

RUSSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY: CENTRAL ASIA— A VIEW FROM UZBEKISTAN

Vladimir PARAMONOV

*Ph.D. (Political Science),
independent expert
(Tashkent, Uzbekistan)*

Alexey STROKOV

*Independent expert
(Tashkent, Uzbekistan)*

Oleg STOLPOVSKIY

*Independent military analyst
(Tashkent, Uzbekistan)*

Introduction

The history of Russia's policy in Central Asia is long and colorful, although the relations between Russia and Central Asia did not begin to gather momentum until the latter half of the 19th century when Central Asia became part of the Russian Empire. It was then that the region gradually established closer political, economic, cultural, and other contacts with Russia, which helped it overcome its economic and geographical isolation and added vigor to its social and economic life.

The downfall of the Russian Empire opened a new era in the relations between the two parts of the same state. It was under Soviet power that the region demonstrated unprecedented economic growth and received new statehoods. In Soviet times Russia was the driving force behind the region's social, economic, scientific, and technical progress, which shaped the region's modern image.

Russia's post-Soviet policy in Central Asia can be divided into three stages:

- At the first stage, the early and middle 1990s, Russia, guided by the illusion that it might become "part of the West," excluded Central Asia from its foreign policy priorities;
- At the second stage, in the late 1990s, Russia critically assessed its earlier foreign policy and its results in all parts of the world, Central Asia included;
- At the third stage, which began in 2000 when Vladimir Putin and his team came to power in the Kremlin and which is continuing under President Medvedev, Russia is working consistently and purposefully toward drawing the region into its sphere of influence to boost its foreign policy position everywhere.

First Stage (1992-1995)

As soon as the Soviet Union ceased to exist the new elite headed by Boris Yeltsin that came to power in Russia demonstrated a lot of determination in consistently and purposefully destroying the Soviet political and economic heritage, thus ruining the Soviet state system. Until the mid-1990s, Yeltsin's Russia pursued no more or less consistent policy in the post-Soviet expanse, Central Asia being no exception. The new Russian ultraliberal political elite looked at the West as the only source of ideas and believed that its interests were absolutely identical to those of Russia. In short, in the early 1990s, Moscow was determined to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic community.

Russia's Central Asian Policy

Early in the 1990s Russia regarded Central Asia as something which interfered with its economic reforms and its incorporation into the Western economic and military-political system. This explains the policy which can be best described as "getting rid of the burden of national republics."

Security and Military Cooperation

The Central Asian countries were in fact abandoned to face the dangers emanating from Afghanistan alone. In 1992, Russia declared itself to be the heir of the Soviet Union and as such was bound by the 1978 Treaty on Friendship, Good-Neighborly Relations and Cooperation, with respect to Afghanistan, signed in Moscow and, in fact, by the Collective Security Treaty signed in Tashkent in 1992. Russia preferred to ignore these and other documents and left Kabul to its fate.

At the same time, Moscow decreased the level of its military cooperation with the Central Asian countries; and the declarations about a collective security system remained on paper. The same can be said about the bilateral formats, the 201st motorized infantry division stationed in Tajikistan and the Russian border guards deployed in some of the Central Asian countries remaining the only, and highly important, exceptions. It was the Russian military which, early in the 1990s, averted the region's complete destabilization under the impact of the civil war in Tajikistan.

Moscow, however, did everything to distance itself from the Central Asian developments. In the absence of political will and support, the Russian military was essentially left to make shift for itself while Russia's military presence became a mere formality. The Russian Federation proved unable either to stem the escalation in Tajikistan, or stop drug trafficking from Afghanistan, or prevent other countries moving into the region with their military contingents. In late 1994, when NATO launched the Partnership for Peace Program in Central Asia, Russia did nothing to arrive at a coordinated regional approach to the program.

The Economy

Russia not merely destroyed the military and defensive expanse it shared with Central Asia; it did everything to destroy the common economic expanse. Egor Gaidar and his government did more than anyone else to squeeze Central Asia out of the ruble zone. In 1992-1993, Central Asia was still

using the Russian ruble; the Central Asian republics would have preferred to remain in the ruble zone and preserve the common system of trade and monetary relations. In 1993, however, Russia resolutely pushed the republics out of the ruble zone, thus leaving them without a means of payment.

On the whole, Egor Gaidar destroyed the system of trade and monetary relations among the post-Soviet countries, which greatly undermined the close economic relations within the CIS. In 1992-1993, trade between the Russian Federation and the Central Asian countries dropped on average 10-fold compared to 1991 (from about \$60 billion to \$6.3-\$6.7 billion) and remained at the same low level in 1994 and 1995 (see Table 1).

