

Russia and the CIS in 2018

Regionalism or Transregionalism?

ABSTRACT

Russia's "Asian pivot" remains focused on China, despite energetic Russian diplomacy in 2018 *vis-à-vis* Japan and India. The benefits of the enlargement of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to include Pakistan and India remained unclear, and the overlapping memberships of regional organizations highlighted the challenges for security and economic cooperation in Central Asia.

KEYWORDS: SCO enlargement, BRI, EEU, multilateralism, regional cooperation

IN 2018, RUSSIA'S RELATIONS with the West continued to deteriorate, marked by the investigations into electoral interference in the US and the Skripal poisoning affair in the UK. On the Asian front, however, significant regional and global powers, including China and India, remained sanguine regarding the trajectory of relations with Russia.

The relationship with China is still the mainstay of Russia's engagement with Asia. Debates continue as to whether the close relationship with the superpower-in-waiting is a question of Russian subordination to Chinese grand strategy, or more a relationship of equals seeking to manage their respective regions.¹ China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) gathered pace, and the BRI–Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) agreement is due to come into force in early 2019. Still, questions were increasingly being asked as to whether Russia would in fact benefit from the project in economic terms, and

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1. Marcin Kaczmarski, "Russian-Chinese Relations in Eurasia: Harmonization or Subordination?" Briefing Paper 238, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, <<https://www.fiaa.fi/en/publication/russian-chinese-relations-in-eurasia>>, accessed November 25, 2018.

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whether it was wise to be so tightly bound to China in terms of trade and energy deals. Nevertheless, Chinese demand for natural gas has increased, and the first exports via the Power of Siberia pipeline are due in December 2019.

Bilateral trade turnover was US\$ 67.5 billion for January–August 2018, up 25.7% over the same period in 2017.² But the bulk of Russian exports to China remained raw materials, in particular in the Far Eastern Federal District of Russia, which in the 1990s had been securitized as “raw materials appendages” of a China sometimes accused of seeking to revise the “unequal treaties.” In 2018, similarly, some Russian governors in the region adjoining China sought to make political capital from the geopolitical and geoeconomic anxiety regarding China’s economic presence.

Chinese investment in Russia remains minimal, in part due to the poor investment climate and undue bureaucratization. Chinese bankers were cautious, avoiding Russian clients due to the sanctions risk.³ Thus, the longer-term substance of Russia’s “pivot to the East,” as an alternative to the West in economic terms, is called into question.

While Russia has often professed the need to maintain a diversity of partners in Asia, this has proved more aspiration than reality. Still, India, Japan, and the Korean Peninsula were all objects of Moscow’s diplomatic efforts in 2018, and Russia’s agreement on a strategic partnership with ASEAN, as well as President Vladimir Putin’s attendance at the East Asia Summit in Singapore in November 2018, showed some interest in moving beyond China. Russia discussed a free trade agreement between the SCO and ASEAN, although trade and investment from ASEAN countries is paltry, while Russia remains the biggest seller of weapons to Southeast Asia.⁴

Moscow’s relationship with New Delhi, which had begun to seem more symbolic than substantial, in particular given India’s closer relations with the US and the rolling out of the US’s INDOPACOM, the all-Asia security strategy that now explicitly includes India, showed signs of strengthening. At an informal summit between Putin and Prime Minister Narendra Modi in

2. “Russia-China Trade Turnover up 25.7% in Jan–Aug 2018,” TASS.

3. “Novoe kitaiksoe predubezhdenie” [China’s new bias], *Kommersant*, October 24, 2018, <<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3779051>>, accessed December 2, 2018.

4. Jun Suzuki and Tomoyo Ogawa, “Russia Draws Closer to Southeast Asia with Arms and Energy Trade,” *Nikkei Asian Review*, <<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-Relations/Russia-draws-closer-to-Southeast-Asia-with-arms-and-energy-trade>>, accessed December 3, 2018.

