

20th Century Tools for 21st Century Challenges

The Limits of Russian Influence in Central Asia and South Caucasus

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Since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia has regarded both Central Asia and the South Caucasus as being within its sphere of influence. It has also been constantly afraid of “losing them to the West.” The critical moment came in the fall of 1991, when U.S. and NATO military bases were established in Central Asia, American military assistance to Azerbaijan and Georgia was enhanced, and there was talk about the creation of military bases in these two countries as well. This news, albeit on the surface accepted by Moscow, created veritable panic.

Three years later it has become clear that the panic was unfounded. U.S. presence in Central Asia energized Russian policy toward and helped strengthen both Russian military presence and cooperation within regional organizations like the Collective Security Organization (ODKB) and the Shanghai Cooperative Organization (ShOS)

Notwithstanding, influence is slipping out of the hands of Moscow and the process seems irreversible. Part of the reason is the limited ability of Russia to offer investment, technology, or business management know-how. Also, the construction of new identities in the states of Central Asia and the South Caucasus often includes differentiation from Russia. Finally, in the 1990s Russia demonstrated that its military, although still the strongest in the former Soviet Union, was unable to solve the most pressing concern for Central Asia: the Taliban in Afghanistan. In contrast, the United States defeated the Taliban quickly and effectively.

These limitations are significant, but do not preordain the loss of influence. Instead Moscow might emphasize comparative advantages such as common roots of the elites, traditional economic links, and dependence on military hardware. Perhaps the most important reason for the long-term weakening of Russia’s positions in the area is the absence of a positive agenda or, as the Secretary General of the Eurasian Economic Community Grigori Rapota put it, “Russia knows very well what it does not want, but does not know what it wants”(Itogi 2/18/2002). The main task is to keep the United States, Russia’s more feared competitor, out.

Although U.S.-Russian relations are definitely not conceptualized in Moscow as resembling the Cold War, the surface similarity of the task, keeping competitors out of the sphere of influence, dictates the choice of similar methods. These instruments were inefficient in the past and are even more inefficient now. Considerable resources and

military power, as well as the superpower status helped to mitigate the effects of inadequate approaches by the Soviet Union. For Russia, negative consequences are likely to become evident much sooner. The following familiar trends stand out:

Working with available leaders with disregard for their domestic politics.

Russia In many respects, this is the right choice, at least in the short term. All leaders in Central Asia are effectively leaders for life. Azerbaijan has implemented an option that could be called hereditary presidency. Insistence on human rights and democracy risks antagonizing the leaders and the elites of target countries.

From Moscow's perspective, the reduction of American military assistance to Uzbekistan by \$18 million in the summer of 2004 due to the failure of Islam Karimov to implement political reforms only played into Russian hands. This move demonstrated to authoritarian regimes in Central Asia that Moscow was a more reliable partner because it did not interfere with domestic politics. An extreme case is Turkmenistan, whose repressive dictatorial regime is an exception even by Central Asian standards. The Russian government stubbornly ignores violation of human rights including those of the Russian-speaking community.

The downside for Russia, paradoxically, is its reduced influence. Governments in Central Asia and Azerbaijan have come to regard Russia as a "fallback option," which can always be counted on if more attractive (but more difficult to obtain) alternatives do not materialize. For example, even after Tashkent left ODKB in the late 1990s, Moscow continued attempts to woo Islam Karimov without attempting to find an alternative inside Uzbekistan, introduce sanctions, or take other measures to increase the cost of breaking ties with Moscow. When Uzbekistan decided to join ShOS more recently, and upgraded its relations with Moscow, it was welcomed with open arms. However, nothing will prevent Karimov from turning his back to Moscow once again in the future.

In the longer term, Russia risks alienating alternatives to the existing regime, be they democratic or another authoritarianism-leaning group. A change of government is likely to immediately and radically reduce Russian influence in the region.

Public expression of loyalty is more important than substance.

Vladimir Putin and his team display the same propensity as their Soviet predecessors: public expression of disagreement is taken as a sign of hostility, but public statements of "undying friendship" often substitute substance.

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan led the other Central Asian states in expressing their loyalty to Russia. This was especially true for Emomali Rakhmonov of Tajikistan, who depended on Russian troops to be deployed along the border with Afghanistan. Askar Akaev of Kyrgyzstan closely followed this lead. Yet, the enthusiastic agreement of two countries to host American military bases (the largest is Manas near Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan) came as a shock to Russia. Shortly afterwards Tajikistan reportedly demanded \$150-200 million per year for military bases.

