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3

Factoring the Foreign Policy Goals of the Central Asian States

MARLENE LARUELLE

Introduction

In academic works and the media, Central Asia is almost systematically presented as a region in thrall to the games of the great powers, a passive object of external projections that it cannot influence, and a region incapable of developing its own narrative on international affairs. This distorted image, at once inscribed in the memory of the nineteenth-century "Great Game" and an overly Western-centric view of international relations, does not correspond to reality. The contemporary Central Asian states cannot be reduced to simple objects of rivalry between the great powers. They are not mere passive recipients of external influences—colonial domination in the nineteenth century, Soviet control in the twentieth century, and the post–Cold War geopolitical contests of the twenty-first century—but instead actors in their own right, with their own identity projections onto the international stage.

The five states have all developed their own specific international positioning, formed their own narratives on their place in the world, and implemented short-term and long-term strategies. As new states, they have formulated foreign policy goals that are intrinsically linked to their own statehood and leadership legitimacy: the interaction between domestic and foreign policies is therefore intense. They all avail themselves of contradictory tools as a way of maximizing their gains in the international arena, put on multiple faces—postcommunist, Muslim, Asian, European—and cultivate the historical references and geopolitical myths surrounding the region: a buffer zone, a heartland, a Silk Road. They all share common traits in their foreign policy goals, but also have increasingly diversified objectives and strategies, such that it

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is no longer really possible to talk of a Central Asian unity in terms of international affairs: the world is not seen through the same sets of eyes in Ashgabat or in Bishkek, in Astana or in Tashkent.

This chapter discusses the Central Asian long-term positioning on the international scene and the matrixes of foreign policies (symbolic recognition but political autonomy, international integration but an instrumental reading of it); regime security; and diverging strategies of multi-vectoralism and of regional cooperation, as well as some shared patterns (mimetic strategies of external actors' narratives, cultural sovereignty as the main foreign policy goal; and the use of international affairs as a domestic tool of political legitimacy).

Understanding Central Asian Long-Term Positioning on the International Scene

In 1992 Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan were obliged to form their foreign policy and diplomatic corps from scratch, since in the Soviet period these were almost entirely reserved for Moscow and not delegated to the federated republics. It took a long time for their diplomatic corps to take shape, and the process is by no means finished: if Kazakhstan is the most advanced in this domain, followed by Uzbekistan (the only state in the region that had international visibility during the Soviet period as a display case for Muslim socialism, which was aimed at brother countries), the other three states are in difficulty in this regard. Given its isolationist position, Turkmenistan has not yet devoted enough energy to the creation of a diplomatic corps, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan do not have the public purses to do so. In addition, competence building on international expertise is still very limited throughout the region, and all the countries lack good experts on the international economy and world affairs to advise decision makers. Despite challenging regional and domestic conditions, they have all developed their own strategies for shaping what they consider to be their best possible foreign policies given the circumstances.

The goal of all Central Asian states' foreign policy could be summed up in a sentence: To be as autonomous as possible from outside pressures while obtaining as much recognition as possible. As young states recently arrived on the international scene after the great waves of

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decolonization had come to an end, they search for symbolic recognition. At the same time, the ruling elites are concerned about autonomy in the managing of domestic affairs, and want to avoid having to deal with any new "big brothers" looking to take over the former place of the Russians. Depending on the domain of activity and the geopolitical conjuncture of the moment, this duality creates tensions and contradictions in the strategies adopted.

A second sentence that could be used to sum up the foreign policy of the Central Asian states runs as follows: They desire more international integration, more assurance of their territorial unity, and less regionalism. This strategy implies a clearly instrumental conception of international relations: Central Asian governments sign a good many documents but never consider them binding. All are members of major international organizations such as UN agencies, and are or have been the beneficiaries of loans from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, as well as from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the Asian Development Bank, and the Islamic Development Bank. All are also members of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE); the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), with Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and Azerbaijan; the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC); the NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP); the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA); and the Central Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (CANWFZ), the first denuclearized zone in the Northern Hemisphere, bordering atomic powers such as Russia and China, and states on the verge of acquiring nuclear capacity such as Iran.

However, many of these regional organizations, such as ECO or CICA, are essentially forums for state-level discussion and international visibility, with a socializing function, and have no impact on local realities. Some of them have had difficulties in creating the hoped-for dynamic of regional cooperation, as is the case with the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) program in terms of transport and trade, and the EU-supported and UNDP-implemented Border Management in Central Asia (BOMCA) border security program. These projects are usually lacking in substance and do not work in favor of deeper regional integration. The only ones that have received some support from some ruling elites—not from the Turkmen elites and only

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very fickle support from those in Uzbekistan—are the security-oriented institutions dominated by either Russia or China, that is, the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the functions of which are essentially defensive. Belonging to them enables the elites to forge solidarity in the name of domestic regime security, as well as to brush aside the agendas of good governance or democracy promotion, a move aptly named "protective integration" by Roy Allison.[1]

The majority of the Central Asian states thus reject supranational organizations that would effectively limit their margin of maneuver. The main multilateral organizations, like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization, have no supranational objectives, but instead aim only at consultation, cooperation, and protection from Western pressures. The Common Economic Space (CES) between Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, which came into effect on January 1, 2012, and the formation of a supranational executive body, the Eurasian Economic Commission, is Kazakhstan's first supranational agreement since the fall of the Soviet Union. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which have applied for the Russia-backed Customs Union with reluctance, have shown only moderate interest in it, where Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have overtly criticized all these projects.[2]