May 2018, it was agreed that the “special and privileged strategic partnership” between the two was an important factor for global peace and stability. The sale to India of SU-27 fighter jets was a reminder of Moscow’s traditional prioritization of India in the arms sector, as well as of the fact that despite the close security relationship, the US would not supply India with F-35s.⁵ In September, India concluded a US\$ 2.2 billion deal to buy four warships from Russia. This came a few days after India’s signing of the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement with the US, demonstrating their close strategic relationship, one that could sit uneasily with closer relations with China and Russia.⁶

China nevertheless maintained its position as chief purchaser of Russia’s arms exports. Negotiations with Japan over the territorial issue limped along. Viewed against the *longue durée* of Russo–Japanese diplomacy, one could be forgiven for thinking relations were a case of *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*, as Putin dangled the possibility of a resolution of the islands dispute, yet always stopped short of any concrete concessions. Japan’s continued interest in negotiations, at a time when Russian territorial integrity appears more sacrosanct than ever, seemed puzzling. It can partly be explained by Japanese concern over the deepening Sino–Russian relations, in particular in the military sphere.

This deepening was exemplified by the Vostok 2018 military exercises held in Russia in September (timed to coincide with the end of the Eastern Economic Forum), in which 300,000 Russian troops took part, plus 3,000 Chinese soldiers. Views on the significance of the exercises have varied, with some suggesting they show that the relationship has all the features of an alliance, and others pointing out that in reality this was a Russian exercise with a few Chinese exercising alongside.⁷ It does seem that Russia wished to showcase its military might, and in particular the fruits of its campaign in Syria, where it has for the first time projected power at the global level, leading to speculation that China seeks to learn from the Russian experience

5. Vasily Kashin, “The Current State of Russian-Chinese Defense Cooperation,” CNA Occasional Paper, <https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/DOP-2018-U-018184-Final.pdf>, accessed October 11, 2018.

6. Saurabh Mishra, “India’s Response to its Strategic Conundrum,” *Asia Dialogue: China Policy Institute Blog* (email newsletter), September 30, 2018, University of Nottingham, UK.

7. Roger McDermott, “Moscow Showcases Vostok 2018: Fact, Fiction and Hyperbole,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 15, no. 126, <<https://jamestown.org/program/moscow-showcases-vostok-2018-fact-fiction-and-hyperbole/>>, accessed November 10, 2018.

in Syria.⁸ Understandably, then, Japan is wary of the two powers working together in such a way, a view echoed in the US National Defense Strategy Commission report in November.⁹

China and Russia might be expected to speak with one voice regarding the Korean Peninsula, but the tendency has been for only Russia to attempt to push for an easing of sanctions.¹⁰ Both states have suffered from the restrictions on North Korean labor, in particular in the Russian Far East, where North Koreans have worked for decades. These laborers are widely perceived as more reliable and hardworking than their Russian or Central Asian counterparts, and have largely replaced Chinese workers, who no longer show much interest in settling in the Russian Far East. Their numbers fell from around 7,500 in 2017 to 1,000 in 2018.¹¹

In the West Asian direction, the Peace Mission exercises in 2018 involved India and Pakistan for the first time as new members of the SCO; 3,000 troops from Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan took part, as well as Russia, China, India, and Pakistan. The exercises were hailed by the SCO's secretary-general, Rashid Alimov, as proof of its growing "global profile," noting "the importance of the SCO's expanding trans-regionality from the Pacific to the Baltic and from the Arctic Ocean to the Indian Ocean" in the light of the accession of India and Pakistan.¹²

8. "China Declares Vostok 2018 War Games Exercise a Success as Troops Are 'Toughened up for Battle,'" *South China Morning Post*, September 17, 2018, <<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/2164592/china-declares-vostok-2018-war-games-success-troops-are>>, accessed November 20, 2018.

9. United States Institute of Peace, "National Defense Strategy Commission Releases Its Review of 2018 National Defense Strategy," November 13, 2018, <<https://www.usip.org/press/2018/11/national-defense-strategy-commission-releases-its-review-2018-national-defense>>, accessed December 1, 2018.

