
8. Russia's policy options in Central Asia

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I. Introduction

One essential question in the formation of the political course of any state is the definition of goals and the choice of the means best suited for the tasks set. The Central Asian policy of the Russian Federation is to all appearances distinguished by the absence of clear ideas about the purposes Russia is pursuing in this area of the world and the means necessary to achieve them. It would seem that the question 'What do we need Central Asia for?', so frequently asked in Russia after the disintegration of the USSR, has still not found a precise answer, despite the development that has taken place in the Russian approach to the region after 1991. Such uncertainty is to a certain extent traditional for a significant part of Russian public opinion. Fyodor Dostoyevsky remarked on Russian society's perception of the place of Central Asia in Russian politics:

And in general all our Russian Asia, including Siberia, still exists for Russia as some kind of appendage, in which our European Russia seemingly does not even want to be interested . . . There were even very bitter voices: 'Oh, this Asia of ours! We cannot make an orderly arrangement for ourselves even in Europe, but now they thrust Asia on us as well. This Asia is of no use to us at all, we'd better leave it to somebody else!' Sometimes our wiseacres express these judgements even now, out of their great wisdom, no doubt.¹

These words have a relevant ring first and foremost as applied to the Atlantacists, as they are called, in Russian foreign policy, whose position has been substantially weakened in the second half of the 1990s, but who nevertheless continue to influence the political line with regard to the states of Central Asia. At the same time, the ideas of those who believe that Russia's basic interests and its historic fate are closely connected with Asia have become considerably more attractive. Occupying as it does a key position on the Eurasian continent, Russia, in the opinion of a number of experts, can realize its role in the world as an effective bridge between West and East. The importance of Central Asia for Russia is thus not a tactical factor, but determines Russia's own geopolitical and geo-economic situation in a long-term perspective.²

¹ Dostoyevsky, F. M., *Dnevnik Pisatelya: Sobraniye Sochinenii* [The diary of a writer: collected works], vol. 14 (Nauka: St Petersburg, 1995), p. 504.

² For more detailed treatment of the debates on the formulation of Russian approaches towards Central Asia, see Zviagelskaia, I., *The Russian Policy Debate on Central Asia*, Former Soviet South Project (Royal Institute of International Affairs: London, 1995).

The evolution and dynamics of Russia's approach to the region can be presented as a choice between various options of which the outcomes are impossible to foresee or control.

II. The progress of Russian policy

At the beginning of the 1990s, perceiving the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as a form of divorce rather than as a basis for future cooperation, the government of then Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar rejected the idea of close cooperation with the Central Asian states while preserving Russia's leadership, preferring to distance itself from them. This position was explained by the following logic: Russia was in need of rapid reform, and the Central Asian states with their authoritarian regimes would only retard its progress.

In the opinion of specialists of the International Research Centre of the Moscow State Institute of Foreign Relations (MGIMO), who did not at all deny the need to seek forms of cooperation with the states of Central Asia, a Russo-Asian union was undesirable because of the 'danger of the proclaimed "alliance for reform" degenerating into an anti-reform alliance with the conservative elites remaining in power in Central Asia'.³

The proclaimed goal of faster reform was, however, not the only reason why Russia pursued an 'isolationist' course within the post-Soviet territory. The then Kremlin politicians were convinced that the states of Central Asia would eventually 'have nowhere to go outside the zone of Russian influence' and that as soon as Russia's economy recovered they would be compelled to fall completely within its sphere of influence, this time on terms advantageous to Russia. The extent to which Gaidar and his colleagues misjudged the situation in forecasting the future of Russia itself, not to speak of its Asian neighbours, is now hardly a question of any importance. The reasons for the choice made are of much greater interest here. Besides hopes of Western aid and the certainty, nationalistic in its essence, that 'they have nowhere else to go', the unwillingness to pay any price whatsoever to preserve the bonds linking these states was of fundamental importance. It was obvious that Russia would have to shoulder a certain burden of political, economic and defence obligations, and it was not ready to do so.

The Russian politicians managed to achieve only one thing—to alienate the states of Central Asia, which were compelled to search for opportunities for survival both by developing relations with new partners and in the framework of intra-regional cooperation. Thus Russia's first political choice—that of distancing itself from Central Asia (with the exception of Kazakhstan)—proved to be wrong. It did not ensure the strengthening of Russia's positions in the region or an effective containment of the challenges to its security.

³ Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), Centre for International Studies, *Sodruzhestvo Nezavisimykh Gosudarstv: Protsessy i Perspektivy* [The Commonwealth of Independent States: processes and perspectives] (MGIMO: Moscow, Sep. 1992), p. 17.