In parallel with this instrumental use of multilateral organizations, the Central Asian states and their established elites share a pragmatic and sometimes cynical view of international relations: for them, power relations have more pertinence than legal obligations, and they consider that the big players in this world are not subject to binding agreements. This reading justifies their own use of strategies that they manipulate to their own advantage—for example, in Kyrgyzstan's negotiations over the closure of the Manas base, or Uzbekistan's handling of the Northern Distribution Network. This may also be explained by the fact that Central Asian foreign policies are presidentially driven: decisions are the province of the presidential apparatus, that is, of the president himself and his immediate entourage, while senior officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have no more than symbolic functions of representation and of managing current affairs. The authoritarian nature of the regimes makes the decision-making process very opaque, but even in the least authoritarian country in the region, Kyrgyzstan, foreign affairs

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are the domain of the president's inner circle, not of diplomats. The lack of interest shown in international issues gets reflected in career strategies: with some rare exceptions, getting a diplomatic post is often considered a punishment, an exclusion from the inner circle.

Openness and Closedness: Multi-vectoral Foreign Policies

From the time of their independence, the states of Central Asia have promoted divergent conceptions of their place on the international stage, and these divergences have widened over time. Twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian foreign policies share similar objectives—autonomy but recognition—but from these they draw very different strategies and outcomes. Indeed, the diversity of positions is extreme, going from Turkmen isolationism, so complete that it led to the country's often being placed alongside North Korea and Burma in various global rankings, to the far-reaching openness of Kyrgyzstan, the first former Soviet state to join the WTO in 1998, even prior to the Baltic countries, and the only country in the world to host a Russian and an American military base on its soil at a distance of only a few kilometers from one another.

Schematically, the Central Asian states can be divided into two broad categories: those who want to keep a distance from Russia at all costs—Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan—and those who deem Moscow to be an essential actor in Eurasia over the long term. However, this framework is too binary and needs to be nuanced.

First, Turkmenistan pursues a policy of isolationism that is not only directed against Moscow and the Eurasian region: with the exception of Turkey, Iran, and China, its three main allies, and to a lesser extent the United Arab Emirates, neither does Ashgabat welcome Westerners. The Turkmen authorities continue to be very cautious concerning the requests for cooperation issuing from Washington and the European countries, in particular in the guise of the European Union. The situation has slightly improved since 2007 with Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov's coming to power, but the hopes of seeing the country engage in a Khrushchevian thaw have not borne out.[3] More than by its anti-Russian foreign policy, the country is thus above all defined by its closedness. China's growing hegemony over Turkmen gas (the 2011 contract

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stipulates 65 bcm/year to be sold to China by 2015, so a large part of the Turkmen production, bought for cheap by Beijing) will probably reinforce this isolationist trend, which allows the Turkmen elites a guaranteed rent without having to change policy.

* * *

Uzbekistan, for its part, has opted to remove itself from post-Soviet integration dynamics ever since independence, due to its desire to take a distance from Russia. However, it has also impeded intra-regional processes of integration. Building regional unity has only ever been meaningful to Tashkent if it played the lead figure and had its own status reinforced, which has not been the case. Despite being anti-Russian, Uzbek foreign policy has not thus turned out to be advantageous for its "cultural" neighbors such as Turkey or Iran, with whom relations have always been chaotic, but more recently has turned in a decisive way toward China.

Since independence, Uzbek strategy has been unambiguously pro-American, not for reasons of political or ideological sympathy (the country has, for example, never seen European actors as allies), but for reasons of strategy: Tashkent sees itself as a major historical regional power and desires symbolic recognition of this status through a privileged partnership with Washington. However, the country has had to switch its position in accordance with the geopolitical interests of the moment. In the 1990s, its foreign policy seemed well established and stable. The pro-American strategy culminated after 9/11 with the opening of the U.S. base of Karshi-Khanabad, a symbol of the Uzbek-American honeymoon, but abruptly drew to a close in 2004–2005.[4] After an interlude of a few years (2005–2008) in favor of Russia,[5] Tashkent turned once again to the United States, a partnership that has been strengthened thanks to Uzbekistan's key role in the Northern Distribution Network. Although the country became more clearly isolated from the international community in the early twenty-first century, its status as a regional power on the demographic and strategic levels, despite growing economic weaknesses, has granted it large international visibility and meant that all external actors have pressed their suits with it despite the difficulties involved in negotiating with Islam Karimov's regime.

