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Russia and Central Asia: Never Closer or Drifting Apart?

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Russian President Vladimir Putin with his Tajik counterpart Emomali Rahmon. **kremlin.ru**

Just one year ago, Russia's positions in Central Asia were so solid that even China's growing presence in the region was not a threat. That all changed with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. With every missile it fires at Ukrainian cities, the Kremlin is destroying Russia's influence around the world, above all in the post-Soviet space.

Now any statements or gestures that deviate from Moscow's line look like an attempt by Central Asian countries to sever ties with Russia, and prompt talk of the impending end of its influence in the region. Formal data, however, paints a very different picture of blossoming bilateral relations: Russia's trade turnover with the region is growing fast; huge numbers of migrants are moving in both directions; and there is a record number of top-level meetings. So what is really happening: is Central Asia moving away from Russia, or ever closer?

None of the Central Asian nations have supported Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and all are

adhering to Western sanctions against Russia. The region is also distancing itself from Russian integration projects. In October, Kyrgyzstan canceled military exercises on its territory that were due to be held by the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and in December, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev postponed a visit to Bishkek, in doing so avoiding meeting his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin there. The focus is increasingly now on non-Russian projects, such as the Organization of Turkic States.

For Central Asia, adhering to sanctions isn't about supporting the West or going against Russia; it's an attempt to save their economies from collapse and isolation. A multi-vector foreign policy is an essential condition of the countries' basic economic prosperity — especially since Russia has shown no sign of being ready to compensate the region for losses it would incur from breaking off relations with the West. Indeed, this is largely why the Kremlin itself does not require Central Asian leaders to show their solidarity with Russia.

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From time to time, Moscow reminds Central Asia of its dependency on Russia, such as by putting a halt to the operations of the Caspian oil pipeline that runs through Russian territory, which Kazakhstan uses to export 80% of its oil. But Moscow does not demand unswerving allegiance, otherwise, the pressure being applied would be far, far greater. In any case, it can hardly afford to lose its few remaining allies. The war and the Kremlin's shrinking opportunities to choose its foreign partners have forced the Kremlin to place a higher value on its ties to Central Asia.

As a result, Russia's trade turnover with all five nations is growing fast and in the second quarter of 2022, more people from Central Asia went to Russia to work than at any time in the last six years, and remittances from Russia have increased accordingly.

This growth is largely linked to new trade patterns caused by sanctions, as well as to the mass exodus of Russians who fled to Central Asia following the outbreak of war and the start of mobilization. At the same time, Moscow is now paying noticeably more attention to the region. This year was the first for many in which Putin visited all five Central Asian nations. Moscow doesn't just want to show that attempts to isolate Russia have failed: there are also many practical issues to discuss. Central Asia has more to offer than periodic support during UN votes.

Tajikistan, for example, has been accused of providing Russia with deadly Iranian attack drones that have been used in Ukraine (though Dushanbe denies this). There are reports that Wagner, a Russian private military company, is recruiting convicts from prisons in Turkmenistan to send to Ukraine. Deliveries of telescopic sights from Kyrgyzstan to Russia have increased sevenfold, while the growth in imports of home appliances from the EU to Kazakhstan is reportedly due to the microchips from those goods being used in the Russian military complex.

The CSTO's reputation is in tatters. Russia's military defeats in Ukraine have exploded the myth of the mighty Russian army, which has alarmed countries that depended on the Russian security umbrella. That's not to say that the CSTO will disintegrate any time soon, but there is certainly no potential for its expansion.

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Russian soft power in Central Asia is dissipating before our eyes. Polls show that most people in Central Asia (70% in Kyrgyzstan, 55% in Kazakhstan, and 30% in Uzbekistan) blame the current economic problems on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Bishkek and Almaty have seen several anti-war protests; entertainment venues are refusing to host Russian stars; and the popularity of the Russian language is in decline. Central Asian media outlets have been blocked in Russia for trying to cover the war in Ukraine objectively. The issue of decolonization is once again in the public discourse.

The mainstay of Russian influence in Central Asia remains the relationship of trust between the countries' political elites. All of the regimes are headed by aging men who grew up in Soviet times and who communicate with one another in Russian. They have known each other for decades, and any newcomers face an obligatory trip to Moscow to be looked over and approved.

For now, these regimes don't want to risk falling out with the Kremlin, and their response to growing public calls for their countries to distance themselves from Russia has been very restrained: cutting the number of Russian language lessons in schools, for example, or renaming streets. But the elites in Central Asia are gradually changing together with society, which remains very young: half of the region's inhabitants are under 30. They don't remember Soviet times; they are less likely to speak Russian; and they do not consider Russia an example to aspire to.

Central Asia's move away from an increasingly unattractive Russia is a natural process. The Central Asian states have never been as self-sufficient as they are right now, nor has the public in these countries ever demanded so much of their leadership, including on foreign policy issues. Yet Moscow, instead of recognizing the agency of the Central Asian nations and working on making itself more appealing to them, demands that the former Soviet republics uphold the historical dominance inherited by the Kremlin.

Russia had every opportunity to make the Central Asian nations gravitate toward it. Instead of that, it is trying to stop the progression of time. If the Kremlin doesn't change its approach to foreign policy — and that's not something that will happen under Vladimir Putin — then Russia's influence in the region will wither away.

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