek for more economic benefits in its near neighborhood. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), originally the "Shanghai Five", was established at China's initiative. This organization was the only regional institution that included almost all principal countries in central Eurasia. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization was originally created for a joint effort to strike the "Three Evils": separatism, terrorism and extremism. China's primary security goal in Xinjiang has been to clamp down on the activities of Uighur movements, viewed as threats to its territorial integrity, while it has upgraded the surrounding region's infrastructure to promote the regional economic development that it viewed as key to ensuring future political stability. China has implemented many of these policies through the SCO, thereby lending a multilateral face to these regional initiatives.<sup>52</sup>

Though the Chinese government currently had no obvious intention or plan of sending military forces into the Central Asian region, it was deeply attracted by the

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<sup>52</sup> Huasheng Zhao. "Central Asia in China's Diplomacy." in *Central Asia: Views from Washington, Moscow, and Beijing* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2007), 152

rich oil, gas resources and huge market there. By 2001, China's import and export quota with the SCO members reached 12 billion US dollars, achieving a 20% increase from the previous year.<sup>53</sup> According to statistics released by the Ministry of Commerce of China, before 2002, China has invested totally 945.4 million US dollars in SCO member states: 270 million in Russia, 650 million in Kazakhstan, 300 million in Kyrgyzstan, 3.4 million in Tajikistan, 55 million in Uzbekistan.<sup>54</sup> The Chinese investment in Kazakhstan even surpassed that in Russia. China's seemingly friendly quest for economic partnership and non-aggressive cooperation was enthusiastically welcomed in Central Asia, which could bring Central Asia huge economic benefits while not interfering in Central Asia's domestic politics.

The United States' intent to turn its ad hoc military presence in Central Asia into a permanent one, as well as China's active participation in the Central Asian market, caused anxiety in the Kremlin. President Putin realized that Central Asia was no longer a "forgotten region", but rather, a heatedly contested place full of the dynamics of "Great Game" among the United States, Russia and China. The remarkable events of 2001 reinforced Russia's determination to rehabilitate its traditional influence in Central Asia and to preserve its privileged position in Central Asian affairs in all aspects.

**Economy:** To exert more economic influence, Russia expanded the scale of mutual trade with Central Asian states, mostly bilaterally: 1) Enhancing economic ties. In 2002, the volume of Russia's trade with Central Asian states was 5.464 billion US

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<sup>53</sup> Zhuangzhi Sun, Economic Cooperation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Achievements and Prospects, *International Observation*, No.3 2011, 25

<sup>54</sup> Data from: <http://www.mofcom.gov.cn/data>, accessed on January 22, 2016.

dollars, in 2003 it climbed to 7.088 billion, 10.463 billion in 2004. In 2005, it reached 13.227 billion. The scale of mutual trade increased by 142% over the first four years of the “Rehabilitation Period”.<sup>55</sup>

2) Intensifying cooperation in energy sectors. In April 2003, Russia signed an agreement on 25-year cooperation in natural gas transportation with Turkmenistan. In the same year, Gazprom signed a natural gas provision treaty with the Kyrgyz government. Upon President Putin’s visit to Tashkent, Russia promised Uzbekistan 2.5 billion dollars’ investment in supporting the Russian Lukoil oil company and Gazprom’s participation in oil gas production and pipelines construction in Uzbekistan, assisting Uzbekistan in developing energy sectors. By doing so, Russia controlled a considerable part of energy extraction, production and transportation in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, ensuring its monopoly in the energy networks in Central Asia. 3) Helping Central Asia in overcoming its economic difficulties. In October 2004, a complementary *Agreement on Debt Restructuring of the Republic of Tajikistan 2002, Agreement on Forgiving Debt of Tajikistan in Advance, Agreement on Russian-Tajik Labor Service and Inter-State Protection of Citizens’ Rights, Agreement on Long-Term Cooperation Between Tajik Government and the United Company RUSAL*, were signed by the Russian and Tajik governments. Russia not only generously forgave Tajikistan’s huge debt, which was 300 million dollars, but also solved the problem of protecting the rights of Tajik guest workers in Russia. Moreover, Russia ensured Tajikistan more than two-billion investments in the following five

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<sup>55</sup> Fenghua, Liu, “Russia in Central Asia: The Evolution of Policies,” *International Politics Studies* (2007), 187

years. 4) On Oct.18<sup>th</sup> 2004, in the Dushanbe meeting, Russia managed to be admitted as an official member of the Central Asian Cooperation Organization, which was a regional institution led solely by Central Asian states. The establishment of this organization was viewed by Russia as a portent of de-Russification in Central Asia. By joining this organization and successfully incorporating it into the Eurasian Economic Community, led by Russia, Russia kept itself from being isolated from Central Asian affairs.

**Politics:** From 2001 to the end of 2003, the US military forces entered Central Asia and actively developed military cooperation with Central Asian states, while Russia remained in a defensive position. However, the success of the “Rose Revolution” in Georgia and the germination of similar color revolutions in CIS countries caused alarm in Moscow. The Central Asian states realized that one of the United States’ principal goals for entering Central Asia was to sponsor democratic reforms and overthrow the current regime; Russia, on the other hand, actively supported Central Asian countries in resisting the “Color Revolutions”. Fearing domestic political instability, Central Asian states gradually changed their balanced foreign policies to pro-Russian ones. Having gained Central Asia’s trust, Russia gradually grasped the initiative in competing with the United States.