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The three pro-Russian countries are not uniform either. Tajikistan is the most critical of Moscow. It regularly reconsiders the status accorded to the Russian language, and is a tough negotiator as regards the Russian military base, now on a lease for thirty years. Moreover, Dushanbe refuses to give authorization for Russian border guards to return to the Tajik-Afghan border. At the same time, this increasingly anti-Russian policy should not mislead us; it is a bargaining strategy toward Moscow and a branding by the authorities aimed at domestic public opinion. In fact, the Tajik economy is almost entirely dependent upon Russia, both in terms of the remittances sent by a million Tajik migrants (out of a population of seven million) and in terms of investments.[6]

Kyrgyzstan is distinctly more pro-Russian than its Tajik neighbor, and the cultural tensions with Moscow are fewer since the country still has a large Slavic minority, grants Russian language a bilingual status, and points up its Russo-Soviet heritage. The Kyrgyz economy is just as dependent upon Russia, due to massive investments and remittances, though the latter are less significant than in Tajikistan since Kyrgyz migrants also travel to Kazakhstan. Its massive opening up in the 1990s meant that Kyrgyzstan nonetheless benefitted, more than its Tajik neighbor, from international, particularly Western, attention: the country served as a laboratory of Western aid to "civil society," and the political system there remains freer. Furthermore, the Kyrgyz economy's near-total dependency on the re-export of Chinese products and the presence of the American military base at Manas (officially a "transit center") work in favor of promoting greater balance.[7]

Kazakhstan remains the most pro-Russian state of the region: Nursultan Nazarbaev has not stopped defending strategies of regional integration between post-Soviet states; ever since 1994 he has been actively in favor of a Eurasian Union endowed with supranational institutions, well before Vladimir Putin's revival of the idea in October 2011.[8] Kazakhstan ranks Moscow as its foremost ally both on the economic (Eurasian Economic Community, Customs Union) and strategic (Collective Security Treaty Organization) levels. However, this positioning can be explained by Astana's being able to gain respect from Moscow, and by the fact that its partnership with China, its rapprochement with the European Union, and its strategy of visibility vis-à-vis NATO are accepted by the Kremlin. Over the long term, the Kazakh authorities do not project

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themselves as simply a "loyal second in command" to Moscow but as its equal in Eurasian space.

All the states of Central Asia claim to be pursuing so-called multi-vectoral policies. While multilateralism presupposes multiple actors working in concert on a given issue, multi-vectoralism means a multiplicity of bilateral relations that create a balancing effect for the country initiating them. Kazakhstan is the only one to have succeeded in implementing a *positive* multi-vectoral policy, that is, in building links in multiple directions, rather than opposing the actors against one another, and in having this strategy recognized by its partners. By openly displaying the hierarchy of its relationships—Russia first, China second, followed by the West (more the European Union than the United States)[9]—Kazakh foreign policy has managed to build stable and consensual logics for presenting its case on the international scene.

The multi-vectoral foreign policy of the other Central Asian states has proven more problematic.[10] Turkmenistan's stance of "permanent neutrality" can be defined as multi-vectoral only by default, since it is more a testimony to isolationism than international involvement. Uzbekistan has undergone several major strategic reversals, which makes its multi-vectoralism a sign not of stability, but of geopolitical instability. Kyrgyzstan, for its part, and Tajikistan to a lesser extent are able to play with a fair amount of success on the oppositions between the major powers, but they do not have any established multi-vectored policy to speak of. They play one power against another, while Kazakhstan plays upon all of the powers at the same time. Only Astana has thus developed a foreign policy whose multi-vectoral nature is cumulative, whereas those of the others are exclusive.

This multi-vectoral strategy is replicated in matters of regional integration. Kazakhstan has made multilateralism one of the principles of its foreign policy, and the country considers itself one of the heralds of multilateralism not only in the Eurasian or Asian space but also on the global level, with, among others, its initiative for elaborating a universal declaration for a denuclearized world, which it put forward at the nuclear security summit held in Washington in April 2010.[11] Kazakhstan is a fervent supporter of numerous regional organizations, especially the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), initiated by Nazarbaev himself. Kyrgyzstan endorses

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also the international community's narrative in favor of multilateralism, about which Tajikistan is clearly less enthusiastic, but it plays the game out of a lack of alternatives.

The other two states give clear preference to bilateralism. Ashgabat's and Tashkent's foreign policies are even constructed on the basis of their refusal to join the various regional bodies. In the 1990s Turkmenistan refused to join the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO)—the only one in which no regional powers were involved; it suspended its participation in the CIS; and in the 2000s it has refused to join any of the Moscow-led institutions or the China-led SCO. Uzbekistan became a member of CACO but has refused to apply its rules. It joined the SCO in 2001 after the incursions of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan into Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in the summer of 1999 and 2000, with the twin aims of building a collective security policy and of hosting the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS).[12] Then, under pressure from Moscow, it joined the Eurasian Economic Community in 2005 followed by the CSTO in 2006, at a time when relations with the United States had visibly deteriorated. However, it has never implemented any CSTO mandates and left the organization in 2012, while continuing to participate with reluctance in some of the SCO joint activities.

In addition, intra-regional cooperation between Central Asian states is impeded by multiple tensions between political leaders, unresolved border issues, contradictory geopolitical orientations, and an inability to find a consensual resolution to the regional water/energy nexus.[13] Ever since independence, Turkmenistan has indicated its desire to leave the Eurasian and Central Asian space and orient itself around Iran and Turkey. Indeed, the country has effectively stopped its regional cooperation. However, in practice it is still obliged to cooperate with its Uzbek neighbor for the collective management of the border dams; it tries to sell electricity to Tajikistan; and since 2007 it has been cooperating more closely with Kazakhstan. Uzbekistan, for its part, favored intra-Central Asia cooperation only when it reckoned it was the undisputed leader, that is, at the beginning of the 1990s. After that it thwarted all attempts to structure regional mechanisms: it closed its border with Tajikistan during the civil war and has never reopened it, since it continues to apply the railway blockade and refuses to demine border zones; it plays hot and cold at the volatile border with Kyrgyzstan in

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the Ferghana Valley, thus contributing to destabilizing that country[14]; and it has sought to prevent Kazakhstan's rise to power. The three other states are more favorable to regional cooperation, in both economic and regional terms, and also have cultural policies that are more open to a Central Asian regional identity (for instance, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan allowed their respective minorities to be taught with textbooks from the other republic in minority schools).