By 1994–95, the stress in the Russian approach to Central Asia had changed substantially in favour of developing processes of reintegration within the CIS framework. The 'near abroad' was proclaimed a zone of vital Russian interests.⁴ However, a change in emphasis did not mean a fundamental change of course in practice. In particular, at the initial stage many politicians and experts, without denying the need to develop reintegration in the post-Soviet space, nevertheless excluded the states of Central Asia from the company of eventual partners. A case in point may be a situation analysis submitted by State Duma Deputy Alexei Arbatov. While indicating that integration calls for 'a relatively similar level of economic development, a socio-political compatibility of societies [wishing to integrate themselves⁵], a cultural affinity of the peoples', the author comes to a quite unambiguous conclusion: 'In the foreseeable future Russia can be integrated only with Ukraine and Belarus'.⁶

In the meantime, the states of Central Asia themselves began to realize that intra-regional integration was a necessity. On the one hand, it was dictated by the desire to launch and make the most of the mechanism of common political and economic interests and to smooth over the difficulties of the transition period. On the other hand, the states of region could expect to create some kind of counterbalance to Russian policy and to avoid pressure on them from Russia. The Central Asian Union, comprising Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, was created in 1994.⁷ It should be noted that in Russia this was treated with a degree of mistrust. By that time Russian politicians had begun to put forward their own integration projects and were not interested in the appearance of separate associations which could enhance the multipolarity already existing within the framework of the CIS. In August 1996, Russia itself was included in the union with the status of observer, which toned down its concern. In March 1998 Tajikistan, which had earlier had the status of observer, was interested to become a full member of the union.⁸ Despite initially rather sceptical forecasts of the chances of successful cooperation between the states of Central Asia, their regional association is keeping afloat.

Fundamentally the integrationist appeals of the Russian leadership had the character of propaganda and the Russian authorities tried to use all their potential for their own political needs. This may explain why Russia, while standing for reintegration, has consistently rejected the idea of a Eurasian union originally proposed by President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan.

The first document determining strategy in regard to the newly independent states was the Decree of the President of Russian Federation of 14 September

⁴ 'Ob utverzhdenii strategicheskogo kursa Rossiyskoy Federatsii s gosudarstvami-uchastnikami SNG' [Russia's strategic course with respect to the CIS member states], Presidential decree no. 940, 14 Sep. 1995. For the text, see *Segodnya*, 22 Sep. 1995, p. 9.

⁵ Translator's note.

⁶ Arbatov, A., 'Realnaya integratsiya: s kem i kakaya?' [Real integration: with whom and what sort?], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 24 June 1994.

⁷ See, e.g., Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 'The state of integration in the CIS', Draft report presented at the Carnegie Moscow Centre, 5–6 Mar. 1998, p. 118.

⁸ *Jamestown Monitor*, vol. 4, no. 60 (27 Mar 1998).

1995, which put forward the goal of creating an economically and politically integrated association of states.⁹ The gradual expansion of the CIS Customs Union,¹⁰ a rapprochement of the economies, the formation of a common capital market, the creation of a system of collective security and so on were included. An attempt to put the reintegrationist spirit of the document onto a practical footing was made in 1996. That year was crucial for several reasons. First, it was a presidential election year in Russia and progress towards a rapprochement with the republics was regarded as something calculated to appeal to the electorate. Second, it was necessary to promote a realistic line in opposition to the programme of the communists, who were playing not only on such major miscalculations of the authorities as the war in Chechnya, but also on the hankering after the past of a society experiencing an extremely difficult transition period. Third, in March specific actions had already been coordinated and a group of states displaying a readiness for profound integration with Russia (Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) had been established in the 'union of four'.¹¹

The scandalous resolution of the State Duma (the lower house of the Russian Parliament) of 15 March 1996 denouncing the Belavezh agreements¹² was a prologue to the signing of the treaty creating the 'union of four'. In particular, the resolution made the following prescription: 'The committees of the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation shall in a month's time develop and submit to the Council of the State Duma a set of measures to eliminate the consequences of the break-up of the USSR'.¹³ The resolution dealt a serious blow to the policy of the authorities. It threatened to undermine trust in the CIS states and foreign countries in the integration efforts, representing them as a prologue to the restoration of the USSR, and promoted the strengthening of the positions of the nationalists. It created additional stimuli for the Baltic and the Central and East European states to distance themselves from Russia and join NATO. To all appearances it was aimed at forestalling President Boris Yeltsin and either frustrating the chances of the documents between Russia and the three other republics being signed or at representing their association as a step in the direction indicated by the State Duma.

The 'union of four' was inaugurated on 29 March 1996. Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko was elected first Head of the Interstate Council. Such ambitious tasks as the definition of common policy and direct management in the economy, money, credit and financial regulation, energy, transport, communications, the provision of equal guarantees of citizens' and national

⁹ See note 4.