Table 1

**Trade between Russia and the Central Asian Countries
(1991-1995)**

Years	Trade turnover, \$ million	Russia's export to Central Asia, \$ million	Import from Russia to Central Asia, \$ million	Russia's trade balance, \$ million
1991	59,226	33,785	25,441	8,344
1992	6,360	5,767	593	5,174
1993	6,750	4,703	2,047	2,656
1994	6,143	3,771	2,372	1,399
1995	7,679	4,230	3,449	781

Note: The sources cite 1991 in Soviet rubles because these republics were still part of the Soviet Union; in Table 1 the figures for 1991 were calculated in U.S. dollars on the basis of the exchange rate established by the State Bank of the U.S.S.R. (based on a purchasing power parity of \$1 = 0.78 ruble).

Source: National statistics structures of the Central Asian countries.

Institutional Cooperation

The institutional sphere likewise suffered from Russia's desire to move away from the Central Asian countries (and all the post-Soviet states for that matter). For the simple reason that the Euro-Atlantic trend was not only Russia's main, but practically only, foreign policy trend, the CIS was a mere formality from the very beginning. What was more, the Kremlin never hailed the attempts of the post-Soviet states to move forward to new formats among themselves.

Results

The very obvious "disdain" for Central Asia against the background of the equally obvious Western bias destroyed the region's former confidence in Russia and its policy; the local countries set

down to the business of re-orienting their foreign policy priorities. The ruling elites of the Central Asian countries (anti-Russian in at least some of them) should not be held totally responsible—no one knew whether Russia could be trusted at all.

The doubts amid the very real threat of regional destabilization were aggravated by the highly complicated and painful economic, political, and social transformations in the Central Asia countries, which lost much more than Russia when the economic ties in the post-Soviet expanse were ruptured.

The Soviet Union's disintegration bared the truth about the national economies of the Central Asian republics: they were relatively small and weak, the result of their niche in the Soviet economic system. The Soviet system of division of labor (and territorial distribution of the productive forces) made nearly all of Central Asian industry dependent (structurally and technologically) on the economies of Russia and other Soviet republics. The close republican economic ties of the past were destroyed when the Soviet Union disappeared and Central Asia found itself cut off from Russia's trade and monetary system.

The region's economic and geographic isolation became even more pronounced: geography imposed new "rules of the game." According to certain expert assessments, it is 50 percent more expensive to move goods from landlocked than from coastal countries.

The industrial branches of the Central Asian countries failed the test for endurance; the economic situation began rapidly sliding into chaos, while the social sphere degraded just as rapidly. At the early stage of independence, the standard of living plummeted; social tension increased while qualified people were leaving the region in great numbers. In the early 1990s this, and the social destabilization in Afghanistan, brought the Central Asian states to the brink of destabilization; one of them, Tajikistan, failed to keep the lid on social discontent. Had the common economic, defense, and institutional expanse survived there would probably have been no civil war in Tajikistan or other negative developments.

On the whole, it was in the early and mid-1990s that an "alienation barrier" appeared between the local states and the Russian Federation. Yeltsin's policy stirred up anti-Russian sentiments among the political elites of some of the Central Asian countries: they were prepared not merely to rid themselves of the "younger brother complex" but also to form much closer relations with alternative power centers. This was done by necessity: ramified foreign economic ties were badly needed to overcome the ruinous results of disintegration of the single economic system. The Central Asian countries placed their stakes on the developed Western states and some of the financially reliable and culturally close Islamic states.

The Second Stage (1996-1999)

In the mid-1990s Russia became more and more obviously concerned with looking for fundamentally new foreign policy approaches to the world, the post-Soviet expanse and Central Asia as its part. In fact, the course toward a multipolar world formulated in 1996 by Russia's new Foreign Minister Primakov added weight to Central Asia in the system of Russia's foreign policy priorities. The old foreign policy course was replaced with the aim of developing Russia into an independent power center; Euro-Atlantic integration was pushed aside to the margins of the Yeltsin team's foreign policy agenda.