Russia understood well that the key element of expanding its influence in Central Asia was to preserve the status quo and support pro-Russian governments. Any attempt to threaten the regimes in place would result in an irreparable loss of Russian influence in Central Asia. In the parliamentary and presidential elections in

Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, Russia lent strong support to the ruling authorities by organizing high-level visits, promoting economic collaboration, providing financial aid and dispatching observing groups, etc. To prevent too much intervention in Kyrgyz presidential election, Russia acted cautiously and maintained a close relationship with Bakiyev's government. Russia's affirmative actions in support of its Central Asian partners, who had their own fights against domestic opposition parties, was highly appreciated by the Central Asian regimes.

One of Russia's greatest achievements in opposing the United States' "Export of Revolution" policy was the shift of Uzbekistan's foreign strategy. The "9/11" event brought Uzbekistan and the US closer. The *United States-Uzbekistan Declaration on the Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Framework* was signed by the two sides in March 2002 to improve bilateral relations. Uzbekistan pursued a "Bases for Aid"<sup>56</sup> policy, which meant exchanging military bases for large-scale economic sponsorship and protection of Uzbekistan's current regime from the United States. However, things went against Karimov's wish. The United States only provided limited amount of financial aid, while at the same time repeatedly accusing Uzbekistan of violating human rights and suppressing reforms. To prevent further democratic infiltration, the NGOs from Western countries that supported the opposition parties were viewed by Karimov as the US's agencies for inciting "Color Revolutions" in Uzbekistan. In 2003, the representative office of Soros Fund Management was shut down and expelled from Uzbekistan; in 2004, three American NGOs, including the National Democratic

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<sup>56</sup> Fenghua, Liu, "Russia in Central Asia: The Evolution of Policies," *International Politics Studies*, 2007, 195

Institution, were warned not to support any opposition party in any form. In response to Uzbekistan's resistant attitude towards the American NGOs, the Congress of the United States reduced its financial aid from 86 million dollars in 2003 to 18 million in 2004. After that, the US-Uzbekistan relationship began to cool down. After a series of terrorist attacks in Uzbekistan in March 2004, Karimov realized the importance of getting close to Russia and the necessity of Russia's cooperation in antiterrorism. In April 2004, president Karimov visited Moscow, negotiating with Putin about strengthening bilateral cooperation in economic and security spheres. In June, Putin visited Uzbekistan and signed the *Treaty of Russia-Uzbekistan Strategic Partnership* with Karimov. According to the treaty, Russia had the right to use Uzbekistan's military resources under emergent circumstance and was responsible for training military officers for Uzbekistan. In return, Uzbekistan promised to buy weapons and instruments from Russia.

On May 12, 2005, in the city of Andijan, a gang of Islamic extremists stole military weapons, released prisoners in jail, captured state government building and organization protests on streets, publicly forcing the Karimov government to resign. President Karimov aggressively dispatched military forces to suppress the rebellion, which caused more than 700 deaths and thousands of injuries. Such brutal suppression caused dissatisfaction in the West and resultant diplomatic isolation. The Western press fiercely accused Karimov of cruelty and violation of human rights. As more details of the scale of the shooting emerged, the State Department finally listened to the call of human rights and insisted on an international investigation. Furthermore,

the United States supported the UN's decision to transport the refugees from Andijan, who had been living in southern Kyrgyzstan, to Romania rather than turn them over to Uzbek security services for interrogation. Unlike the West's critical voices, Russia soon demonstrated its support for Karimov's position and agreed with the Uzbek government's statement that the Islamic Party of Liberation was the main sponsor of this rebellion, stating that the "Andijan Event" was created by external terrorist parties. Uzbekistan was grateful for Russia's support and was disappointed in the US's request for an independent international investigation of the "Andijan Event". Since then, Uzbekistan strengthened its determination to alienate itself from the US and pursue a pro-Russian political routine. Upon Karimov's visit to Russia in July, 2005, he several times expressed his gratitude to Putin and affirmed that Uzbekistan would shift its priority of foreign policy from the United States to Russia. President Putin succeeded in persuading Karimov to expel the US military from Uzbekistan and reconsider its treaty with the United States about the use of the Hanabade military base for 25 years. After the "Andijan Event" the US-Uzbekistan relationship deteriorated. Russia took advantage and tried to draw Uzbekistan to its side, excluding US influence there.

Furthermore, the Astana Declaration, issued upon the meeting of the heads of the SCO member states on July 5, 2005, requested that the Western countries confirm the deadline for withdrawing military troops from Central Asia. With Russia's support, Uzbekistan officially demanded the United State to withdraw from its military bases in 180 days.