¹⁰ Also known as the 'union of four'. Created on 20 Jan. 1995 by Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia. Kyrgyzstan joined when the Treaty on the Deepening of Integration in the Economic and Humanitarian Spheres (also called the 'Treaty of Four') was signed on 29 Mar. 1996. For the text, see *Diplomaticheskii Vestnik*, no. 4 (1996), pp. 56–60. Tajikistan joined in Feb. 1999.

¹¹ See note 10.

¹² Agreements on the dissolution of the USSR reached between Belarus, Russia and Ukraine at a secret meeting at Belavezh, near Brest, Belarus, on 7–8 Dec. 1991.

¹³ *Argumenty i Fakty*, no. 12 (Mar. 1996), p. 2.

minorities' rights and freedoms, foreign policy, the environment, security and the border security were allocated to the competence of joint bodies of the union. In particular, in the military field the parties agreed to ensure common security, to have uniform principles for the construction, planning and use of the armed forces and their participation in peacekeeping operations, and to use elements of the military infrastructure in line with national legislation.¹⁴

The emergence of the 'union of four' did not elevate relations between the member countries to a fundamentally different level. In the final account it was the result of political manoeuvring and internal political struggle in Russia, was not backed up by serious measures and, to all appearances, did not kindle strong mutual interest among the parties to it. At the same time, there are no grounds yet to speak of a complete failure of the union at present or, which is the main thing, in the long run. Significantly, at the peak of financial crisis in Russia in August 1998 the leaders of Belarus and Kazakhstan discussed progress in the integration processes within the framework of the customs union¹⁵ and agreed on the need to create a uniform economic space.

Furthermore, taking into account the inefficiency of the CIS, some statist experts have started to talk about reverting to the idea of a Eurasian Union proposed by Nazarbayev in 1994. However, their interpretation in many respects differs from his ideas and calls for a leading role for Russia in the new entity, including the granting to Russia's state bodies of 'powers to administer the corresponding bodies of other Eurasian Union members within the framework of various kinds of uniform systems (for example, of the border customs service [or] anti-aircraft defence)'.¹⁶ This is of theoretical rather than practical value, both because it would mean delegating too broad terms of reference to Moscow and because Russia would find it difficult to perform the whole range of obligations implied.

So far it remains Russia's main choice to develop relations with the states of Central Asia on a bilateral basis, and their future depends directly on the situation in Russia itself.

III. Political approaches

Russia's relations with the newly independent states of Central Asia remain a branch of policy with a conceptual basis and a system of priorities in a formal sense only. On the one hand, Russia, faced with its own difficulties, has no chance to be a centre of gravity for the former Soviet republics. On the other hand, the newly independent states are actively developing as independent subjects of international relations and formulating their own interests, priorities

¹⁴ Vinogradov, B., 'Soyuz chetyrekh vseryoz i nadolgo, po menshey mere na pyat let' [The union of four: serious and long-term, for at least five years], *Izvestiya*, 30 Mar. 1996, p. 1.

¹⁵ *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 4 Sep. 1998, p. 5.

¹⁶ Vasilyeva, L., Balytnikov, V. and Serkov, E., 'Resheniye problem SNG sushchestvuyet' [There is a solution to the problems of the CIS], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 4 Sep. 1998, p. 5.

and political orientations, which are far from being always coincident with those of Russia.

At the same time, Russia, by virtue of historical links, geographical proximity and, lastly, its military might, maintained in spite of the difficulties of the transitional period, remains and probably will remain a major centre of power in the framework of the post-Soviet system.

The Near Abroad is a unipolar region (Russian preponderance is overwhelming) characterized by asymmetric interdependence . . . and the dominant strategy of regional states toward Russia will be 'bandwagoning' (accommodation), not 'balancing' (resistance). By this I do not mean that the leaders of the southern Near Abroad do not (and will not) have their own agendas or that their foreign policies will be choreographed in Moscow. My point is that even their decisions to diversify economic and political transactions so as to decrease dependence on Russia will be made with a keen awareness that Russia is nearby and powerful and that they inhabit a zone that it considers vital for its national security.¹⁷

The problems of Russian policy in relation to Central Asia stem not only from objective limiting factors and the discrepancy between the proclaimed goals and Russia's own resources but also from the fact that the specifics of the Central Asian states are not sufficiently taken into account. A generalized approach, as practised in the USSR, is frequently transferred, deliberately or by inertia, to the independent states of Central Asia, where the intrinsic influence of the traditional sector of society living according to laws that essentially differ from Russia's is strong. The feeling of cultural, economic and political commonality lingering in the mass consciousness after the disintegration of the USSR has been short-lived and transient. The search for national identity in Central Asia, without which the shaping of the newly independent states is impossible, presumes that the stress will be laid on their original roots, thus estranging them culturally from Russia.