* * *

Fostered by external actors or international institutions, the overwhelming majority of regional organizations acting in Central Asia have refused to discuss openly the fundamental contradiction involved in encouraging Central Asian states to pursue policies that they do not want to adopt. The Central Asian regimes tend to confound *regionalism* that is endowed with a supranational driver, on the model of the European Union, with the need for *concerted action* in numerous domains, economic as well as strategic. In their defense, most of the external actors in the region also tend to advance cards of a national character using regionalist arguments, and to legitimate their bilateralism in the name of multilateralism. This is the case with Russia and China, both of which claim to be promoting multilateralism in the name of the need for a multipolar world. These complexities largely explain the failure of "regionalism": regional organizations operate first on the basis of the lowest common denominator, and therefore on minimal consensus, which often works to foster the status quo more than it does to build any sort of regional architecture; and second in an essentially declaratory mode, granting little interest to implementation mechanisms, with therefore a limited impact on realities on the ground.

Cultural Sovereignty as a First Foreign Policy Goal

All the Central Asian states have made cultural sovereignty a key element of their foreign policy. They are thus extremely sensitive to matters of cultural heritage. Turkmenistan is an extreme case of this, due to the exacerbated nationalism organized by the authorities in order to legitimate the regime of Saparmurat Niyazov and then that of Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov.[15] As for Kyrgyzstan, it was deeply shocked that

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China asked UNESCO to recognize, in the name of its Kyrgyz minority, the Manas epic as being part of mankind's oral heritage.[16] The fact that Beijing is able today to argue that Manas is a Chinese cultural good, at the same time as Bishkek considers that it is its own national epic, has provoked fierce anti-Chinese polemics within Kyrgyz public opinion and presented a problem for the respective diplomatic corps.[17] In a general way, the states of Central Asia have a view of the international scene stamped by the fear of their ethnic/state disappearance: the narrative on the Chinese demographic threat reveals, for example, how much the question of the survival of the nation is a key element of local anxieties, explainable by the feeling of having been unforeseeably "born again" from the fall of the Soviet Union.[18]

In their foreign policy, the states of Central Asia severely limited Turkish pretensions to play the role of new "big brother" at the beginning of the 1990s and halted all attempts to encompass them within a Turkish identity grouping in which they would only be a piece of the greater whole.[19] The same process is visible, to a lesser extent, in the relationship to Iran. Even Tajikistan has sought to impede Tehran's attempts to include it in Iran-centered narratives in the name of their linguistic unity. The states of Central Asia also criticize Moscow's tendencies to incorporate them into post-Soviet mechanisms and its presumptions that this meets their own objectives. They denounce the disdainful character of Russian foreign policy, which flaunts its lack of respect for the independence of the new states. While such a strategy is obvious in the most anti-Russian states such as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, it is also manifest in the three pro-Russian countries: Tajikistan has revealed its cultural sensitivities to be great where Russia is concerned;[20] Kyrgyzstan considers that some Moscow-backed institutions such as the Customs Union go against its economic interests; and even Kazakhstan must sometimes reiterate that it is an autonomous actor able to make the decisions it wishes to without having to consult the Kremlin.

* * *

Lastly, like many other emergent or developing countries, the states of Central Asia are very critical of the world order that they regard as dominated by the West and its values. They denounce the interference of Western countries in domestic questions in the name of respect for

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human rights; criticize the international financial institutions like the World Bank or International Monetary Fund for their narrow view of enforceable financial and budgetary norms; and endorse a multipolar world in which the opinion of non-Western countries would be better taken into account. At the same time, they all lack international recognition and wish to win the attention of the most prestigious countries, mainly the United States and Europe. They share, nevertheless, the feeling of being disappointed by Western involvement in their favor: the dominant narrative they all express is that American and European engagement is temporary and unstable, that the West always promises more than it delivers, and that it might suddenly decide to vacate the scene, leaving local actors all alone to deal with their neighbors.

Mimetic Strategies toward External Actors' Narratives

Similar to many other young states that have only recently appeared on the international stage, those of Central Asia are hesitating between two types of narrative: that of the victim and that of the responsible actor. They often present themselves as still being the victims of Russia or the Soviet Union, denounced as former colonizers, in order to avoid taking on certain responsibilities and to receive specific aids. At the same time, however, they request to be recognized as fully fledged international actors. These ambiguities are visible, for example, in the international handling of environmental questions, particularly during debates on the question of the Aral Sea, in which Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have tried to lay all the blame on the Soviet regime without changing their contemporary practices of water overconsumption.[21]

This twofold position of victim/responsible actor is also found in the Central Asian debates on the return of the "Great Game" and the influence of the great powers, particularly the United States, Russia, and China. Central Asian experts, but also the political authorities, tend to present their countries as the victims of great powers' strategies, considering that they have been torn between contradictory logics—this trait is particularly evident in Kyrgyzstan due to the presence of the two military bases, one American, the other Russian.[22] At the same time, the Central Asians criticize Western discourse about their status as a buffer zone and lay claim to their autonomy of decision.