Russia's Central Asian Policy

To realize its new doctrine Russia had to build up its “regional presence;” in this way Central Asia acquired a new dimension—that of a region where, and at the expense of which, Russia could potentially develop the muscles of a regional Eurasian power. It was expected that this could be done through much more intensive cooperation with the Central Asian countries in the security sphere as well as tapping Russia's monopoly on the transit of Central Asian energy fuels. It should be said that at that time Russia had no better tools. Amid its own economic and political turmoil, placing the stakes on cooperation in these spheres was in fact the best alternative: it was cheaper than full-scale economic cooperation yet fairly effective.

Security and Military Cooperation

In the latter half of the 1990s Russia paid much more attention to Central Asian stability and security mainly because it had become aware of the threat of political Islam to its own security. In the late 1990s the Islamic radicals who had defeated the Northern Alliance in 1998 became the masters of Afghanistan; they spread their control to Chechnia after the federal pullout in 1996. As the wave of terror mounted in the Russian Federation while the North Caucasian conflict rapidly escalated, Moscow awoke to the fact that the destructive forces operating in Russia, Afghanistan, and some of the Central Asian countries were closely connected. It was in the latter half of the 1990s that Moscow scored its first diplomatic success in Central Asia by brokering, together with other interested states (Iran and Uzbekistan in particular), the Tajik domestic conflict.

The Economy

Very much as before the Russian Federation refused to take trade and economic cooperation with the local states seriously. The volume of trade between Russia and its Central Asian partners decreased compared to the first half of the 1990s. Between 1996 and 1999, trade turnover dropped two-fold from \$7.2 to \$3.7 billion (see Table 2). The hard currency deficit both in Russia and its Central Asian partners forced them to resort to barter schemes.

It will be no exaggeration to say that fragmentation of the post-Soviet economic expanse triggered by the Gaidar ministers continued unabated. The oil and gas sector alone showed certain signs of revived cooperation limited to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. This can hardly be called economic relations: perfunctory cooperation was mostly used for political purposes, a lever of pressure to be applied to the countries. At that time Russia had the monopoly on moving oil from Kazakhstan and gas from Turkmenistan to the corresponding markets, which accounts for the ambiguity of oil and gas cooperation between Russia and the two Central Asian republics.

On the one hand, Moscow wanted to move Central Asian hydrocarbons exclusively across its territory and prevent any bypassing pipelines laid outside it. On the other hand, Gazprom, as the monopolist, was frequently tempted to block up the transit of Turkmen gas across Russia's territory, which caused serious tension between Moscow and Ashgabad. On several occasions Russia limited the transit of Kazakh oil across its territory.

Table 2

Trade between Russia and the Central Asian Countries in 1996-1999

Years	Trade turnover, \$ million	Russia's export to Central Asia, \$ million	Import from Central Asia to Russia, \$ million	Russia's trade balance, \$ million
1996	7,244	3,920	3,324	596
1997	6,833	3,402	3,431	-29
1998	5,411	3,165	2,246	919
1999	3,695	1,903	1,792	111

Source: National statistics structures of the Central Asian countries.

Institutional Cooperation

Throughout the first and latter half of the 1990s the Yeltsin Administration limited itself to co-operation within the CIS, which by that time had deteriorated into a de facto impotent structure, while Russia and the Central Asian countries maintained relations at the bilateral level.

Results

Mutual mistrust was fed by Russia's inconsistent and highly contradictory policy; the fact that the administration that had spared no effort to demonstrate that Central Asia was an "unwelcome burden" still remained in power did nothing to improve the relations. The Central Asian countries were well aware that Russia was not merely economically weak; what amounted to a defeat in the first Chechen campaign of 1995-1996 was ample evidence of its military impotence.

The Russian Federation and the Central Asian states had to address numerous and fairly urgent domestic problems: plummeting industrial production caused by ruptured or weakened traditional ties, the very contradictory social context, subversive activities by religious extremists, etc.

On the whole, in the latter half of the 1990s Russia failed to remove the "alienation barrier" that separated it from the Central Asian states; they, in turn, no longer looked to Russia for more or less considerable assistance. Left to rely on their own resources, they turned to all sorts of international organizations, sponsors, and power centers. In the latter half of the 1990s all the countries finally embraced a multivector foreign policy course.

Third Stage: 2000 until the Present Time

The advent of Vladimir Putin and his team to power in 2000 marked a turning point in Russia's policy. The country acquired a much clearer foreign policy designed to make it one of the

power centers on the international scene and in the global economy. The new president who came to power in 2008 has not yet changed the earlier vector. In fact, both Putin's course and that of the Putin-Medvedev tandem is rooted in the "multipolar world" conception formulated by Evgeniy Primakov.