Furthermore, in the states of the region themselves on the whole (with the exception of Tajikistan, which has suffered a bloody civil war and is dependent on Russian aid and support) the consolidation of the regimes has not been proceeding along the line of rapprochement with Russia but along that of increasing alienation from it. This can largely be explained by hasty decisions and actions that followed Russia's declaration of independence and in particular its decision on the rouble zone,¹⁸ which forced the republics of the region, Uzbekistan above all, to urgently introduce their own currencies, break off many economic links and so on. President Nazarbayev has repeatedly encountered arrogance on the part of Russia. In the circumstances, the local regimes, frustrated at Russia's position, were compelled to search for such ways of consolidating

¹⁷ Menon, R., 'After Empire: Russia and the southern "near abroad"', ed. M. Mandelbaum, *The New Russian Foreign Policy* (Council on Foreign Relations: New York, 1998), p. 101.

¹⁸ 'Dogovor o prakticheskikh merakh po sozdaniyu rubevoy zony novogo tipa: Soglasheniye gosudarstv-uchastnikov SNG ot 7 sentyabrya 1993 goda' [Treaty on practical measures to create a rouble zone of a new type: agreement of the CIS member states, 7 Sep. 1993], *Sovety Kazakhstana*, 23 Oct. 1993, p. 1.

their authority as would quickly and effectively reduce their dependence on Russia. Moreover, the present Russian regime, despite all its obvious blemishes, can still be reckoned a democratic one, while in Central Asia authoritarianism is becoming stronger. Local rulers are not interested in the demonstrative effect of Russian reforms, and particularly not in the emergence of independent media in their respective states. Russia has not managed to take advantage even of such important levers to strengthen its influence as the broad spread of the Russian language and the relations of trust resulting from that. In Central Asia, the opportunity of receiving higher education in Russia is still highly appreciated, but only a handful of individuals can enjoy the opportunity. As noted above, all this is passing very quickly, but Russia for its part is not undertaking even such less expensive but essentially important actions as the preservation of the common information and cultural space.

Russia's political relations with the Central Asian states are marked by asymmetry. The states of the region differ considerably and have different specific weights and ambitions. Relations between them are not developing smoothly: for example, there is rivalry and mistrust between the strongest powers of the region, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Russia's relations have been most difficult with Uzbekistan, which is least dependent on it and is bidding for leadership in Central Asia.

Attempts have in fact been made to improve relations with Uzbekistan by defining the sphere of mutual interests. In particular, Russia has used Uzbekistan's fears of the growth of Islamic fundamentalism and extremism to envisage opportunities for closer cooperation. Uzbekistan's President, Islam Karimov, has faced action by fundamentalists in the Ferghana Valley (in Namangan), is afraid of external Islamic forces exerting undesirable influence and is anxious about the prospect of a political challenge to his own position from Islamists. Mikhail Ardzinov, the chairman of the unregistered independent human rights community in Uzbekistan, links the coming presidential election to Karimov's toughening position concerning political Islam: 'New presidential elections will be held in the year 2000. And our president, Islam Karimov, has already begun to prepare for them. He understands quite well that the Islamists are his main rival. If the elections were held now, their candidate would undoubtedly get about 70 per cent of the vote . . . Karimov simply has to get rid of this dangerous rival before it's too late'.¹⁹ The figure of 70 per cent may seem exaggerated, but the fact that in Uzbek society there is scope to mobilize the population under Islamic slogans is not in doubt. In this context, during President Karimov's visit to Moscow on 6 May 1998, the Russian authorities proposed an agreement with a view to resisting 'the advance of Islamic fundamentalism' in Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Central Asia in general. President Imomali Rakhmonov of Tajikistan, who was told about the document under preparation by telephone, also immediately volunteered to sign it.²⁰

¹⁹ *Prism* (Washington, DC), vol. 4, no. 13, part 1 (of 3) (26 June 1998).

²⁰ *Jamestown Monitor*, vol. 4, no. 91 (12 May 1998).

The creation of a troika of official fighters against fundamentalism testified to Russia's rather clumsy and short-sighted attempts to find points of contact with the Uzbek regime on the basis of an agreement which is regarded by many as anti-Islamic. The reasons for Karimov's interest in it have been mentioned. Rakhmonov was tempted by one more chance to demonstrate Russia's and Uzbekistan's support for his regime. However, considering that he is compelled to carry on dialogue on the sharing of power and to cooperate with the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), his position caused bewilderment in the ranks of the UTO, where the document was perceived as a deviation from earlier commitments. Russia itself, in which about 12 million Muslims live and which is confronted with acute problems in the northern Caucasus, should also have been more circumspect in tackling such delicate issues. Finally, the document has hardly added to the popularity of Russian policy in public opinion in Central Asia, although it suited local regimes which had reason to be afraid of the Muslim challenge. The agreement also testified to the lingering uncertainty about Russia's priorities in Central Asia.