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The same paradoxical relation to the outside world appears in the use made by Central Asian political leaders and diplomats of geo-historical references—for example, being at the "crossroads" of the world, at a "meeting point" between the East and West. They often implement mimetic strategies with external actors that enable them to present the face that is expected of them and to create common discursive spaces with their main partners. Some cultural borrowings can be easily written into their own vision; others are more artificial.

The five states easily consolidated their own discourses on the Islamic threat by using the Russian narrative on this issue inaugurated at the start of the second war in Chechnya in 1999, and use each new bomb attack in Russia to underscore their own fragility. After 9/11 their discourse has also been strengthened by borrowing the theme of the "war on terror" from the United States, thus enabling the justification of the repressive measures used against all those suspected of threatening the established order. Further, they were quick to adopt the Chinese narrative of the fight against the "three evils" (*san gu shili*) of separatism, extremism, and fundamentalism, which has become the symbol of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and which originally targeted the Uighur dissidents. These three borrowings—from Russia on the Islamic threat, from the United States on the war on terror, and from China on the three evils—made very clear their desire to repress every approach to Islam that they deem incongruent with their secular identity and potentially challenging the incumbent regimes.[23]

When dealing with other Muslim states, the states of Central Asia point up their Muslim identities, underscore their belonging to the Organization of the Islamic Conference, and recall that they are in the process of entering the *Umma* in terms of Islamic education or ritual practices. This face enables them to access financial support from the Islamic Development Bank, as well as from various sovereign funds from the United Arab Emirates, both for infrastructure and Islamic banking projects.[24] The four Turkish-speaking countries also point up their linguistic proximity with the Turkish authorities and the organizations associated with it such as Turksoy, while Tajikistan plays the card of the Persian-speaking unity with Iran.

With the countries of South and East Asia, the Central Asian states underline other elements of identity, ones based on historical references

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to the Silk Roads along which people, products, and ideas travelled from east to west throughout centuries. They tend to minimize their Muslim identity by valorizing the—more or less mythologized—pre-Islamic epochs. They also insist on their will to adopt specific contemporary Asian models. In the early years of independence, the Central Asian presidents increased their positive references to an allegedly "Asian model," insisting on the economic dynamism of Asian countries, but also on their political regimes, and their allegedly non-Westernized cultural identity. Later, at the turn of the twenty-first century, the symbolism of the Asian Dragons (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan) and Asian Tigers (Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam) was translated by Kazakhstan into its own narrative of becoming a "snow leopard."[25] This valorization of both South and Southeast Asia, very manifest in the first half of the 1990s, gradually dissipated with the return of Russian influence and the rise of China, before reappearing at the end of the 2000s, this time with more tangible economic foundations. This is particularly true in Kazakhstan, where the prospect of a high-tech sector is most realistic and the geopolitical stakes toward the Asia-Pacific region stronger.

The use of shared historical references is inflected with a specific national flavor depending upon the country being dealt with. With Japan, for example, Central Asia emphasizes the role it played in the spread of Buddhism from India toward East Asia: the Buddhist roots of Japanese culture are allegedly to be found in Central Asia.[26] With South Korea, Central Asia valorizes itself as the possible cradle of the ethnic and linguistic origins of Koreans, and promotes its Korean minority, which is particularly well integrated and a symbol of social success.[27] With India, the focus is on the Mughal Empire and its brilliant universal culture, which constitute the real jewel in the crown of historical arguments that are advanced to exalt their age-old bilateral relations.[28] With China, the Silk Road narrative is used in its Sino-centric version, enabling centuries of either mutual ignorance or tensions to be bypassed and the emphasis to be placed on more ancient periods when China was a key actor in the Central Asian region.[29]

When negotiating with Moscow and Beijing, the Central Asian states do not conceal the authoritarian nature of their decision making. When

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meeting with the Europeans and the Americans, however, they display concern for democratization and good governance, emphasizing their past as a Soviet country in "transition" toward the norms of the Western market economy and democracy, requesting more time to be able to integrate the requested changes, and showing a concern to improve their governance. They also reiterate Western preoccupations when it is in their own interests: they point out, for example, their secular legislation and their refusal to become Islamic states, particularly when dealing with Israel, and play the role of countries menaced by the "Afghan threat" so that they can ingratiate themselves with Europe and the United States and obtain financing from them.[30]

Foreign Policy as a Domestic Tool for Political Legitimacy

Foreign policy is not disconnected from domestic realities: in many cases, the choices made in this domain are closely dependent on internal questions, more so in young states that have to forge a twofold legitimacy, both domestic and international.

