



Feature Article
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Russia's Central Asian Underbelly: The Case of Uzbekistan

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The remnants of the Russian imperial modus vivendi is revealing in current Moscow's manipulative policy in Central Asia where Moscow tries to embody its own version of Monroe Doctrine. This region looks like the last bastion of Russian imperialism. Uzbekistan, the biggest Central Asian country by population and the most central by location, provides an obvious illustrative case to observe and analyze this new/old regional order. Moscow's manipulation of Uzbekistan and leverage-keeping policy is conducted with the help of a specific toolkit including propaganda, information attacks, geopolitical pressure and show visits.

In the context of Russia's war in Ukraine it becomes obvious that studying and understanding Russia's attitude and policy toward Central Asia requires comprehension of the long period from the middle of the nineteenth century through the Soviet period up to now in its entirety and in holistic



*Presidents Shavkat Mirziyoyev and Vladimir Putin.
(Photo courtesy of Uzbekistan presidential press service.)*

perspective. Indeed, it is clear that Central Asia has long been regarded by Russian governments, political elites, military officers, geographers, as well as many historians and writers with arrogance and an Orientalist and geopolitical position as a region that should

serve the economic and geopolitical interests of the empire.

Such a vision has persisted through the post-Soviet period. It is not an accident that the humiliating notion of Russia's "underbelly" was invented with respect to Central Asian countries to symbolically depict their inferior position and indicate the role of this region's peoples and countries with respect to the Russian empire. The seeds of imperialism that former Soviet peoples thought went into oblivion appeared to be well preserved and have now again sprouted in the form of neo-imperialism.

Uzbekistan, the biggest Central Asian country by population and the most central by location, provides an obvious illustrative case to observe and analyze this new/old regional order. Moscow's manipulation of Uzbekistan and leverage-keeping policy is conducted with the help of a specific toolkit including propaganda, information attacks, geopolitical pressure and show visits.

Propaganda & Information Attacks

Ubiquitous Russian propaganda seems to penetrate into all major cells of the social, cultural and political life. Russia's presence in the information and media sphere of Uzbekistan has a definite influence on public opinion, having an effect of, so to speak, a 'gray power'. Information attacks in fact became a form and means of power projection by the big

power upon the smaller, vulnerable and dependent ones in the region. They are not a manifestation of soft power, as some might think, but rather a somewhat "gray power" which is a byproduct of hard power. When utilized, it is full of intimidation, hate speech, unfriendly statements and direct interference in the domestic affairs of an independent state.

This gray power manifests itself in multiple forms: revision and manipulation of history, attempts at "mentorship" on state language policy, warnings against leaving the Russian sphere of influence, hints on common interests to stand against the "Collective West", constant reminders of erstwhile unity of the former Soviet peoples in the second world war, etc.

Russian propaganda TV shows in Uzbekistan are a somewhat "normal" phenomenon: all of them are broadcast without any restrictions. In March 2022, the Ukrainian Embassy in Tashkent sent a note to the MFA of Uzbekistan with the request to "block the translation of Russian TV channels in the country because the information war that the Russian mass media is waging is an unalienable part of the military campaign and is aimed at disinformation of the

international community".¹ However, Tashkent did not satisfy this Ukrainian request.

Geopolitical Pressure

Moscow does not refrain from exerting geopolitical pressure upon Tashkent. Moscow invented its own version of the Monroe Doctrine according to which the former Soviet territory should be free from any Western geopolitical presence. In December 2021, Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs addressed the U.S. and NATO with the demand that they should not engage in military cooperation with former Soviet republics.

The demands on NATO, for example, seek to prevent the alliance from carrying out any military activity outside its territory in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Ukraine, and the South Caucasus. The draft agreement proposed by Moscow also demanded that the United States not establish military bases on the territory of former Soviet states outside NATO, nor "use their infrastructure for any military activity, or develop bilateral military cooperation with them." In particular, this would rule out Washington negotiating with Central Asian nations on the possibility of stationing U.S.

bases in the region to be able to confront Islamic State groups in Afghanistan.²

Although Washington rejected Moscow's unacceptable demands, Central Asian capitals did not react to them at all, revealing thereby what could be called a "weak state complex" – in other words, an inability to withstand Russian hegemonism.

The Russian leadership often practices speaking "on behalf of Central Asian countries" on major regional and Eurasian political and strategic issues. For example, during Chinese Chairman Xi Jinping's visit to Moscow in March 2023, the two leaders – besides their bilateral issues – made a special Joint Statement on Central Asia in which they stated that they would not tolerate a replication of "color revolutions" or external interference in the domestic affairs of countries of the region. Again, none of the Central Asian states reacted to this statement, which sounded like Russia and China taking responsibility for the region.