The following features of the present-day Russian political course in Central Asia can be singled out: (a) an absence of ideas about the value of the region for Russia; (b) an unwillingness to impose restrictions on itself for the sake of keeping Central Asia in the orbit of Russian influence (the question of military presence is considered separately below); and (c) rather superficial ideas about the socio-political and ethno-political processes under way in the region.

IV. Economic links

Russia was unable to ensure its economic presence in the region through investment, purchase of blocks of shares, and the creation of joint ventures and financial groups. A rather high level of risk and the lack of any prospects of getting dividends quickly has discouraged private Russian capital from Central Asia, except for oil, where Russian companies tried to join in the development of deposits and the transport of oil.

Interest in diversifying the economy and developing new industries—light industries, food, machine-building—is pushing the Central Asian countries toward the CIS in search of technological cooperation, and, most importantly, in search of possible market outlets for these industries. Taking into account the saturation of world markets, the things they are and will be producing will rather be bought in Russia than elsewhere.

Some financial backing also comes from the Russian Federation in the form of technical (actually interest-free) credits which prevent the establishment of serious debts of Central Asian states for interstate deliveries. Interest in Russia as a transit bridge to the West, as an outlet to the sea, still persists. However, the dynamics and the general trend of development of Central Asian economic links is not towards Russia, and the latter bears a large share of the blame for this.²¹

²¹ Nikonov, V. (President of the Politika Foundation), 'Politika Rossii v Tsentralnoy Azii' [Russia's policy in Central Asia], *Tsentralnaya Aziya*, no. 8 (1997) p. 55.

Table 8.1. Russia's trade with the Central Asian republics, 1991–96

Figures are in current US \$m. Figures in italics are percentages.

	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1996 as % of 1991
<i>Kazakhstan</i>							
Exports	11 820.0	6 265.0	2 924.0	2 198.4	2 586.0	2 552.4	21.6
Imports	6 266.8	4 131.4	2 591.2	1 996.2	2 726.4	3 025.7	48.3
<i>Kyrgyzstan</i>							
Exports	1 700.0	518.7	255.0	103.9	104.7	153.2	9.0
Imports	1 328.0	309.4	205.4	97.8	101.2	138.2	10.4
<i>Tajikistan</i>							
Exports	1 785.0	327.6	119.0	143.3	190.1	151.5	8.5
Imports	1 062.0	145.6	63.2	90.0	167.0	88.0	8.3
<i>Turkmenistan</i>							
Exports	1 530.0	600.6	238.0	111.9	93.1	113.8	7.4
Imports	2 070.9	436.8	158.0	60.4	60.8	146.4	7.1
<i>Uzbekistan</i>							
Exports	7 820.0	2 102.1	901.0	786.1	824.0	1 084.8	13.9
Imports	6 903.0	728.0	880.0	851.8	888.7	653.1	9.5

Source: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 'The state of integration in the CIS', Draft report Presented at the Carnegie Moscow Centre, 5–6 Mar. 1998.

The data on the volume of trade between the states of Central Asia and Russia (see table 8.1) are sufficiently disquieting and significant. They confirm that as a trade partner Russia is losing its importance and appeal for them. The sharp fall in the volume of trade after 1991, natural after the break-up of a single state, has not been compensated for since. Even in the case of Kazakhstan, with which Russia has kept the widest economic links, the volume of trade did not reach half of the level of 1991 in the relatively favourable year 1996.

The participation of Russian oil companies in the development of oil deposits, first of all in Kazakhstan, is important. In Kazakhstan they form part of Tengizchevroil, the joint venture to develop Kazakhstan's giant Tengiz oilfield. Its shareholders are the US companies Chevron and Mobil, with stakes of 45 per cent and 25 per cent, respectively; Kazakhstan, with 25 per cent; and LukArco, an alliance of Russia's Lukoil and the US Atlantic Richfield, with 5 per cent.²² However, the activity of the Russian oil and gas monopolies in Central Asia has virtually no relation to or connection with the rest of their economies and does not radically change the fact of Russia's gradual economic withdrawal from the region. At a time when Russia is in most serious financial crisis, it is beyond reason to expect its economic presence in Central Asia to increase in the immediate future.

²² *Jamestown Monitor*, vol. 4, no. 69 (9 Apr. 1998).