10. "Morgulov prizval uchest' interesy KNDR v oblasti bezopasnosti," [Morgulov calls for North Korean security interests to be taken into account], *Ria Novosti*, October 9, 2018, <https://ria.ru/world/20181009/1530306042.html> accessed November 1, 2018.

11. Andrei Lankov, "North Korean Workers and their Russian Employers: Observations from Vladivostok," *NK News*, November 22, 2018, <<https://www.nknews.org/2018/11/north-korean-workers-and-their-russian-employers-observations-from-vladivostok/>>, accessed November 30, 2018.

12. R. Alimov, "Mnogoplanovoe sotrudnichestvo v ramkakh ShOS opredelyaet vector obshcheregional'nogo razvitiya" General'nyi sekretar' ShOs prinyal uchastie v mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii v Shankhae," [Multivector cooperation within the SCO framework will determine the pace of regional development: the general secretary of the SCO took part in an international conference in Shanghai], September 17, 2018, <<http://rus.sectscsco.org/news/20180917/465421.html>>, accessed October 17, 2018.

In terms of regional security in Central Asia, diplomacy relating to Afghanistan was centered mainly on the contact group meetings involving only Russia, China, and Pakistan. The new rationale for the SCO appears elusive, but with the accession of India and Pakistan, the SCO summit in June 2018 revealed some differences between members on priorities. The Chinese dominance of the SCO and the diverging views of China and Russia on SCO objectives over the years remain a problem. Previously, the division of labor within Central Asia appeared clear, as the Chinese tended to try to push the SCO in an economic direction, while Russia emphasized political and security aspects. Yet China shows signs of becoming a more political actor, with officials making speeches that hint at a more proactive and engaged approach to ideas about regional international order, a development that is a cause of anxiety in Moscow. Thus China used the SCO summit to highlight the role of the SCO *vis-à-vis* the BRI, and to remind members that the organization transcends “outdated concepts such as clash of civilizations, Cold War and zero-sum mentality.”¹³ Given Indian hostility to the BRI, this linkage of the BRI with the SCO may be unwelcome there.

CENTRAL ASIA

In Central Asia, 2018 was a year of both change and continuity. Most of the change revolved around the change in leadership in Uzbekistan, although each Central Asian state contributed to the dynamics of change and continuity in the region. In Kazakhstan, for example, ambivalent relations with Russia continue to mark Astana’s foreign policy. On the one hand, there is the clear recognition that Russia and Kazakhstan are strategic partners and that their alliance, which stands on solid historical, economic, and political ground, will continue to evolve.¹⁴ On the other hand, the heavy economic sanctions that Western countries have imposed on Moscow have contributed to a sharp devaluation of the tenge (the Kazakhstani currency) and an underperforming economy.¹⁵ The downward trend in the economic conditions of

13. “Full Text of Chinese President Xi Jinping’s Speech at the 18th SCO Qingdao Summit,” *Xinhua*, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-06/10/c_137244587.htm>, accessed November 30, 2018.

14. “Nursultan Nazarbayev Meets with Vladimir Putin,” *Qazaq Times*, May 15, 2018, <<https://qazaqtimes.com/en/article/39856>>.

15. KazakhSTAN 2.0, “Nazarbayev Said: ‘We Are Not with Putin’,” March 5, 2018, <https://kz.expert/en/news/analitika/467_nazarbayev_said_we_are_not_with_putin>; “Currency Devaluation

Kazakhstan can also be attributed to disputes with Moscow over the unauthorized transit of Ukrainian goods to Kazakhstan through Russian territory, in the context of what is still, in many respects, an ill-functioning EEU. Kazakhstan showed renewed engagement with its Central Asian neighbors by hosting a “consultative meeting” of the Central Asian states in Astana in March 2018. Relations between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have improved, especially in the economic, political, and cultural spheres.¹⁶ The strategic partnership between the two countries has been reaffirmed, trade turnover soared by 52% in the first half of 2018, and mutual recognition of visas has been established, thus creating a mini-Central Asian “Schengen.”