In the same year, after the US military forces' withdrawal from Uzbekistan,

Presidents Putin and Karimov signed the *Russia-Uzbekistan Treaty of Alliance Relations*. Growing camaraderie between Uzbekistan and Russia led to the signing of the treaty November 14, 2005. Article 2 of the Uzbek-Russia treaty stipulated that: "If an act of aggression is committed against one of the sides by any state or group of states, this will be viewed as an act of aggression against both sides, the other side will provide necessary assistance, including military assistance, as well as giving aid through other means at its disposal." Article 3 of the treaty stipulates that: "In case of emergence of a situation, which, according to the view of one of the sides, may pose a threat to peace, disturb peace or touch upon the interest of its security, as well as emergence of threat against one of the sides of the act of aggression, the sides would immediately would bring into force the mechanism of corresponding consultations for agreeing positions and coordinating practical measures for regulating such a situation." And Article 4 opens up the possibility of a Russian base in Uzbekistan. It provides for granting "the use of military facilities" on the territories of the signatories to each other "when necessary and on the basis of separate treaties" in order to ensure security and maintain peace and stability.

Judging from the content of the Treaty, the *Russia-Uzbekistan Treaty of Alliance Relations* was of greater strategic importance than the *Russia-Uzbekistan Treaty of Strategic Partnership* signed in 2004, upgrading the strategic partnership to political military alliance relations. By doing so, Russia placed Uzbekistan, which was strongly criticized and isolated by the West, under its protection. In February and April, 2006, Uzbekistan's congress and Russia's State Duma respectively approved the



*Russia-Uzbekistan Treaty of Alliance Relations*. Meanwhile, Russia actively sought to include Uzbekistan into the *Collective Security Treaty Organization*. On August 16, 2006, the member states of the Eurasian Economic Community signed documents accepting Uzbekistan as an official member of the CSTO. In December, 2006, the Uzbek congress approved the act of restoring Uzbekistan's legal membership in the CSTO. Uzbekistan's return to the Collective Security Treaty Organization greatly enhanced Russia's privileged status in Central Asia and expanded its range of influence.

On October 7, the Petersburg Summit of the Central Asian Cooperation Organization decided that member states be integrated into the Eurasian Economic Community, dominated by Russia. President Karimov soon stated that Uzbekistan wished to join the Eurasian Economic Community and expressed his willingness to establish an alliance with Russia. The incorporation of the Central Asian Cooperation Organization, aiming at jointly managing Central Asian affairs free of Russia's interference, into the Eurasian Economic Community, was a remarkable event for Central Asia. It signaled the completion of integrating the Central Asian states into the orbit of Russia-dominated economic unification.

Politically, Russia's overwhelmingly principal status in Central Asia faced strong challenge from the United States at the beginning of the "Rehabilitation Period", especially after the entrance of US military troops into the Central Asian states. By providing financial aid and enhancing military cooperation, the United States managed to export democratic revolution and promote reforms in Central Asia.

Against Central Asia's wish, when Islamic radical rebellions came, the United States not only refused to provide any military assistance, but also criticized them for their brutal actions. The Central Asian states soon realized the US's ultimate goal and chose to lean towards Russia's protection. Thus, Russia regained trust from Central Asia and rehabilitated its political prestige.

**Security:** Prior to the United States' military entrance into Central Asia and the rising Chinese participation in the Central Asian market, Russia had absolute control in security affairs and was the Central Asian states' undisputed partner in counterterrorism and military exercises. Now that Central Asia had other choices for military collaboration and protection, Russia's dominance was completely altered by the United States' and China's presence. Putin knew quite well that if Russia did not take action to respond to the US's intervention in Central Asian affairs, it would face the potential danger of losing Central Asia.

Thus, several measures were taken by the Russian government to reinforce the mechanism of the *Collective Security Treaty Organization* and enhance its military control in Central Asia: 1) Upgrading the CSTO into a regional institution to consolidate its function in resisting non-traditional security threats. In May, 2002 in celebrating the ten-year anniversary of the signing of the *Collective Security Treaty*, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan signed a joint declaration about restructuring the Collective Security Treaty into the Collective Security Treaty Organization. The declaration regulated that member states had the missions to resist external threats, to deal with terrorism, illegal drug smuggling, transnational crimes

and other crimes that could threaten national, regional or international security. The CSTO was designed to coordinate a mechanism for diplomacy, security, counterterrorism among member states. In the following October, the treaty about the regulations and the legal status of the CSTO was signed. In the Dushanbe meeting in April 2003 the heads of the CSTO members decided to found a Joint Staff and a Permanent Council, in order to regularly negotiate over military and political issues.