The most flagrant case of direct connection between building national identity, legitimizing political leadership, and foreign policy strategies is the symbolic competition that pitted Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan against each other in the 1990s, and continues partially to shape interstate relations in the region.[31] The Uzbek president, Islam Karimov, referred to the need for regional unity by reviving the historical name of Turkestan—used in Western and Russian Orientalist texts in the nineteenth century to define both contemporary post-Soviet Central Asia and Xinjiang—and promoted an identity based on Turkic and Muslim values that he named Turanism.[32] The Kazakh president, Nursultan Nazarbaev, by contrast, put forward the concept of Eurasia, which situates Central Asia at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, the regional identity of which would be distinctly less Turkic and Muslim, more open to the Russian heritage, and more settled on Asian modernity—a combination that was obviously thought of as embodied by Kazakhstan.[33] Both these narratives served as an ideological framework for foreign policy strategies—Uzbekistan sought to distance itself to a maximum from Russian influence, whereas Kazakhstan preferred

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to become one of the pillars of the post-Soviet regional instances—but also in the personal competition into which the two presidents launched themselves in regard to public opinion.

Another example of this foreign/domestic interaction is Turkmenistan's geopolitical isolationism, which was legitimized by the country's international status, validated by the United Nations, of "permanent (or positive) neutrality." This can no doubt be explained by the complexity of the regional environment, and especially of the Afghan and Iranian neighborhoods; however, this isolationism is also construed as the conclusion of an autarkic narrative about Turkmen nationhood. The doctrine of permanent neutrality constitutes a key element in nation building, based on a megalomaniac narrative about the role of the Turkmen people in all the great achievements of human civilizations since antiquity and, after the Russo-Soviet "parenthesis," the need for the country to find the path to an alleged new "golden age."[34]

Although less visible in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, their respective foreign policies are also shaped by domestic-oriented narratives concerning their own state-building. Bishkek has often presented itself as the state most open to the international community, in line with the alleged openness of the Kyrgyz nomads, and has also cultivated an image as the Switzerland of Central Asia for purposes of domestic legitimacy, in particular under the presidency of Askar Akaev in the 1990s.[35] Under Kurmanbek Bakiev, the narrative privileged an image of Kyrgyzstan as the victim of the great powers and as weakened due to the presence of two military bases on its territory: foreign policy and conspiracy theories[36] thus served as an excuse to avoid naming the real reasons for the country's fragility, mostly due to the lack of economic perspectives and the failure of the state to provide social services. Since the second "revolution" of April 2010, Roza Otunbaeva's presidency, and the establishment of a parliamentary republic, Kyrgyzstan continues to promote itself as the most democratic country of the region, and is indeed valorized as such, for instance by the U.S. State Department. As far as Tajikistan is concerned, it managed both to valorize its Persanophone ethno-cultural specificity—denouncing the all-conquering pan-Turkism embodied by Uzbekistan is a common feature of Tajik foreign policy—and to rival Iran in laying claim to the historical heart of Persianness on its territory.[37] However, the region's two weakest

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countries also take into account, perhaps more so than their neighbors, their contemporary situation as small states without great means: they maintain more realistic discourses on their limited foreign policy autonomy, and are more favorable to the involvement of external actors and international agencies.

For regimes that are all extremely presidential and personalized—as even Kyrgyzstan was under Akaev and more so under Bakiev—the leader's legitimacy is in part founded on the instrumentalization of foreign policy. Official visits during which leaders are received by great Western or Asian leaders are thus highly emphasized in the local media: Uzbek and Turkmen propaganda on this subject is the most extensive, a phenomenon amplified by the total absence of press freedom. In Kazakhstan, this mode of legitimacy has been exacerbated by Nazarbaev's personal will to be considered an influential actor in the international arena. Very early on Astana had grasped the need to create a nation-branding for the country and so implemented logics of lobbying in Russia (financing of press articles favorable to the Kazakh president and high media visibility in the Russian capital, in large part thanks to the direct support of the former mayor Yuri Luzhkov[38]) as well as in Europe (in the framework of Kazakhstan's campaign to obtain the OSCE chairmanship in 2010[39]) and in the United States (several articles commissioned by lobbying firms paid by Astana have come to light in recent years[40]).

Conclusions

The foreign policy goals of the Central Asian states have common patterns thanks to their shared Soviet legacy, their status as young states, and their proximity to former empires (Russia), to emerging powers (China, India), and to unstable countries (Afghanistan). The personalization of power, the control of the main strategic and economic orientations by a small inner circle, deep-seated local conflicts that impede intra–Central Asia cooperation, the need to be recognized on the international stage, and the confusion of narratives between state-building, nationhood, and foreign policy are all common elements in large part explainable by the domestic political culture. The challenges needing to be met, however, are very different between the three rich or potentially

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rich countries (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), and the other two (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), which are among the poorest on the planet. The region's long-term prospects are increasingly divergent, on a scale going from the potential failure of the Tajik and Kyrgyz states to Kazakhstan's aim of catching up to Central European living standards in the coming decades. China's well-established power in the region is both a unifying element that pushes the Central Asian states toward their neighbor, and potentially a bone of contention as all of them hope for more investments.