For Kyrgyzstan, 2018 was marked by Bishkek’s welcome and long-overdue rapprochement with Tashkent, exemplified by the signing of a new treaty regulating their border, consultative meetings on military and cultural issues,¹⁷ and a staggering rise in trade turnover as compared to the Karimov era. Kyrgyzstan’s relations with Kazakhstan, despite well-known rhetorical discourse on nomadic and Altaic brotherhood, continue to be strained over issues pertaining to cross-border trade in the framework of the EEU, often due to problems concerning phytosanitary standards of goods. Bishkek has also managed to maintain cordial and warm relations with Tajikistan, but the chronic problems on their border, with frequent episodes of intercommunal violence, have not been solved. On a more international level, Kyrgyzstan has remained in the orbit of Moscow for matters pertaining to security, even discussing the prospect of a second Russian military base in the country,¹⁸ while being an active economic partner with China.

Looking at Tajikistan, the launch of the Roghun Dam is the most significant event of 2018. After protracted negotiations with regional and international partners, and after overcoming extremely strong opposition to the project from the late President Karimov, President Emomali Rahmon successfully

Places Kazakhstan Central Bank under Pressure,” *Financial Times*, September 15, 2018, <<https://www.ft.com/content/48495ba8-579f-11e5-a28b-50226830d644>>.

16. Embassy of Uzbekistan in New Delhi, “Shavkat Mirziyoyev Met with Nursultan Nazarbayev,” March 15, 2018, <<http://www.uzbekembassy.in/shavkat-mirziyoyev-met-with-nursultan-nazarbayev/>>.

17. “Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan Plan to Hold Second Meeting of Leaders of Border Areas,” November 15, 2018, <<http://kabar.kg/eng/news/kyrgyzstan-and-uzbekistan-plan-to-hold-second-meeting-of-leaders-of-border-areas/>>.

18. “Kyrgyz President Says Russia Undecided on Second Military Base,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 6, 2018, <<https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-russia-second-military-base/29082637.html>>.

inaugurated the operation of the dam on November 16 (President Day in Tajikistan).¹⁹ The realization of the project, which is still in its infancy, is certainly linked to a political and diplomatic atmosphere in Central Asia that differs remarkably from the past. With the change of leadership in Uzbekistan, Dushanbe has found in its neighbor a cooperative partner, and no longer a staunch opponent. Between the two countries, trade is now on the rise, cultural exchanges are now the norm, and border disputes have been regulated and contained thanks to the use of international law instruments.²⁰ At the same time, not all is rosy for Rahmon. Recent insurgencies in northern Afghanistan have made it imperative to coordinate strategically with Moscow and other Central Asian neighbors to protect the border and prevent the penetration of Taliban and other radical elements into Tajik territory. Moreover, from a domestic viewpoint, renewed tensions in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region have raised tensions, especially after a recent episode of violence in a prison in Khujand, for which ISIS claimed responsibility.²¹

The year was rather uneventful for Turkmenistan. Yet, this apparent stasis may be seen to conceal the dynamics of potential (violent) change. More and more evidence of food shortages and mounting lack of crucial basic goods such as bread is being gathered and presented to the international community, despite the notorious secrecy of the Turkmen government. The Russian newspaper *Izvestiya* recently characterized the situation as comparable to that in Venezuela, calling it Turkmenezuela, in what is arguably a diplomatic and reputational blow to Ashgabat.²² In an unprecedented move, the government acknowledged the situation by ending the free provision of crucial services like petrol and gas, which was customary and institutionalized under the presidency of Saparmurat Niyazov.²³

19. "Tajikistan Inaugurates Mega-Dam," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, November 16, 2018, <<https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-dam/29604625.html>>.

20. Office of the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, "High-Level Meeting between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan within the State Visit of the President of Tajikistan to Uzbekistan," August 17, 2018, <<http://www.president.tj/en/node/18190>>.

21. Catherine Putz, "Inmates Killed in Tajikistan Prison Riot," *The Diplomat*, November 8, 2018, <<https://thediplomat.com/2018/11/inmates-killed-in-tajikistan-prison-riot/>>.