As soon as it acquired sufficient financial, administrative, and other resources Russia displayed its determination to move "from word to deed." On the one hand, its foreign policy course became less chaotic and more consistent; while on the other, the extremely favorable (until September 2008) world prices for Russia's main export items (raw materials, oil and gas in particular) can be described as a boon to Putin's Russia. Petrodollars helped resolve many domestic problems that received the Kremlin's full attention in the first years of Putin's first presidential term. Part of the oil and gas income went into foreign policy projects.

Many of them became clear when Moscow finally became convinced that its restored regional position across the post-Soviet expanse would boost its international prestige. Central Asia was one of the regions where Russia could test its new policy and its methods—pragmatism, flexibility, and practicality. This became even more obvious when in the context of the U.S. and NATO counter-terrorist operation in Afghanistan Central Asia, the periphery of world politics, acquired strategic importance.

Today, Russia's foreign policy in general and in Central Asia in particular needs a more consistent conceptual basis with long-term and specific priorities (less abstract than "multipolarity") and corresponding mechanisms of their realization. Russia has not yet acquired a clear idea about the role and place of the countries and regions (including Central Asia and the post-Soviet expanse in general) in the system of its internal and external measures. This means that Moscow has not yet found the main vector of its development. So far, nothing can be said about a system of Russia's strategic goals in Central Asia. No success is possible without an algorithm of action in this direction, at which Moscow has not yet arrived.

The global financial and economic crisis might greatly change Russia's foreign policy strategy, which will undoubtedly readjust Russia's Central Asian policy. If the crisis develops further it might force Russia to choose between two options: either abandon the post-Soviet expanse and Central Asia to their fate and concentrate on its own crisis or push forward economic integration so that together with the CIS partners (or at least within the EurAsEC) it can find new possibilities of economic growth. Today, Russia's choice is not clear.

Russia's Central Asian Policy

Compared with the 1990s Russia stepped up its foreign policy involvement in the region as a result of which the numerous declarations about the "need to develop close cooperation" were gradually realized. Russia intensified its bilateral relations with the regional states. At the same time the Kremlin has not yet acquired effective forms and mechanisms of regional multilateral cooperation and a new, more effective project of post-Soviet integration.

It seems that Russia has not yet become convinced that economic integration with the Central Asian states is fundamentally important. On the one hand, Moscow is pouring a lot of effort into integration while, on the other, it lacks a detailed strategic course and a program of real integration and, therefore, still keeps to the bilateral format.

Institutional Cooperation

Russia moved to specific actions and initiatives related to institutional cooperation; this is a novel and extremely important turn in its Central Asian policy. Logically enough, it concentrated on devising new integration schemes and formats rather than reviving the old ones (the CIS, which has preserved its political club function, is one of the examples). Russia's new policy is fairly flexible: Moscow is developing several integration schemes/institutions simultaneously: EurAsEC, SEE, OCAC (in 2006 it became integrated in the EurAsEC) and the CSTO.

So far Russia has to cope with objective and subjective problems; the latter are created by the still cautious attitude of some of the post-Soviet states toward supranational structures: for obvious reasons they are apprehensive of the possibility of a restored "elder brother" represented by Russia. Moscow nevertheless remains the driving force of integration in the CIS. This has become especially clear against the background of the unfolding world financial crisis. At the special meeting of the EurAsEC interstate council held in Moscow early in February 2009 it was decided to set up a joint anti-crisis fund of \$10 billion (in which Russia will invest \$7.5 billion) to support the national economies of the CIS members. The Russian leaders expect that on 1 January, 2010, the Single Economic Expanse of Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus will start functioning. It will be open to other countries.

From the very beginning, Moscow has been seeking greater influence when pushing forward institutional cooperation rather than promoting integration as a large-scale project albeit under its own aegis. For this reason the CSTO alone has retained its efficiency while the EurAsEC and SEE remain, to a much greater extent, economic blocks of doubtful efficiency. Today, multilateral economic cooperation is in crisis to the extent that it can boost neither comprehensive development of members nor of organizations; it cannot help but deal with the grave post-Soviet social problems. It is not yet clear whether concerted anti-crisis measures are possible. It seems that back in 2008 Uzbekistan had good reason to suspend its EurAsEC membership.