V. Problems of security

Russian policy in Central Asia is most clearly revealed in the crises which demanded of Russia an immediate response.

The isolationism with respect to Central Asia which was characteristic of the Russian approach at the beginning of the 1990s was not so evident in the field of security as in other areas of its relationship with the states of the region. However, if at the initial stage there were illusions concerning the chances of preserving the unified armed forces, the swift nationalization of military policy, the interest shown by the Central Asian newly independent states in the creation of their own armed forces as a symbol of national sovereignty and the hasty division of the military property that remained on their territories quickly convinced the Moscow politicians of the need for new approaches in the field of security.

In May 1992, four Central Asian republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) were among the first to sign the Tashkent Treaty on Collective Security.²³ Awareness of their own vulnerability, the post-Soviet syndrome and the desire to retain support from Russia in the military sphere made the Central Asian states active adherents of collective efforts. Russian politicians did not show much interest in preserving the defence space through the development of contacts with Central Asia; they merely did not resist the process taking place.

Subsequent propositions and ideas, basically stemming from the military and concerning the creation of a single defence union, failed to receive support. The rather amorphous Tashkent Treaty suited the parties better than the heavy obligations they would inevitably have to shoulder in a defence union. Besides, a defence union could not adequately meet the security challenges the parties to it might confront. From the very beginning it was obvious that there would be a need to create regional sub-systems. The Central Asian region was thus to be divided into two security zones: western (Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and part of Kyrgyzstan) and eastern (Kazakhstan and parts of Russia and Kyrgyzstan). The main danger to the states of the western zone comes from Afghanistan. The Chinese factor is present in the East Asian region, the eastern area of the Russian Federation and the eastern region of Kazakhstan.²⁴

This approach could be carried into effect only by means of huge capital investment, for which nobody in the CIS was ready. The creation of a military–political union without Ukraine basically lost all sense. Uzbekistan also treated that kind of association rather sceptically. The idea was merely used for a time as a propaganda counterbalance to plans for NATO expansion, as some kind of answer from Russia to the presumed new partition of Europe.

²³ For the text, see *Izvestiya*, 16 May 1992, p. 3. The original signatories were Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. By the spring of 1994 Azerbaijan, Belarus and Georgia had also joined.

²⁴ Ivashov, L., 'Vozmozhno li voyenno-politicheskiy soyuz?' [Is a military–political alliance possible?], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 18 Oct. 1994, p. 5.

At the same time Russian politicians were facing problems with which they were, to all appearances, unprepared to cope. To abandon Central Asia and leave it to its own devices has turned out to be impossible. Russia's interests in the security field did not allow it to do so.

A prominent example is the Tajik conflict. Much has been written about the evolution of events there and about Russia's policy on Tajikistan.²⁵ Here it is necessary to note only a number of elements that illustrate the dynamics of the Russian approach and policy options at various stages, which grew out of expediency to a much greater degree than out of well-conceived strategy.

The choices open to Russia in the early stages of the conflict were just two—to withdraw its troops and border guards, completely ignoring what was going on, or to intervene on the side of the pro-government forces. The first option could be regarded as highly speculative. Although the Russian Government genuinely tried to avoid intervention, it could not close its eyes to the interdependence of events in Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Even the supporters of a complete departure from Central Asia were compelled to realize what a completely open border in the south—the only fortified barrier—would mean for Russian security. They therefore rather vaguely imagined a possible alternative to the presence of Russian border guard troops. However, the decision to use Russian troops to guard the border also automatically posed new tasks for the Russian 201st Motor Rifle Division (MRD), stationed in Tajikistan. Thus in practical terms Russia had no choice. The stormy political debates on the issue only created an illusion of choice and were largely part of the internal political struggle, not of the working out of strategy for Central Asia.

Russia was compelled to become involved in 1992, when a bloody civil war was already raging.²⁶ Until then, official visitors from Russia saw in the intensifying conflict mainly an ideological collision between the communist *nomenklatura* and the progressive forces—perhaps not quite democratically mature, but in any case ready to overthrow the communist regime. The specifics of the conflict, which was based on regional contradictions, were of little interest to those responsible for political decisions at the time. Appeals from President Karimov, concerned about the prospect of Islamist ideas being exported to Uzbekistan and above all about the possibility of enhanced activity on the part of political Islam in the traditional enclaves of the Ferghana Valley, prompted