22. "Turkmenesuela: bogateishuyu postsovetskuyu respubliku shtormit" [Turkmenesuela: the richest post-Soviet republic is in the eye of the storm], *Izvestiya*, October 28, 2018, <<https://iz.ru/804812/igor-karmazin/turkmenesuela-bogateishuii-postsovetskuii-respubliku-shtormit>>.

23. Toymyrat Bugayev, "The Gas Man Cometh: In Turkmenistan, Free Energy No More," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, November 11, 2018, <<https://www.rferl.org/a/turkmen-energy-consumers-get-shock-treatment/29594173.html>>.

Another element that may lead one to think that the Turkmen government is finally taking measures to contain the economic crisis is the resumption of gas deliveries to Russia. Such a move derives from effective diplomacy and lobbying by Gazprom, ending what has been so far an almost exclusive commercial relationship between Turkmenistan and China. Even more interestingly, Turkmenistan is discussing the development of trans-Caspian pipelines from Turkey to Turkmenistan via Azerbaijan.²⁴ President Gurbanguly Mälikgulyýewiç Berdimuhammedov has made sure to maintain good relations with all of Turkmenistan's Central Asian neighbors, in particular Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan, despite a recent row over the construction of the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Tajikistan railway, which, according to the Tajik government, is no longer necessary, despite half of it already having been built.²⁵

Uzbekistan is certainly in the spotlight when it comes to assessing 2018 in Central Asia. One might argue that most of the changes in the region have been catalyzed by the proactive multilateralism pursued by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in the last two years. Uzbekistan first launched the idea of institutionalizing a yearly consultative meeting of Central Asian leaders to discuss matters pertaining to the politics, security, environment, and development of the region. Uzbekistan has also opened up its borders, de-mining the border with Tajikistan, removing visa regimes with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, entrenching border demarcation and collaboration with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, and even reaching an agreement with Kazakhstan on the mutual recognition of visas, creating a sort of embryonic Central Asian Schengen area.²⁶ This new commitment to a liberalization of the Central Asian space, at least in economic terms, has found its direct consequence in the resumption of talks with international financial institutions, such as the IMF and the WTO, in which Uzbekistan is considering membership.²⁷

24. Ministry of Transport, Communications and High Technologies of the Republic of Azerbaijan, "Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan Signed Bilateral Documents," November 22, 2018, <<http://mincom.gov.az/en/view/news/447/azerbaijan-turkmenistan-signed-bilateral-documents>>.

25. Catherin Putz, "Did Tajikistan Just Ditch a Rail Project with Turkmenistan?" *The Diplomat*, September 25, 2018, <<https://thediplomat.com/2018/09/did-tajikistan-just-ditch-a-rail-project-with-turkmenistan/>>.

26. "Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan Sign Mutual Visa Recognition Deal," *Tashkent Times*, November 16, 2018, <<http://tashkenttimes.uz/national/3192-uzbekistan-kazakhstan-sign-mutual-visa-recognition-deal>>.

27. International Monetary Fund, "Uzbekistan: Staff Concluding Statement of the 2018 Article IV Mission," March 14, 2018, <<https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2018/03/14/mso31418-uzbekistan-staff-concluding-statement-of-the-2018-article-iv-mission>>; "World Customs Organization to Assist

Yet, one should be careful not to expect a drastic change in foreign policy. Despite its modernization and its craving for investment, it is very unlikely that Uzbekistan will join the EEU, at least in the short or medium term. Rather, the trend seems to be that of internationalizing the economy while avoiding integrationist projects with the bigger economies of Kazakhstan and, most importantly, Russia. At the same time, in the field of security, while it is true that Uzbekistan has resumed dialogue on military cooperation with Russia,²⁸ it is unlikely that talks on rejoining the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) will be resumed any time soon. If Uzbekistan's foreign economic policy has changed, the same cannot be said for the security aspect thereof, in which sovereignty prerogatives and defensive neutrality still seem paramount.