Russia even targets internal political developments in Uzbekistan and the country's democratic reform agenda as if liberal reforms are a matter of geopolitics. Russian political

¹ "Posolstvo Ukrainy prosilo zablockirovat rossiyskiye telekanaly v Uzbekistane" ("Посольство Украины просило заблокировать российские телеканалы в Узбекистане.") (<https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2022/03/11/ambassador-of-ukraine/>)

² "Russia broadens security demands from West, seeking to curb U.S. and NATO influence on borders, *Washington Post*, December 17, 2021. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/17/ukraine-russia-military/>.)

and media circles relentlessly try to impose upon public opinion and officials the idea that democracy promotion that the West is conducting in the region is actually disguising its geopolitical interests.

Researcher Aijan Sharshenova's observation deserves mention in this regard. She portrayed Russia as a trend-setter in Central Asia and the main agent of autocracy promotion as opposed to the global democracy promotion trend. "Russia still sets political trends in Central Asia – it has to compete with other external actors, of course. Central Asian regimes are also capable of producing unique combination of policy elements. However, the historical path dependence, the economic and security cooperation, and the relative compatibility of Russian governance elements with Central Asian political structures make it all too easy for Russia to diffuse authoritarian practices and norms in the region".³

Putin obviously has resorted to the old "carrots and sticks" principle in order to fix the declining Russian empire. For example, on New Year's Eve, one Russian chauvinist – a former State Duma deputy and currently the co-chair of the "Just Russia" Party – called for

annexing Uzbekistan to Russia. This was a threatening message that received sharp reactions in Uzbekistan from the President, the Speaker of the parliament and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as civil society, mass media and the public.⁴

Since 2019, Moscow allures Tashkent towards the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) – the Russia-led and Russia-dominated organization of five former Soviet republics (Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.) Uzbekistan is only an observer in it. It remains unclear why Uzbekistan should become a member of this organization. Some observers point to the bright perspectives that EAEU membership would provide for Uzbekistan in its cooperation with Russia. Others argue that joining the EAEU would resolve the problems of more than 2.6 million Uzbek labor migrants working in Russia. Still others believe that integration with Russia is predetermined by a common historical destiny of the former Soviet republics and peoples and that the time has allegedly come to fulfill this destiny.

According to one school of thought, in the context of global rivalry with the West, Moscow will take all possible measures to

³ Aijan Sharshenova. "Policy Diffusion and Regime Security in Central Asia", in Marie-Sophie Borchelt Camelo, Aziz Elmuradov, eds., *Shifting Security and Power Constellations in Central Asia and the Caucasus*, (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2024), p.29.

⁴ "Kreml dolzhen prinyat pravovye mery protiv shovinistov. Deputaty otvetili na slova Zakhara Prilepina o prisoedinenii Uzbekistana k RF", *Gazeta.ru*, December 21, 2023. (<https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2023/12/21/zahar-prilepin/>.)

create a buffer zone on its perimeter and persuade Central Asian states to comply.

Positive relations with the Russian Federation should not be confused with the economically more complex, strategically more complicated, geopolitically overburdened and historically challenging issue of re-integrating the former Soviet republics⁵.

Summits for the Sake of Summits

Recently, Moscow has been articulating the mantra of a “Collective West” which Russia allegedly confronts by attempting to create its own collective, primarily in the former Soviet space. That is why Russia invented what one could call a multi-summit regime of interactions with the neighboring young independent states. For example, besides formal summits of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), so-called informal summits were invented in order to create an impression of political activism within the CIS and empathy among leaders of its member-states emanating from the common Soviet past.

Moreover, Moscow goes further to combine summits to create an image of a bigger and stronger unity. For example, on December 25-

26, 2023, two summits were held in Saint Petersburg: the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) summit and the so-called CIS informal summit. They can be regarded as a joint summit of two organizations with similar goals. In fact, in its attempt to prevent the fate of a fading empire, Moscow seeks to resort to its soft power instruments and create a semblance of an entourage of collectivity around Russia. In the context of its war in Ukraine and frequent unfriendly and threatening statements towards its neighbors, the Kremlin’s artificial collectivity looks like a disguise of its loneliness.

Russian political rhetoric and propaganda often reiterates the notion of the “Collective West” against which Moscow is eager to create its own collective. However, the fiasco of the formal CIS forced Russia’s creation of its informal “pillar.” The exhibition of the formal/informal CIS and EAEU in the form of frequent and irrelevant summits, obviously, cannot mitigate the image of Russia as an aggressor and imperialist power. Constant references to and efforts to capitalize on miserable remnants of the Soviet legacy cannot be efficient, given the generational factor: the two youngest generations have no memory of the Soviet Union and have no reason for

⁵ Farkhad Tolipov, “History Repeats Itself: Uzbekistan’s New Eurasian Gamble,” *Central Asia-Caucasu Analyst*, November 22, 2019.