Each of these states has thus set its own foreign policy methods in terms of opening to or closing itself off from the international community, especially in relation to the three great powers of Russia, China, and the United States. All of them have successfully exploited international competition to their own advantage: for twenty years or so they have played one actor against the other and taken advantage of the lack of coordination between the main external actors and institutional organizations in order to give themselves more room to maneuver. Their multi-vectoral strategies can be interpreted sometimes as a sign of weakness, but also as a sign of success. Although they are "small" players compared to their "large" Russian and Chinese neighbors or to the American "superpower," they have nevertheless managed to impose their rules and to defeat foreign strategies that did not correspond to their vision of the world: they defeated the West's will to impose a democratic good governance, the Russian hope for controlling the geopolitical orientations of the local foreign policies, the Chinese trend toward a free trade zone. It can thus be considered that, given the objectives each country has set for itself, their foreign policies have, more so than their domestic policies, been successful: the governments have more or less obtained what they wanted.

One might ask, nonetheless, whether Turkmenistan's extreme isolationism and Uzbekistan's policy of regional obstruction will not be detrimental to the interests of the Central Asian populations over the long term. One can wonder also about the future of these policies. NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan and the decreasing interest in the region apparent in U.S. foreign policy send a worrying signal to the Central Asian elites. They feel they are being left alone to face either

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a China-Russia coalition or a Chinese hegemony that, in either case, will reduce their room for maneuver in the global arena and put at risk their multi-vectoral foreign policy. The Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan strategic partnership treaty, signed on June 14, 2013, according to which the presidents of both countries have indicated the need for regional cooperation, reveals indirectly their concerns as the U.S. withdraw partly from the local radar (Kourmanova 2013).

NOTES

1. R. Allison, "Virtual Regionalism, Regional Structures and Regime Security in Central Asia," *Central Asian Survey* 27, no. 2 (2008): 185–202.

2. M. Laruelle, "When the 'Near Abroad' Looks at Russia: The Eurasian Union Project as Seen from the Southern Republics," *Russian Analytical Digest*, no. 112 (April 20, 2012): 8–11.

3. See the "Turkmenistan" special issue, *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (2010), edited by S. Peyrouse and L. Anceschi, http://www.chinaeurasia.org/images/stories/isdp-cefq/CEFQ201009/cefq8.3sp47.pdf (accessed December 5, 2011).

4. G. Gleason, "The Uzbek Expulsion of U.S. Forces and Realignment in Central Asia," *Problems of Post-Communism* 53, no. 2 (2006): 49–60.

5. The Uzbek "pro-Russian" stance was a short-term axis of convenience that followed the West's condemnation of the Andijan repression of May 2005. Losing support in the United States and in Europe, Tashkent favorably received Moscow's support, and tried to take advantage of it in terms of strategic cooperation and modernization of the Uzbek army and security services.

6. International Labor Organization, *Migrant Remittances to Tajikistan: The Potential for Savings, Economic Investment and Existing Financial Products to Attract Remittances* (Moscow: ILO Subregional Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, 2010).

7. For a view on the Kyrgyz narrative, see T. Berdikeyeva, ed., *Current State and Prospects for the Development of Kyrgyzstan's Foreign Policy* (Bishkek: Institute for Public Policy, 2008).

8. M. Laruelle, "Putin Uses Symbols of Soviet Power to Announce Idea of Eurasian Union," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 8, no. 195 (October 24, 2011).

9. B. K. Sultanov and L. M. Muzaparova, eds., *Stanovlenie vneshnei politiki Kazakhstana: Istoriia, dostizheniia, vzgliad na budushchee* [Establishing Kazakhstan's foreign policy: History, successes, and a look to the future] (Almaty: IWEP, 2005).

10. F. Tolipov, "The Foreign Policy Orientations of Central Asian States: Positive and Negative Diversification," in *Eager Eyes Fixed on Eurasia*, ed. Iwashita Akihiro (Sapporo: 21st Century COE Program Slavic Eurasian Studies, 2007), 23–40.

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11. "Nazarbayev Calls on Countries to Adopt Universal Declaration on Nuclear-Free World," *Interfax*, August 26, 2010, http://www.interfax.com/newsinf.asp?id=185218 (accessed September 15, 2011); "Kazakhstan Calls on OSCE States to Adopt Declaration on Nuclear-Free World," *RIA Novosti*, December 1, 2010, en.rian.ru/world/20101201/161573340.html (accessed December 5, 2011).

12. S. Aris, *Eurasian Regionalism: Shanghai Cooperation Organization* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

13. The water issue is a key element of the Uzbekistan-Tajikistan and Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan relationship. Water-rich Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan hope to develop hydroelectricity to free themselves from Uzbek domination in supplying them power, and to transform water into a geopolitical weapon. V. A. Dukhovny and J. De Schutter, *Water in Central Asia: Past, Present, Future* (London: CRC Press, 2011).

14. N. Megoran, "The Critical Geopolitics of the Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan Ferghana Valley Boundary Dispute, 1999–2000," *Political Geography* 23 (2004): 731–64.

15. M. Denison, "The Art of the Impossible: Political Symbolism, and the Creation of National Identity and Collective Memory in Post-Soviet Turkmenistan," *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no. 7 (2009): 1167–87.

16. Manas is the main Kyrgyz epic poem, and with more than 210,000 lines, one of the longest in the world. The Kyrgyz authorities have institutionalized Manas as the founding father of the Kyrgyz people, and promote him as a model for independent Kyrgyzstan. The jubilee of Manas's millennium was organized in 1995.

17. M. Bekesheva, "Kyrgyzstan Protests UNESCO's Listing of Epic of Manas as Chinese," Central Asia Online, February 2, 2010, http://centralasiaonline.com/en_GB/articles/caii/features/entertainment/2010/02/20/feature-02 (accessed December 20, 2011).