Russian concerns quickly subsided, however, after a series of public statements by these leaders was made reaffirming their friendship with Russia, even though their policies did not significantly change. For example, Askar Akaev did not act on his promise that if the United States wanted to keep the Manas base for longer than one year, the request would be submitted by Kyrgyzstan to the ODKB and the ShOS. Neither organization has ever been given a voice in the decision to extend the lease. Nevertheless, relations with both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan remain stable, supported first and foremost by statements of high-level officials, who go out of their way in official statements and interviews to declare their friendship to Russia.

A black-and-white view dominates perspectives.

The phrase “Who is not with us is against us,” made famous by Stalin before World War II, still informs Russian thinking about leaders in the near abroad. It is assumed that these can be either pro-Russian (i.e. their policies coincide with what the Kremlin desires) or anti-Russian, (i.e. oriented toward the West). The middle ground, the case when a government’s policy can coincide with Russian interests only partially or be compatible but not identical, is recognized in theory but not in practice. The outcome is reasonably predictable. Sooner or later purely pro-Russian leaders come to be seen inside their countries as foreign stooges and risk losing domestic support and those who begin to contradict Russia and are reclassified as enemies.

In 2004 alone, Russia managed to alienate two alternative leaders who could have been acceptable and friendly to Russian interests: Sergei Bagpash in Abkhazia and Viktor Yushchenko in Ukraine. Heavy-handed Russian attempts to affect the outcomes of elections could have cost pro-Russian candidates a considerable chunk of votes, especially in the case of Ukraine.

It is likely that Russia’s experience with Georgia strengthened this tendency. Russian representatives, especially Igor Ivanov, played a pivotal role in the removal of Edward Shevardnadze and ensured a peaceful restoration of Tbilisi’s control over a dissident region of Adjara. While it was widely expected that the new president of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, would accommodate Russian interests, he instead kept pressing for an early return of control over South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and for the removal of two remaining Russian military bases.

From Moscow, this was seen as a failed attempt to work with a candidate that was not selected or approved by Moscow. It is possible that the heavy-handed approach to Abkhazia and Ukraine was informed by the fear of having the same result: that the endorsement of and assistance to a non-Moscow approved candidate would bring an anti-Russian politician to power.

In reality, the fiasco in Georgia was more likely caused by the expectation of a quick quid pro quo on a wide range of issues and the lack of understanding of the limits that any government faces inside its own country. If the Russian government agreed to work with Tbilisi on an orderly gradual transition in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and if it temporized on the issue of bases (as the new Georgian government initially seemed prepared to do), relations between the two countries would have been more stable today

and more positive in the future. As things stand now, even if Russia decides to concede on every issue, Georgia will remain distant and possibly hostile.

There is emphasis on military cooperation as a foundation for political influence.

Military assistance is at the cornerstone of Russian attempts to preserve influence in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, as it was in Soviet times. The revival of ODKB in 2002 to 2004 was attractive for the same reasons as it was during the 1990s: military education and the sale of military equipment at Russian internal prices (though as of fall 2004 agreements on lower prices had not been reached), as well as joint military exercises. The emphasis on military cooperation is partly justified; Russia does not have much else to offer. On the other hand, this policy does not address more pressing economic and developmental needs of the states in question. Furthermore, even the types of military cooperation Russia offers are not particularly attractive. Kazakhstan has already indicated that it would prefer to replace Soviet airspace control and air defense systems with British equipment. Georgia's insistence to educate its officers in the United States and Europe follows the same trend. As in other areas, acceptance of Russian offers of military cooperation is a fallback option which is accepted when nothing better is available.

Economic control instead of economic development.

Russian policy displays a rather simplistic conceptualization of the economic instruments of foreign policy, which date back to at least the early 20th century Marxism and Stalinism. Among these is the belief that control over export routes (especially oil and gas pipelines) is tantamount to control over foreign policy (on the assumption that denial or a threat of denial of export can serve as leverage). Accordingly, the Russian government has spent considerable economic and political resources to make sure that the states of Central Asia and South Caucasus do not acquire alternative oil and gas export routes.

In reality, control over oil and gas export routes has either failed to give Russia control over former Soviet states' foreign policy or has yielded only minimal gains. The opposite is probably true. Out of fear of losing influence and pushing newly independent states into the hands of geopolitical rivals (primarily the United States, but also Pakistan and Turkey), Russia has tended to avoid using pipelines as a pressure tool. All in all, genuine economic dependence on Russia has not had discernable policy results.

Ironically, the Western, especially American, approach to this problem has been very Soviet-like. The United States expended considerable resources to reroute oil and gas pipelines to avoid Russia because it was believed that control of export pipelines made Central Asian and Caucasian states dependent on Moscow. These attempts helped to antagonize Russia, but failed to perceptibly change the political landscape in the former Soviet Union because Russia itself abstained from using this as potential leverage.

Inadequate use of force.