²⁵ See also chapter 7 in this volume; and, e.g., Djalili, M.-R., Grare, F. and Akiner, S. (eds), *Le Tajikistan: l'Épreuve de l'Indépendance* [Tajikistan: the test of independence] (Institut Universitaire de Hautes Etudes Internationales: Geneva, 1995), pp. 161–62; Tajbakhsh, S., 'The bloody path of change: the case of post-Soviet Tajikistan', *Harriman Institute Forum*, vol. 6, no. 11 (July 1993), p. 6; Khaidarov, G. and Imomov, M., *Tadjikistan: Tragediya i Bol Naroda* [Tajikistan: the tragedy and pain of a nation] (LINKO: Dushanbe, 1993), p. 72; Bushkov, D. and Mikulskiy, D., *Anatomiya Grazhdanskoy Voyny v Tadjikistane: Etno-sotsialnye Protssesy i Politicheskaya Borba, 1992–1995* [The anatomy of the civil war in Tajikistan: ethno-social processes and political struggle, 1992–1995] (Institute of Ethnology: Moscow, 1996); Zviagelskaya, I., *The Tajik Conflict* (Russian Center for Strategic Research and International Studies: Moscow, 1997); and Zviagelskaya, I., 'The Tajikistan conflict', *SIPRI Yearbook 1999: World Armaments and Disarmament* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1999), pp. 63–75.

²⁶ On the early development of the conflict, see Amer, R., 'Major armed conflicts', *SIPRI Yearbook 1993: World Armaments and Disarmament* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1993), pp. 104–107.

Russia to take more positive action. Russian Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev, visiting Dushanbe on 6 November 1992, made it clear that Russia had chosen to help Tajikistan to re-establish calm. One of the solutions suggested was to give power to the Commander of the 201st MRD, but he officially refused.²⁷ Measures to strengthen the Afghan–Tajik border were taken in parallel.

Military success did not stabilize the situation. The Tajik Government, which had limited regional support, could not establish control over the country. Powerful pressure on the border by the armed groups of the opposition and losses among the Russian border guards forced Russia to bring political influence to bear on the Tajik leaders, who were opposed to the very idea of negotiating with the opposition. Under UN auspices and with the active participation of Russia, the Central Asian states, Iran and Pakistan, official negotiations started in 1993, to end on 27 June 1997 in the signing in Moscow of the General Agreement on Peace and National Accord.²⁸ Forced participation in the settlement of the Tajik conflict has set new tasks—mediation and peacekeeping—for Russian policy in Central Asia.

Russia has come to regard the evolution of relations with the CIS states, including the countries of Central Asia, as the major precondition for the settlement of the conflicts that arise there. Its National Security Doctrine noted: ‘The deepening and development of relations with the member states of the Commonwealth of Independent States is the most important factor promoting the settlement of ethno-political and inter-ethnic conflicts and the maintenance of socio-political stability on Russia’s borders, which will eventually stop centrifugal phenomena in Russia itself.’²⁹ In this context, intermediary and diplomatic efforts to resolve conflicts in the CIS are seen as major factors promoting the reinforcement of Russia’s national security.

The development of positive relations with the international organizations—the UN and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)—and with all parties interested in the settlement of conflicts, irrespective of political *partis pris*, has become a new element in the Russian approach.

Peacekeeping operations are an important element of de-escalating conflicts. Russia’s peacekeeping experience in the CIS started and was further developed in Tajikistan, and then expanded to other post-Soviet conflicts. It was there that the collective peacekeeping forces were created, with the participation, albeit symbolic, of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.³⁰ According to the military doctrine published in November 1993, the Russian Army, along with its traditional tasks, was to perform peacekeeping operations.³¹

²⁷ Poujol, C., ‘Chronology of Russian involvement in the Tajik conflict, 1992–1993’, eds M.-R. Djalili, F. Grare and S. Akiner, *Tajikistan: The Trials of Independence* (Curzon: Richmond, Surrey, 1998), p. 113.

²⁸ For the text, see *Diplomaticeskii Vestnik*, no. 7 (July 1997), pp. 45–46.

²⁹ ‘Kontseptsiya natsionalnoy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii’ [The national security concept of the Russian Federation], *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 27 Dec. 1997, pp. 1–3.

³⁰ Uzbekistan withdrew its troops in Nov. 1998 and Kyrgyzstan in Feb. 1999.

³¹ Stasovsky, A., ‘Voyennaya doktrina Rossii: novoye ponimaniye bezopasnosti strany’ [The Russian military doctrine: new understanding of the country’s security], *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 4 Nov. 1993, p. 1.

The Russian border troops in Tajikistan, currently 11 500 strong,³² form the bulk of the Russian military forces there. The 201st 'peacekeeping' Division has some 6700 troops deployed in the interior of Tajikistan.³³

Coordination of effort between Russia and the Central Asian states in the sphere of defence and security is tending to increase. The constant recurrence of crisis encourages consultation and joint action. Afghanistan is an example: a successful Taleban offensive, the rout of the northern alliance and the advance of the Taleban towards the CIS southern border in the autumn of 1998 caused concern in Russia, Tajikistan and to a lesser extent Uzbekistan. Turkmenistan had had time to establish relations with the Taleban by then. According to the Director of the Russian Federal Border Guard Service, Colonel-General Nikolay Bordyuzha, it is possible not only that Taleban armed formations will appear at the Afghan-Tajik border but also that they will cross it.³⁴ Border protection has been sharply tightened.