18. M. Laruelle and S. Peyrouse, *China as a Neighbor: Central Asian Perspectives and Strategies*, Silk Road Monograph (Washington, D.C.: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 2009).

19. Z. Zardykhan, "Turkey and Central Asia: From Fraternity to Partnership," in *Great Powers and Regional Integration in Central Asia: A Local Perspective*, ed. M. Esteban and N. de Pedro (Madrid: Fundación Alternativas; Almaty: KIMEP, 2008), 79–94. See also B. Balci, ed., "La Turquie en Asie centrale: La conversion au réalisme (1991–2000)," *IFEA Working Papers*, no. 5 (2001).

20. In 2007, for instance, the president de-Russified his surname (from Rahmonov to Rahmon). Though this practice has not been made into law, gradually more government officials have de-Russified their family names as well. See R. Muhutdinova, "Tajikistan," in *Nations in Transit*, Freedom House, 2008, http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/pdfid/4865cf5ff.pdf.

21. V. A. Dukhovny and S. Sokolov, *Lessons on Cooperation Building to Manage Water Conflicts in the Aral Sea Basin* (Paris: UNESCO; Interstate Commission for Water Coordination in Central Asia, 2003); K. D. W. Nandalal and K. W. Hipel, "Strategic Decision Support for Resolving Conflict over Water Sharing among Countries

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along the Syr Darya River in the Aral Sea Basin," *Journal of Water Resources Planning Management* 133, no. 4 (2007): 289–99.

22. H. Huskey, "Foreign Policy in a Vulnerable State: Kyrgyzstan as Military Entrepôt between the Great Powers," *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (2008): 5–18.

23. For an example on Tajikistan, see J. Heathershaw and S. Roche, "Conflict in Tajikistan—Not Really about Radical Islam," *Open Democracy*, October 2010, http://www.opendemocracy.net/john-heathershaw-sophie-roche/conflict-in-tajikistan-%E2%80%93-not-really-about-radical-islam.

24. M. Laruelle and S. Peyrouse, *Central Asia in an Era of Globalization* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2012).

25. S. S. Samubaldin, *Drakony i tigry Azii: Smozhet li kazakhstanskii bars proiti ikh tropami?* [Dragons and tigers of Asia: Can the Kazakh snow leopard follow their path?] (Almaty: International Eurasian Economic Academy, 1998).

26. C. Len, T. Uyama, and H. Tetsuya, eds., *Japan's Silk Road Diplomacy: Paving the Road Ahead* (Washington, D.C.: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 2008).

27. K. E. Calder and V. Kim, "Korea, the United States, and Central Asia: Far-Flung Partners in a Globalizing World," *Korea Economic Institute Academic Papers Series* 3, no. 9 (2008).

28. M. Laruelle and S. Peyrouse, eds., *Mapping Central Asia: Indian Perceptions and Strategies* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011).

29. J. A. Millward, "Positioning Xinjiang in Eurasian and Chinese History: Differing Visions of the 'Silk Road,'" in *China, Xinjiang and Central Asia*, ed. C. Mackerras and M. Clarke (London: Routledge, 2009), 65–66.

30. M. Laruelle, "Reassessing 'Security' in Central Asia: The Weight of Neighboring Afghanistan," in *Contemporary Issues in International Security: U.S-Russian-European Views 2011*, ed. S. Blank (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, 2012).

31. M. Brill Olcott, "Rivalry and Competition in Central Asia," in *Central Asia and the Caucasus: At the Crossroads of Eurasia in the 21st Century*, ed. W. Hermann and J. F. Linn (Washington, D.C.: Sage; Emerging Market Forum, 2011), 17–42.

32. I. Karimov, *Turkistan, nash obshchii dom* [Turkestan, our common home] (Tashkent: Uzbekistan, 1995).

33. On Kazakh Eurasianism, see M. Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire* (Washington, D.C.: Johns Hopkins University; Woodrow Wilson Press, 2008), 171–88.

34. L. Anceschi, *Turkmenistan's Foreign Policy: Positive Neutrality and the Consolidation of the Turkmen Regime* (London: Routledge, 2008).

35. E. Marat, "Nation Branding in Central Asia: A New Campaign to Present Ideas about the State and the Nation," *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no. 7 (2009): 1123–36.

36. J. Heathershaw, "Of National Fathers and Russian Elder Brothers: Conspiracy Theories and Political Ideas in Post-Soviet Central Asia," *Russian Review* 71, no. 4 (2012): 610–29.

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37. M. Laruelle, "The Return of the Aryan Myth: Tajikistan in Search for a Secularized National Ideology," *Nationalities Papers* 35, no. 1 (2007): 51–70.

38. Anonymous interviews with Russian experts on Central Asia, Moscow, May 2004 and December 2007.

39. See "Lobbying for Governments in Brussels," Corporate Europe Observatory, http://www.corporateeurope.org/publications/lobbying-governments-brussels (accessed December 20, 2011).

40. J. Kucera, "Kazakhstan: Astana Hires DC Lobbyists to Work on Softening Aid Requirements," EurasiaNet, November 12, 2009, http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/civilsociety/articles/eav111309a.shtml (accessed December 20, 2011).

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