2) Expanding and consolidating Russia's military presence in Central Asia. To counter the continuing NATO expansion in post-Soviet area, Russia realized the necessity to develop a regional collective security force in direct reaction to the Western alliance. Moscow later focused on developing the CSTO's Collective Rapid Reaction Force (CRRF), an integrated group of 15,000 troops made up of 10,000 Russian troops, 3,000-4,000 Kazakhstani troops, and one battalion from each of the organization's other members.<sup>57</sup> Russia also used the organization to provide the legal framework to establish new Russian military bases in the region. According to the resolution of the Collective Security Council on May 25, 2001 and the treaty about the Russian garrisons in Kyrgyzstan on September 22, 2003, Russia set up the Kant Air Base in Kyrgyzstan on October 23, 2003. The base acted as a *Collective Rapid Reaction Force (CRRF)* in Central Asia, that was responsible for assisting the CIS Joint Air Defense System and protecting Kyrgyzstan's air security from terrorist operations. In 2004, Moscow and Dushanbe concluded a series of agreements that formalized the presence of the Russian 201<sup>st</sup> Motorized Division in Tajikistan, in

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<sup>57</sup> Alexander Cooley. *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 207

exchange for Moscow writing off Tajik debt and promising to invest in hydropower projects. The Russia-Georgia War in 2008 confirmed Russia's determination to strengthen the function of CSTO and CRRF to combat NATO expansion. Thus in 2011, Moscow and Dushanbe declared to extend their agreements on Russia's military base in Kyrgyzstan for another 49 years.

3) Deepening political and technological cooperation among member states. Russia decided to sell weapons and military instruments to other CSTO members at favorable prices. In June 2004 the CSTO Astanan meeting ascertained the developing direction of this organization, including use of military resources, enhancing the construction of military forces, free training for government officials in security spheres. The aforementioned measures demonstrated that Russia strove to enhance its dominant role in guaranteeing regional stability in Central Asia and maximize the function of CSTO in Eurasian affairs. However, the effectiveness of CSTO and the CRRF was strongly affected by the presence of military forces of the NATO anti-terrorist alliance after the "9/11 event". All these factors hampered the process of military unification in Central Asia in the framework of the *Collective Security Treaty Organization*.

**Strategy:** Central Asia is historically an underestimated region. It was the last part to be integrated into the Soviet Union and was widely considered within Russia's dominance after the collapse of the USSR. At the early stage of the dissolution, neither the United States nor China had any specific plan in Central Asia, acknowledging the fact that Central Asia should be within Russia's sphere of influence and barely bore any US or Chinese interest. Due to its poor economic

situation and the lack of ability for self-protection, the Central Asian states had to rely on Russia in exchange for financial aid and military assistance. Otherwise, the ruling authority would be significantly challenged by the Islamic extremists or domestic opposition parties. Besides, geopolitically speaking, Central Asia had no choice but to collaborate with Russia, which was then the only great power around. Though Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan border with China, the Chinese government had little interest in investing in Central Asia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; instead, it was more fascinated by the huge market in the West.

Since 2001 more and more importance was attached to Central Asia in the global stage. The “9/11” event made international counterterrorism the single major mission for US foreign policy. In support of troops in Afghanistan, the United States actively sought military cooperation and establishment of military bases in Central Asia, as well as building up routes for transporting military supplies via Central Asia. Overnight, Central Asia switched to an essential checkpoint for global antiterrorist operations. In exchange for military support, the United States promised Central Asia considerable amount of financial aid and military protection, which Central Asia saw as a basis for escaping Russia’s economic and political monopoly.

The establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) affirmed Central Asia’s resolution to pursue more balanced and pragmatic foreign policy. Troubled by terrorist movements in Xinjiang, which has long borderlands with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the Chinese government decided to set up a regional organization in fighting against the terrorists, which later became the SCO.

Central Asia, having three states bordering with Xinjiang for 2,800 kilometers, was the most ideal partner for China. Thus in the first meeting of the SCO in 2001, all member states signed the *Shanghai Treaty on Striking Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism*, which defined countering the “Three Evils” as the primary purpose of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. China has regularly organized bilateral and multilateral anti-terrorist exercises with SCO countries. In 2002, China held its first exercise with Kyrgyzstan. Throughout the following years, Shanghai Cooperation Organization has successfully held more than 20 bilateral or multilateral exercises, initiated by the Chinese government. Even though China has never expressed any intention for military entrance into Central Asia, the ever-intensifying economic and military contact between Central Asia and China caused Moscow anxiety. Putin realized that significant challenges had occurred in the process of Russia’s returning to Central Asia and more attention should be paid to this region to rehabilitate Russia’s traditional influence there.

During the “Rehabilitation Period” Russia developed a consistent policy towards Central Asia, affirming its intention to return to the post-Soviet area and rehabilitate its traditional influence. To achieve its ambition in Central Asia, Russia reinforced cooperation in energy and military spheres, as well as preserved the stability of Central Asian states’ current regimes. Worried about the growing US and Chinese power in Central Asia, Russia intensified its economic and military collaboration with Central Asia, determined to compete for a privileged role. By promoting bilateral cooperation and supporting the ruling regimes in the Central Asian states, Russia

established a close alliance with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, while at the same time continued to exert robust influence in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which preferred a balanced diplomacy between Russia and the United States.

While the era of Russia's pro-Western policy has completely ended, so too has Central Asia's "one-sidedness" towards Russia's protection. Central Asia now finds itself situated in a strategically important region, with three great powers- Russia, China and the United States-present. Taking advantage of its proximity to Afghanistan as well as the rich reserves of oil and natural gas, Central Asia became a contested area for a new "Great Game" among the United States, Russia and China. In exchange for economic benefits and military bases, the Central Asian governments received military resources and foreign investment, which would improve its external security circumstance and strengthen their political power. The "Great Power Competition" in Central Asia is not simply a "zero-sum" game, but rather a more complex situation where each great power could seek for cooperation and benefits, but also might face challenges.