From a multilateral perspective, there are few, but nonetheless important, facts to consider. The CSTO has continued military drills and exercises, keeping alive member states' focus on the Afghan problem.²⁹ However, the organization has been shaken by a severe diplomatic row between Armenia and Belarus. Belarus has charged that Armenian leadership is not stable enough to hold the chairmanship of the organization. At the same time Belarus has tightened relations with Azerbaijan, a non-member of CSTO and Armenia's rival in regional politics.³⁰ Another interesting development that has affected multilateralism in the region is the possibility that Tajikistan will soon join the EEU. While, as noted above, this may not yet be the case for Uzbekistan, a recent study by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development showed the benefits that Tajikistan would get from membership.³¹ Yet, the organization still seems to be fractured and not working smoothly with respect to the free movement of goods, so it is possible that Dushanbe will take more time to consider applying for membership.

Uzbekistan's Accession to WTO," *Azernews*, November 9, 2018, <<https://www.azernews.az/region/140648.html>>.

28. "After Putin's Visit, Russia's Footprint in Uzbekistan Is Set to Grow," October 22, 2018, <<https://jamestown.org/program/after-putins-visit-russias-footprint-in-uzbekistan-is-set-to-grow/>>.

29. "Lavrov: Post-Soviet Security Bloc's Top Diplomats Concerned about Afghanistan's North," *TASS*, June 11, 2018, <<http://tass.com/politics/1009094>>.

30. Joshua Kucera, "Pashinyan-Lukashenko Spat Intensifies, Threatening CSTO Schism," *Eurasianet*, November 21, 2018, <<https://eurasianet.org/pashinyan-lukashenko-spat-intensifies-threatening-csto-schism>>.

31. "Salary of Tajik Migrants May Grow up to 28% after Accession of Tajikistan in EAEU – EBRD," *Kazakh Telegraph Agency*, November 23, 2018, <<https://www.kaztag.kz/en/news/salary-of-tajik-migrants-may-grow-up-to-28-after-accession-of-tajikistan-in-eaeu-ebrd>>.

The last multilateral development in the region pertains to the agreement that the five littoral states of Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Turkmenistan reached in August 2018 with respect to the international legal status of the Caspian Sea.³² Breaking a stalemate which lasted more than 20 years, the states finally agreed on how to divide the surface (read: waters) and to ban foreign powers from having any military presence in the Caspian. The demarcation of the seabed, and the possible construction of pipelines, have been left to bilateral agreements. But all the documents pertaining to the construction of pipelines, from environmental impact to technical assistance, are to be shared with all the littoral states, despite the bilateral nature of the hypothetical agreements.

ECONOMIC FIGURES

From an economic perspective, the Central Asian republics had moderate growth last year. The economy of Kazakhstan grew 4.3% year-on-year in November 2018, following 5.2% expansion in the previous month. Kazakhstan recorded a government debt equivalent to 17.4% of the country's GDP in 2017, higher than the average of 12.6% from 2002 to 2017. The GDP in Kyrgyzstan expanded 4.9% year-on-year in the first six months of 2018, with government debt equivalent to 54% of the country's GDP in 2017. This is still significantly less than the average of 71% from 2000 to 2017. Tajikistan's GDP expanded 7.2% in the first half of 2018 over the same period of the previous year. Tajikistan had government debt equivalent to 48% of the country's GDP in 2017, lower than the average of 55% from 1998 to 2017. Turkmenistan's economy rose by 6.2% in the second quarter of 2018 over the same quarter of the previous year. Yet, Turkmenistan also had government debt equivalent to 29% of the country's GDP in 2017, higher than the average of 21% in the last decade. The GDP in Uzbekistan expanded 5.2% year-on-year in the first nine months of 2018. Uzbekistan had government debt equivalent to 24% of the country's GDP in 2017, in line with the average of 24% from 1998 to 2017.³³

32. Qishloq Ovozi, "A Landmark Caspian Agreement: And What It Resolves," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 9, 2018, <<https://www.rferl.org/a/qishloq-ovozi-landmark-caspian-agreement—and-what-it-resolves/29424824.html>>.

33. All economic indicators from <<https://tradingeconomics.com>>.