(<https://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13596-history-repeats-itself-uzbekistans-new-eurasian-gamble.html>)

nostalgia thereof. Therefore, without an ideological and political reinvention of Russia's attitude towards its former satellites in accordance with non-imperial principles, any exercises in formalizing the EAEU and informalizing the CIS will likely fail.

Uzbekistan's President participates in all formal/informal summits and never ignores them, despite their useless agenda and dysfunctionality. He even attended the so called "Future Games" – cyber sport games – held in the city of Kazan in February 2024, alongside other Central Asian leaders, and Mr. Mirziyoyev even suggested to hold the second Future Games in Uzbekistan.

Interestingly and paradoxically, President Mirziyoyev from the onset of his leadership in Uzbekistan resolutely declared that Central Asia will be a priority in foreign policy of this state. However, whereas the Consultative Meetings of Central Asian Presidents – the only format of regional integration – takes place once a year, CIS/EAEU/CSTO formal and informal meetings are organized many times each year, and mostly in Russia. Therefore, this cannot but cause the question as to what is really a priority of Tashkent's foreign policy – Russia or Central Asia?

The Weak State Complex

Overall, Russia seems to be interested in nurturing and maintaining the self-perception of Uzbekistanis as a weak state vis-à-vis the

"great power," which is Russia. In this regard, Moscow counts, in particular, on the pro-Russian loyalists inside the country whom Moscow can find in sufficient numbers. For example, among local experts there are many who propagate in unison with Russian propaganda in favor, say, of Uzbekistan's membership in the EAEU or the construction of the Nuclear Power Plant in Uzbekistan by Russia's Rosatom, or protecting the Russian language in Uzbekistan, etc.

Such people (loyalists, whether conscious or unconscious) very often point out, for instance, the problems of labor migrants working in Russia, arguing that Russia can use the theme of labor migrants as blackmail – to warn Uzbekistan against any possible steps which would cause suspicion in Moscow of Tashkent's anti-Russian and pro-Western actions.

Moscow also uses its loyal ally – Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko – to back up its pressure upon Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries, exploiting him as a kind of a "second front" in the Central Asian geopolitical theater. Lukashenko made numerous info-attacks on Uzbekistan resembling those of Russia's political leadership and propaganda circles. For example, at the January 2022 summit of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) he warned Uzbekistan of the possibility of repetition in Uzbekistan of

disturbances which occurred in Kazakhstan in January 2022 because, as he said, terrorists are looking to Uzbekistan as a next target.⁶

Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Spokesperson Maria Zakharova is perhaps in the forefront of Moscow's neo-imperial offensive on all former Soviet republics including Uzbekistan. When in May 2020, a draft law was proposed by Uzbekistan's Ministry of Justice that stipulated the use of the Uzbek language for the entire workflow in governmental bodies, Moscow reacted strongly to the proposal of Uzbekistan's Ministry of Justice. Zakharova stated: "We noticed that the draft law caused polemics in mass media. It creates the impression that its proponents are obviously in the minority. The majority of commentaries point to the preservation of Russian language in official circulation, and this fully corresponds with the spirit of history, time and quality of bilateral relations. The main thing is that this is in the

interests of citizens of Uzbekistan who often make a choice in favor of working and studying in Russia." However, many in Uzbekistan have voiced a critical counter-reaction. Zakharova's assertive commentary caused explosive discussions in social networks and official circles.⁷

Zakharova went so far as to interfere in a minor domestic and local incident that happened in an Uzbek school in Tashkent, where there was a skirmish between a Russian language teacher and a student. She stated that Uzbekistan has been asked to provide an explanation regarding the situation and that Russia would watch closely how this issue is resolved.⁸

Zakharova already has a large collection of anti-Uzbek statements: in her unhealthy zeal to "protect" the Russian language she, in fact, revealed that Russia takes care not so much of the Russian language in Uzbekistan but keeping the imperial leverage in this region

⁶ "Alexandr Lukashenko predupredil Uzbekistan," *Gazeta.ru*, January 10, 2022. (<https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2022/01/10/lukashenko/>)

⁷ Farkhod Tolipov, "Soft or Hard Power? Russia Reacts to Uzbekistan's Draft Language Policy," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, June 8, 2020. (<http://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13623-soft-or-hard-power?-russia-reacts-to-uzbekistans-draft-language-policy.html>)

⁸ "Tashkent school incident sparks diplomatic tensions between Uzbekistan and Russia," *kun.uz*, September 28, 2024. (<https://kun.uz/en/news/2024/09/28/tashkent-school-incident-sparks-diplomatic-tensions-between-uzbekistan-and-russia;>) and "Tashkent school incident sparks diplomatic tensions between Uzbekistan and Russia," *qalampir.uz*, September 27, 2024. (<https://qalampir.uz/en/news/mariya-zakharova-uzbekistondan-kechirim-surasin-min%D2%B3ozhiddin-mirzo-107572>)

which obviously became the last bastion of Russian imperialism.