## **Limits and Boundaries of Russia's Foreign Policy towards Central Asia**

Starting from the year 2001, the US military presence and the Chinese economic venture into Central Asia spurred Russia's serious return and determination to rehabilitate its traditional influence along its historical southern borderlands in Central Asia. By reviewing Russia's increasingly close partnership with the Central Asian

states over the last fifteen years, it is obvious that Russia now has a consistent plan in Central Asia to enhance its “privileged role”. From the Russian perspective, the “time of the South” – ushered in by the cataclysmic developments of the late twentieth century – continues. Central Asia, the biggest part of the former Soviet South, will be increasingly important to Russia’s global strategy.

However, the hope for continuous expansion of both economic and political influence may be stymied by the other two great powers’ intervention in Central Asian regional affairs and Central Asia’s reluctance to be controlled by Russia’s tutelage. The limitations can be classified into three categories: The United States’ newly released “New Silk Road” Initiative, China’s “Silk Road Economic Belt” and Central Asia’s unwillingness to be controlled.

#### **A. The United States: “Central Asia Pivot” in “post-Afghanistan war era”**

Reviewing US foreign policy in Central Asia since the end of the Cold War, it is obvious that the importance of the Central Asian region is rapidly increasing in the United States’ global strategy. From 1991 to 1996, the US policy towards Central Asia was implemented within the framework of its policy towards Russia. During this period, Central Asia was recognized by the United States to be within the range of Russia’s absolute dominance. Later on, approximately from 1997 to 2000, a “New Central Asian Strategy” was initiated by president Clinton. The bright prospect of oil and gas reserves in the Caspian region was cherished by the United States. Intending to integrate Central Asia into the world’s new political and economic order led by the



United States, the US expedited political infiltration into this region. Kazakhstan, which was the biggest and most economically developed country, became the US's first strategic partner in Central Asia. Since this period, the US began to compete with Russia for influence in the region. This new era in US foreign policy in Central Asia coincided chronologically with Russia's "Rehabilitation Period". As counterterrorism became the United States' core strategic sphere, the US shifted its focus to the exclusively unique role of Central Asia in fighting against terrorist operations in Afghanistan and the significance of its rich resources in global energy markets. By means of antiterrorism, the United States and the Central Asian states quickly expanded their military cooperation. However, President Bush's high-profile promotion of "Color Revolutions" seriously weakened Central Asia's trust in the United States, which undermined the latter's ambitious strategy in Central Asia. On June 3rd, 2014, the United States returned the Manas air force base to the Kyrgyz government, which was the last and the only military base in Central Asia controlled by the United States since its entrance to Central Asia in 2001. This marked US military forces' withdrawal from Central Asia and further declining influence there. Relatedly, President Obama planned to reduce its combat troops in Afghanistan to 9,800 and will totally withdraw at the end of 2016.

The US departure from Afghanistan has had a great impact on its interests in Central Asia. Needless to say, most of the US investments and policies in Central Asia were implemented on the basis of the Afghanistan war. After the end of the war, since the original motivation has disappeared, what will the United States do to revise its

foreign policy in this region? In a post-Afghanistan era, what are US interests in Central Asia? This is a question that US elites need to answer. Generally, there are three points of view: 1) After the Afghanistan war, the United State no longer has important interests in Central Asia. The proponents of this idea argue that geographically, Central Asia is distant from the United States. Even though the Central Asian states have rich reserves of oil and gas resources, it is not strong enough to change the global market. Thanks to the rapid development of domestic shale oil extraction, the United States is becoming more independent in energy issues. The Islamic radicalism in Afghanistan will continue to pose threats to the U.S, but antiterrorism should not be the main task of the US foreign policy in the near future. Furthermore, the Central Asian governments' strong resistance to democratic reforms and Non-Government Organizations disappointed the US wish to promote democratization there. 2) Another group of scholars holds the view that in the post-Afghanistan era, Central Asia is no longer that important to the US global strategy, but still, the United State may have some interests there. The United States should abandon the idea of transforming Central Asia, concentrating instead on the security relationship and hard US interests there from the position of pure Realpolitik<sup>58</sup>, and let events on the ground determine the future of the region. 3) The third opinion emphasizes that the United States should develop a new strategy that takes into account Central Asia's complex legacy and new geopolitical realities, which means Central Asia is still of uncontested importance to the United States.

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<sup>58</sup> Realpolitik is politics or diplomacy based primarily on considerations of given circumstances and factors, rather than explicit ideological notions or moral and ethical premises.

Though the US scholars hold various attitudes toward the US interests in Central Asia, the New Silk Road initiative, originally envisioned by Hilary Clinton in 2011, seems to favor the third opinion.