Military force is an important policy tool, whether used directly or indirectly, only when the threats are credible. There is nothing inherently wrong with using this tool as long as it is done wisely and within the confines of international law. At the very least, the use of force should be clearly justifiable by reasons acceptable to the international community. Even though its military has been severely weakened and has lost much of its reputation during two wars in Chechnya, Russia remains the strongest state in the region and can, in theory, use military force to supplement foreign policy.

The effectiveness of that tool has been hampered by the choice of target countries and the context. In the recent years, the targets of threats against which to use force were Afghanistan and Georgia and the pretext was war on terrorism. In 2001 the newly appointed minister of defense, Sergei Ivanov, threatened to bomb Chechen training camps organized by Al Qaeda and hosted by the Taliban. In the fall of 2002 and in 2004, Sergei Ivanov and other high-level representatives of the Russian Ministry of Defense threatened to bomb Chechen camps in the Pankisi Gorge territory of Georgia.

In both cases the threats proved empty. While Chechen camps in Afghanistan could be seen by the international community as a legitimate target, Russia did not have high-precision long-range assets to strike them. Russian claims about Georgia were generally accepted, but key international players did not see military force as an acceptable option. Instead, the United States began to provide assistance to Georgia, and the net outcome was the presence of American military in the territory of Georgia which was exactly the opposite of what Russia wanted to achieve.

To other post-Soviet states, including Central Asia and the South Caucasus, these cases demonstrated that Russian power and threats could be disregarded. In the end, it would have been better not to threaten force at all.

At the same time, the Russian government missed perhaps the only target that was both within reach and reasonably legitimate – Turkmenistan. The treatment of the Russian-speaking population there could be used as a valid reason for a threat to use force or even for the actual limited use of force. Assets capable of performing limited air strikes were readily available. Furthermore, such an action would have probably made Russian forces more credible policy instruments, demonstrating that Russia had both the capability and the political will. Instead, as it was mentioned above, the Kremlin preferred to turn its head on human rights violations, seeking accommodation with Turkmen leadership.

Alternative Policy Options

If the current policy does not change, progressive loss of influence in Central Asia and the South Caucasus is almost unavoidable. This is likely to affect U.S.-Russian relations because it will be interpreted as a loss to the United States rather than the result of inadequate policy. Regardless of U.S. action, unless Russian policy changes, the loss of Russian influence is certain.

A more successful Russian policy should address the deficiencies described above. In particular it should:

- Discontinue automatic support of certain leaders of target countries and diversify contacts with potential alternative leaders;
- Discontinue public discussion of the political value of economic ties, especially oil and gas pipelines;
- Consider selective use of political and economic sanctions in response to unfriendly actions. An obvious example is to introduce restrictions against the estimated 300,000 Tajik guest workers in Russia. Similar steps were taken against guest workers from Georgia, but Tajikistan and other countries have been curiously exempt from these types of sanctions.
- Enhance defense of the rights of Russian-speakers in Central Asian states.

The linchpin of Russia's relations with its southern neighbors should be economic integration based on the existing interdependence. This thesis is not new, but the shape of integration should be different from the traditional attempts to restore Soviet-era networks. Above all, economic ties should not be accorded intermediate political significance.

An alternative to the Soviet-style policy was proposed in October 2003 by Anatoly Chubais and was promptly rejected. One of the possible reasons for rejection was the name he chose for his image of the post-Soviet space, a "liberal empire." The substance of his proposal was much less objectionable, however. According to Chubais, Russia should base its influence on economic development, market forces (including private investment), and promotion of democratic institutions throughout the Soviet Union. The key element of the proposal was reliance on private investment in the near abroad because it is profit-oriented rather than policy-oriented and leads to economic development in recipient states without immediate, short-term political concessions. The aspect that Moscow might find difficult to accept is relatively slow return. Building this kind of interdependence takes time tolerance.

Emphasis on private investment does not seem likely, however, in the light of the squeeze the Russian government has put on large-scale private entrepreneurship (the YUKOS affair is the largest and the most visible, but is only the tip of the iceberg). Thus, the revival or a variation of the liberal empire concept seems unlikely, at least in the near future.

Under the current circumstances, U.S options are limited. It seems advisable to continue a cautious policy, which emphasizes limited goals in Central Asia and the South Caucasus and avoids the appearance of pushing Russia out. Paradoxically, the United States might actually be interested in preserving some Russian influence in the area especially since there is little reason for the United States to accept the full burden of these unstable regions. This kind of parallel presence is plausible. After all, in the late 1990s Russia decided to "share" Central Asia with China through the Shanghai Cooperative Organization. Joint influence seemed (and probably was) better than potential loss in a unilateral game. Perhaps similar options could be found with the United States.