Enhanced coordination has also been planned by way of joint military doctrines. On 9 July 1998, Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Russian officers completed a three-day staff exercise at a military base outside Almaty. The Dostyk/Druzhba (Friendship)-98 exercise, the first of its type, rehearsed joint operations. In the first phase, putative joint forces destroyed a terrorist group in order to rescue an international train and the captive passengers; the second phase rehearsed a joint defensive operation by general-purpose forces against a hypothetical invasion, followed by a counter-offensive. The use of combined arms including infantry, armour and ground-support aviation was rehearsed. A Russian, a Kazakh and a Kyrgyz general all participated in the command of the exercise.³⁵

The increase in the number of joint arrangements in the field of defence can be partly explained by Russia's concern at the heightened activity of the US military in the region. The exercise of the Central Asian Battalion (CentrasBat), a Kazakh-Kyrgyz-Uzbek joint battalion, in Kazakhstan in September 1997 also involved the US Army's 82nd Airborne Division, and was organized not by the Partnership for Peace (PFP) but by the US Central Command. According to Commander of US Atlantic Forces General John Sheehan, the exercise highlights 'the US interest that the Central Asian states live in stability' and the fact that 'there is no nation on the face of earth where we can't go'.³⁶ While token units from Russia and other countries were scheduled to join the exercise, still the presence of a US division near its border was hardly a pleasant experience for Russia. The exercise also asserted US support for the independence of the Central Asian states, demonstrating that support to 'neighbouring countries'. It was clear that 'neighbouring countries' meant China and Russia.

³² 'Russian Border Service', in Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Daily Report-Central Eurasia: Military Affairs (FBIS-UMA)*, FBIS-UMA-98-302, 29 Oct. 1998.

³³ *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 28 Nov. 1998.

³⁴ Panfilova, V., 'Dushanbe obespokoyen priblizheniem talibov' [Dushanbe worried at the approach of the Taleban], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 13 Aug. 1998.

³⁵ *Jamestown Monitor*, vol. 4, no. 133 (13 July 1998).

³⁶ 'Western and Russian agencies, 14-16 September', *Jamestown Monitor*, vol. 3, no. 172 (17 Sep. 1997).

Although for the Russian politicians and military it is clear that in the near future the armies of the Central Asian states cannot reorient themselves to other partners, nevertheless the fact that new actors have emerged in this region, which is a sensitive one for Russia, and their action in the even more sensitive sphere of security may disturb Russia and produce an appropriate reaction.

VI. Conclusions

The continuing retreat of Russian policy in Central Asia is now dictated not so much by ideological reasons, as was the case at the beginning of the 1990s, as by real economic limitations and by the impossibility of taking on additional obligations. Speaking of purely political approaches (which are far from being always implemented in practice), it seems that a trend towards reintegration is dominant and will remain so for the foreseeable future. The question is whether Russia can subsequently bring about deeper cooperation with the states of the region or whether it will manage to make up for the time lost during which the possible partners will diverge still further from the sphere of its influence. In this connection, three options for Russian policy seem possible.

1. *Asymmetric reintegration.* Russia could develop relations on a more profound level and coordinate action with individual states of the region—with Kazakhstan, for instance, as having the greatest geopolitical importance, and with Kyrgyzstan. Russia is linked to Tajikistan by the whole complex of existing commitments and, most importantly, its role in guarding the Afghan–Tajik border. However, there are no grounds to speak of partnership with Tajikistan. Relations with Uzbekistan will hardly be basically improved, although a thaw cannot be ruled out, while coordination of positions on separate questions is possible with Turkmenistan.

2. *A new model of relations.* Russia needs to deal with the states of post-Soviet Central Asia as a new region, little known and more and more civilizationally remote. There is in fact little to counteract the weakening of Russian influence in the whole region, the growth of centrifugal tendencies, and the more precise orientations of the Central Asian states towards foreign partners.

3. *An enhanced military presence.* Russia can try to ensure a greater impact on the march of events in the region through an enhanced military presence and greater coordination of efforts in the field of security, but in default of other developed links and bonds.

At present, the most realistic option for Russia is the third. However, it cannot have a long-term character and may only delay the realization of the second option. The first option is possible if there are positive economic changes in Russia, but how many years back the financial crisis of 1998 has flung it no one can tell with any accuracy.