The United States' reexamination of Central Asia was brought up in the wake of the end of the Afghanistan war. In addition to training and equipping Afghan forces to secure the country, the United States is also seeking to integrate Afghanistan into the global market and transit networks through its New Silk Road initiative, which aims at ensuring Afghanistan's long-term stability and enhancing connection between Central and South Asia. To preserve regional stability and peaceful development, the United States bolstered mutual trade and helped opening new markets in the region, meeting the Central and South Asian countries' requirement for economic integration. The two most significant projects being implemented under the New Silk Road rubric, CASA-1000<sup>59</sup> and TUTAP<sup>60</sup>, are designed to deliver surplus electricity from Central Asia to the large, electricity-poor markets of South Asia. Still on the drawing board is the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) natural gas pipeline, which could allow Turkmenistan to reduce its dependence on China and Russia while addressing growing demand for energy in South Asia.<sup>61</sup> To properly implement these projects, and to create a more stable Afghanistan, it requires further US engagement in

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<sup>59</sup> 1000 Electricity Transmission and Trade Project for Central Asia and South Asia (CASA-1000) is to create the conditions for sustainable electricity trade between the Central Asian countries of Tajikistan and Kyrgyz Republic and the South Asian countries of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The CASA-1000 already includes and will include: 500 kV AC line from Datka (in the Kyrgyz Republic) to Khujand (477 kilometers away, in Tajikistan), 1300 megawatt AC-DC Converter Station at Sangtuda (Tajikistan), 750 kilometer High Voltage DC line from Sangtuda to Kabul (Afghanistan) to Peshawar (Pakistan), 300 megawatt Converter Station at Kabul (with import and export capability), 1300 megawatt DC-AC Converter Station at Peshawar

<sup>60</sup> Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan

<sup>61</sup> Andrew C. Kuchins, Jeffrey Mankoff, *Central Asia in a Reconnecting Eurasia U.S. Policy Interests and Recommendations*, Center for Strategic & International Studies, May 2015

Central Asia.

The United States' initiative for promoting the New Silk Road program can be explained from three aspects: 1) Enhancing cooperation between Central and South Asia in the energy sector. South Asia has a population of more than 1.6 billion, which is a rapidly growing economy that has great demand for inexpensive, efficient, and reliable energy. Thus South Asia opens up a huge market for Central Asia, which is a repository of vast resources, including oil, natural gas and hydropower. By connecting South Asia with Central Asia, the United States will manage to create a win-win economic situation.

2) Improving infrastructure in South and Central Asia. Only by upgrading infrastructure, especially the “hardware” of reliable roads, railways, bridges, and border crossing facilities, can the trading and transporting environment be improved in both South and Central Asia. Except for that, the United States should also keep working on the “software” side, harmonizing national customs systems, bringing states into multilateral trade institutions, and getting neighbors to work together to break down institutional and bureaucratic barriers to trade. For instance, the US has provided more than 3,000 kilometers of roads built or rehabilitated in Afghanistan; support for Kazakhstan and Afghanistan's accession to the WTO; technical assistance for the passage of the 2010 Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit-Trade Agreement (APTTA), and support for the Cross-Border Transport Agreement (CBTA) between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> <http://www.state.gov/p/sca/ci/af/newsilkroad/>, accessed on March 4, 2016

3) Eliminating previous barriers. Rather than regarding South Asia as its reliable partner, Central Asian tends to view South Asia through the lens of security, primarily a source of terrorist operations or Islamic radicalism. Having suffered seriously from terrorist attacks, Central Asia is inherently resistant to moving closer to South Asia. The United States thus is responsible for mediating between the two sides and trying to eliminate their previous bias.

The US government's enthusiasm for promoting regional cooperation and mutual trust in Central and South Asia demonstrates the United States' determination to preserve its influence in Central Asia in the post-Afghanistan war era. Further indicating the US's ambition in Central Asia was the "5+1" program<sup>63</sup> brought up by the current United States Secretary of State John Kerry during his visit to Uzbekistan in November 2015, aiming at providing more financial aid and military resources to Central Asia to prevent the United States from being excluded from Central Asian by China and Russia.<sup>64</sup>

## **B. China: Silk Road Economic Belt—Beijing's more ambitious step**

On September 6<sup>th</sup> 2013, upon President Xi Jinping's visit to Nazarbayev University in Astana, he gave a speech named *Promoting Friendship for a Better Future*, in which he first brought up the concept of the *Silk Road Economic Belt* program, aiming at reviving China's traditional trading connection with Eurasian countries on the old silk road, formed 2100 years ago, during China's Han Dynasty. China's

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<sup>63</sup> "5+1" means the five Central Asian states plus the United States

<sup>64</sup> <http://column.cankaoxiaoxi.com/2015/1104/986540.shtml>, accessed on April 11, 2016

initiative to promote interconnection between China and Central Asian states in trade, infrastructure and energy sectors was enthusiastically welcomed by the Central Asian side, which wished to diversify its trading partners and reduce dependence on Russia. Unlike the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a multilateral institution jointly led by China and Russia, the Silk Road Economic Belt was mainly sponsored by the Chinese government alone, and most of the treaties signed so far were bilateral ones free of Russia's participation. The map of the Central Asia- China gas pipeline (also known as the Turkmenistan–China gas pipeline) shows the route of natural gas transportation from Central Asia to China, passing through Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The construction of the first three lines of the pipeline has already been finished, and the fourth one was launched at the end of 2014.