After 30 years of independence of the former Soviet republics, the Speaker of State Duma Vyacheslav Volodin “suddenly” remembered the collapse of the USSR, which he lamented, demanding a re-evaluation of the collapse. Like an investigator, he raised the questions: “Who betrayed? What are their names?”⁹

When Chairman Volodin visited Uzbekistan in November 2022, he referred to the alleged common past between Uzbekistan and Russia, and frankly warned against cooperation with the United States: “We have a lot in common. For us, for example, it is unacceptable what they [the U.S.] are trying to impose in the sphere of relations, trying to destroy the family, impose new values. Therefore, when the Americans come, of course, in sheep’s clothing, but the wolf’s grin is visible, because everyone understands who has come”.¹⁰

Official Tashkent very rarely reacts to such official and propaganda assaults by sometimes mentioning that interference into the domestic affairs of an independent and sovereign state is unacceptable. Moreover, sometimes, the taboo is established from the top on open media

discussion of sensitive topics such as the nuclear powerplant project to be constructed by Russia, among other.

Conclusion

Russia has managed to perfectly demonstrate a master class one could call “how to make an enemy out of a friend.” None of the Central Asian countries gave any pretext to Russia for suspecting them of anti-Russian policies. Moscow, however, is obsessed with the phantasm of the enemy. It creates an enemy where the enemy does not exist.

When it comes to Uzbekistan, Moscow well understands that Uzbekistan is a key country in Central Asia, and this is why keeping geopolitical and social leverage on this country provides influence in the entire region of Central Asia. It is symptomatic that the Russian side repeatedly mentions the Treaties on Strategic partnership (2004) and Alliance relationships (2005) signed between Russia and Uzbekistan. However, such relations have been discredited by Russia itself.

In the early 2000s, Russian scholar Dmitry Trenin argued there should be a reconsideration of Russia’s approach to Central

⁹ “Spiker gosdumy prizval k otsenke raspada SSSR: kto predal? Famili imena?” (<https://easaily.com/ru/news/2021/06/01/spiker-gosdumy-prizval-k-ocenke-raspada-sssr-kto-predal-familii-imena>, *Eurasia Daily*, June 1, 2021. ([\[gosdumy-prizval-k-ocenke-raspada-sssr-kto-predal-familii-imena\]\(https://easaily.com/ru/news/2021/06/01/spiker-gosdumy-prizval-k-ocenke-raspada-sssr-kto-predal-familii-imena\)\)](https://easaily.com/ru/news/2021/06/01/spiker-</p>
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¹⁰ “Uzbekistanu hvatit mudrosti otsenit veroyatniye posledstviya sotrudnichestva s SShA” State Duma, November 28, 2022. (<http://duma.gov.ru/news/55870/>)

Asia. He wrote that Moscow should “not attempt to become the sole security guarantor of Central Asia; and recognize that, in Central Asia, the fundamental interests of Russia and the United States coincide; cease regarding the American presence in the region as inherently anti-Russian”.¹¹ However, this idea is obviously shunned by Russian policymakers.

Indeed, in the late 1990s, First President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov called for vigilance about the recurrence of imperial thinking and behavior. He pointed out the persistence in Russia of great power chauvinism which, among other things, stimulates the

establishment and strengthening of authoritarian regimes and leads to hard dictatorship, since otherwise it is impossible to keep the obedience of not only subordinate and dependent peoples, but also its own population. However, some politicians cannot overcome imperial thinking and accept the fact of emergence of sovereign states which define their own future”.¹²

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¹¹ Dmitri Trenin, “Russia and Central Asia: Interests, Policies, and Prospects,” in Boris Rumer, Dmitri Trenin, Huasheng Zhao, eds., *Central Asia: Views from Washington, Moscow, and Beijing* Armonk, N.Y.: M.E.Sharpe, 2007, p.130.

¹² Islam Karimov, *Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century: Threats to Security, Conditions and Guarantees of Progress*, Tashkent, 1997, p. 48-66.