The economies of Central Asia and China are complementary in that China has considerable amount of capitals while Central Asia has rich reserves of oil and natural

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<sup>65</sup> [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:A\\_large\\_blank\\_world\\_map\\_with\\_oceans\\_marked\\_in\\_blue.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:A_large_blank_world_map_with_oceans_marked_in_blue.svg), accessed on April 4, 2016

gas. In recent years, China has succeeded in becoming the principal trading and investing partner of Central Asia: in 2013, the volume of China's trade with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan reached 40.2 billion dollars, which increased by 12% compared to the data in 2012. China-Kazakhstan trade volume climbed to 28.6 billion, increased by 11.3% since last year. China-Uzbekistan trade volume in 2013 for the first time reached 4 billion, the annual growth rate was 58.3%.<sup>66</sup> Up to 2013, China has become the biggest trading partner of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, the second largest trading partner of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, the third of Tajikistan. Until the end of 2012, the total Chinese FDI stock in Central Asian was 7.82 billion dollars, and Central Asia's investment in China was 520 million. Kazakhstan was the third largest investment destination for China, and China was the largest investment origin for Uzbekistan.<sup>67</sup>

China's high-profile venture into Central Asia and active engagement in Eurasian economic market is portrayed as a Chinese version of "the Marshall Plan". The huge economic gap between China and Russia worried Kremlin policymakers about losing economic dominance in Central Asia. Boris Guseletov, the international advisor of the president of the party of "Russia of Justice", emphasized during an interview with Chinese media that only by Russia's support can China's Silk Road Economic Belt program be fully realized, that Russia shall never accept to be China's junior partner in Eurasian affairs.<sup>68</sup> To prevent further conflict with Russia in the Central Asian

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<sup>66</sup> [http://news.xinhuanet.com/fortune/2013-10/15/c\\_117721451.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/fortune/2013-10/15/c_117721451.htm), accessed on April.24, 2016

<sup>67</sup> Yuan Shengyu, Silk Road Economic Belt and China's Policy towards Central Asia, *International Economy and Politics*, No.5 2015, 32

<sup>68</sup> <http://www.jingluecn.com/spdp/1/2014-10-14/1058.htm>, accessed on April.24, 2016

market, the Chinese government should work on how to expand cooperation with Central Asia while not affecting Russia's core interests there.

### **C. Central Asia: Maneuvering among great powers**

Though Central Asia was traditionally a loosely connected region, with the five countries implementing divergent domestic and foreign policies, it is now becoming more integrated and begins to develop a growth model based on increasing regional trade ties and connectivity. Between 2005 and 2013, trade with Central Asian partners more than quadrupled for Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan; more than tripled for Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan; and nearly doubled for Tajikistan. The growth of trade between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the two largest economies in Central Asia, is particularly notable. Bilateral trade turnover in 2013 amounted to \$2.3 billion, a nearly five-fold increase from 2005.<sup>69</sup>

By forming a highly integrated community, the Central Asian states are able to have more power of discourse and a more important role in regional affairs. The Central Asian states, even though relatively weaker players in Eurasia, are not passive pawns in the strategic maneuverings of the great powers, but powerful actors in their own right. Multiple patrons' vying for influence for over the course of the 2000s has significantly strengthened Central Asia's economic background and has placed Central Asia in a favorable position to extract increased benefits, assistance and better contractual terms. Kazakhstan's founding leader, Nursultan Nazarbayev, is widely

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<sup>69</sup> Andrew C. Kuchins, Jeffrey Mankoff, *Central Asia in a Reconnecting Eurasia U.S. Policy Interests and Recommendations*, Center for Strategic & International Studies, May 2015



acknowledged as a master in maneuvering among great powers. Nazarbayev is a determined advocate for a balanced and pragmatic foreign policy. Regarding self-interest as its main starting point, Astana successfully maintains close partnership with all great powers around, including Russia, China, the United States, Europe, and Turkey. Kazakhstan has gone to great lengths to present itself as the geopolitical crossroads of multiple identities and influences, invoking the often-quoted slogan that “happiness is multiple pipelines.”<sup>70</sup> Astana is actively engaged in regional affairs, declaring itself the “third pillar” in the SCO, alongside Beijing and Moscow. Kazakhstan also succeeded in gaining the rotating presidency in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2010.

Second, the presence of multiple great powers in Central Asia enabled it to pare down or ignore external demands that they are unwilling to accept. For example, with Russia and China acting as its alternatives partners, the Central Asian states are more self-confident in resisting democratic reforms brought by the United States and US-sponsored NGOs. From 2003 to 2010, after waves of color revolutions, more than 22 laws and amendments was passed in the five Central Asian states to place tighter restrictions on foreign NGOs and media. In terms of South Ossetia and Crimea, no Central Asian state has yet recognized their independence or annexation to Russia, mainly because of their refusal to allow too much Russian intervention in domestic affairs. By reinforcing economic and military cooperation with China and the US, Central Asia have sought to reduce their political dependence on Moscow.

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<sup>70</sup> Alexander Cooley. *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 9

Finally, the leaders in Central Asia managed to use the assistance provided by foreign powers to preserve their regimes and domestic political practices. The Central Asian leaders could not easily withstand the waves of democratic revolutions driven by domestic opposition parties without the support from Moscow. Being well aware of Russia's intention to draw Central Asia to its side in the competition with the United States for regional influence in Eurasia, the Central Asian leaders took advantage of Moscow's support to preserve their regimes and counter domestic opposition parties.

Clearly, in terms of forming a multipolar world in Central Asia, the importance of the "local rulers" cannot be ignored. Central Asia is no longer a strategically subordinate region, but a rapidly integrated community that seeks to strengthen its own interest by maneuvering among great powers.

## **Conclusion**

Central Asia was historically an under-researched area and it had very limited importance in the international arena, either because of its relatively poor economic condition or due to Russia's overwhelming control over the region. Within the first several years after the dissolution of the USSR, the Central Asian states barely had their own foreign policies or strategies towards the great powers. Likewise, neither the United State nor Russia had a consistent blueprint in Central Asia. International society consented to the fact that Central Asia was Russia's "backyard" and would tightly cling to Russia for its future development. It was hard for anyone to foresee the

energy and terrorism issues that would later strongly strike the whole world throughout the first ten years of the new era.

After a period of calm and seclusion during the 1990s, Central Asia became a new contested area that actively engaged all three great powers, and enabled Central Asian governments to use this geopolitical environment for domestic benefits and maneuver among the “Big Three”. Most importantly, the ruling regimes in Central Asian states took advantage of the great powers’ aspiration for securing cooperation and access to maintain the unshakeable position of their regimes. The results turned out to be in Central Asia’s favor. The proximity to Afghanistan made Central Asia an ideal checkpoint and supply depot for the United States’ war against terrorism, which secured the provision of financial aid and military resources to Central Asia by the United States. China’s urgent needs for consuming its excess capacity and launching separatist operations in Xinjiang, immediately bordering with three Central Asian states, guaranteed Central Asia considerable economic benefits and greater say in regional organizations. The huge market and large domestic demand for oil and natural gas resources made China a reliable partner to deal with and a substitute that would allow Central Asia to reduce its dependence on Russia.

As the traditional patron of the Central Asian states, few among Moscow’s foreign policy and military elites cherished the idea of having American or Chinese forces stationed in their strategic backyard. To preserve its privileged role in Central Asia, Russia feared the continuing expansion of US or Chinese influence and sought to provide more economic and political advantages to Central Asia to rehabilitate its

traditional influence in its “backyard”. Well informed of the impossibility of unifying all the CIS countries and integrating them into Russia’s orbit, Moscow actively built up regional organization such as the Eurasian Economic Community, the *Collective Security Organization Treaty*, most of which were operated outside the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States in order to enhance economic and political unification. Being surrounded by the three great powers, more and more importance was attached to Central Asia, which had become a miniature for great power competition in international arena as well as a new region of contests for a multipolar world.

Fifteen years has passed since the beginning of the “Rehabilitation Period” and all the three powers have now devoted capital, resources, and manpower to compete for dominance in Central Asia. It is time to review the scorecard for each state. The record shows that there is no actual “loser” in this game: each side has more or less achieved its interim goals and acquired benefits in Central Asia.

This paper looks at the evolution of Russia’s foreign policy towards Central Asian since its independence and finds an increasingly important status of Central Asia in Russia global strategy. Starting from the period of “Rehabilitation”, Central Asia is no longer treated by Moscow as solely a part of the CIS system, but rather as strategically crucial partners that Russia should by no means lose to other great powers and a place that Russia seeks to rehabilitate its traditional Soviet-style impact. Since the prospect of “reunifying” all the post-Soviet republics is considerably vague, Russia will, in the near future, enhance its cooperation and contact with Central Asia

to establish a highly integrated Eurasian community.

The Central Asian states also successfully marked their exclusively important position in the world map, being at the heart of the Eurasian territory together with China and Russia. Russia's increasingly palpable Eurasianist strategy suggests that Moscow will carry on its self-oriented foreign policy and invest more in the Central Asian states in order to obtain their support in regional affairs.

However, in the foreseeable future, given the geopolitical significance of Central Asia, a tripartite competition will continue in Eurasia. The US government launched the "5+1" plan and New Silk Road Initiative for continuing providing economic and military aid to the Central Asian states, which demonstrated the US government's determination to preserve its influence in the post-Afghanistan war era.

The Chinese government put forward a more ambitious plan than the Shanghai Cooperation Organization for expanding multifaceted cooperation with Central Asian states – The Silk Road Economic Belt. Aiming at reviving the previous prosperousness of the silk road and extending collaboration with major countries bordering with China, the Chinese government planned to export its excess capacity in railway construction, logistics, mining, electrical power, construction of oil and gas pipelines to the Central Asian states to assist them in improving regional infrastructure. In the framework of the Silk Road Economic Belt, most of the agreements are bilateral and the natural gas pipelines under construction will bypass Russian territory. Both the United States and China wish to continue expanding their influence in Central Asia for more economic and military benefits. Against such background,

Russia will inevitably get involved into a tripartite competition of “Great Game” and it will be uneasy for Russia to rehabilitate its traditional influence in Central Asia in short term.

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