The low efficiency of Russia's institutional cooperation with the Central Asian countries is explained by the fact that even under Vladimir Putin Russia was doing little if anything to consistently promote economic cooperation as an important part of interstate relations. As the only leader in the post-Soviet expanse, Russia unwisely removed itself from settling, together with other countries, the water-and-energy issue, a problem of vital importance for Central Asia. The region's states (mainly Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) might be involved in a crisis that could have been avoided with Russia's help. By the same token, Russia could have promoted regional cooperation within EurAsEC in particular. It should be said that no economic integration between Russia and Central Asia is possible until another vitally important issue is successfully resolved. The situation in Afghanistan must be either settled or at least the impact of its threats on the region must be decreased. For objective and subjective reasons Russia's potential is fairly limited.

On the whole, Russia has failed to appreciate the fact that multisided cooperation with the Central Asian countries should become more dynamic, manageable, and better coordinated at the state level: this accounts for the low efficiency of the integration institutions. While the world financial crisis was unfolding in the late 2008 and early 2009 Russia tried to add new impetus to integration. Very much as before these efforts remain limited to bilateral relations.

Security and Military Cooperation

It looks as if the Kremlin still regards cooperation in the security sphere as the all-purpose tool of Russia's influence in the region, which perfectly fits its current course toward strengthening its global

position. The Russian leaders have learned the lessons of the 1990s (one of the worst blunders occurred in 1999 when the Collective Security Treaty was virtually emasculated) and tried to demonstrate to all the Central Asian countries the advantages of cooperating with Russia.

In recent years, Russia has learned to capitalize on the favorable strategic situation: the global struggle against international terrorism with the epicenter in Afghanistan. Cooperation in the military sphere is the most effective and cheapest of the political instruments.

The recent Caucasian developments helped to boost military cooperation within the CSTO. At the latest CSTO summit held in Moscow in February 2009 the heads of the member states agreed with Russia that the organization needed a joint rapid deployment force.

Russia is still resolved to maintain bilateral relations with the Central Asian countries; it looks less eager to develop multisided cooperation in which it might claim coordinating functions. Life has shown that the bilateral format is much more practicable since it avoids the negative impact of national ambitions that inevitably crop up in all multisided formats. So far, bilateral cooperation remains more specific and more practicable.

This means that Russia's policy in the security sphere and its military cooperation with the Central Asia countries cannot be called effective mainly because economic integration, the foundation of any interstate alliance, has not yet become real. In fact, the region's countries are sticking to multivector policies precisely because they see no progress in economic integration.

It is also possible that the growing negative trends in Afghanistan will give Russia the chance to achieve closer cooperation with the Central Asian states and establish common approaches to the regional security issues. So far, Afghanistan and the related issues have not yet moved to the forefront of Russia's foreign policy. In fact, the West is keeping Russia by the wayside. In the last two years, Moscow has been trying to acquire more or less considerable influence there, therefore it is too early to offer any opinion about the possible results of its efforts; there is even less ground to predict how Moscow will use them in Central Asia to cement its position there. The international conference under the SCO aegis held in Moscow in March 2009 revealed the fact that Russia and the SCO partners still have to elaborate a common position on Afghanistan. In March, they merely pointed out that there was a problem and declared that "the world should become more united and more efficient in its efforts to help Afghanistan revive."

The Economy

Russian business became much more noticeable than in the 1990s on the Central Asian economic stage; the same applies to Russia's economic policy, although it remains concentrated in the oil and gas sector. Projects and investments are much more visible in the countries with considerable hydrocarbon resources (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan); outside them Russia's economic involvement remains practically at the 1990s level.

Trade, one of the key indicators of Russia's economic involvement in the region, has been developing in the last 8 years but the level remains low (even compared to Soviet times). In 2000-2002, trade turnover between the Russian Federation and the Central Asian countries remained at the level of the latter half of the 1990s. It was in 2003 that positive shifts became obvious: between 2003 and 2008 the average annual trade turnover increased from \$7.1 billion to \$29.3 billion (see Table 3); on the whole, however, between 2000 and 2008 the share of the region's countries remained at 4 percent of Russia's total foreign trade turnover, slightly higher than the level of the 1990s.

Table 3

**Trade Turnover between Russia and the Central Asian Countries
in 2000-2008**

Years	Trade turnover, \$ million	Russia's export to Central Asia, \$ million	Russia's import from Central Asia, \$ million	Russia's trade balance, \$ million
2000	6,469	2,730	3,739	-1,009
2001	5,924	3,517	2,407	1,110
2002	5,464	3,492	1,972	1,520
2003	7,088	4,520	2,568	1,952
2004	10,463	6,103	4,360	1,743
2005	13,227	7,525	5,702	1,823
2006	14,869	7,982	6,887	1,095
2007	21,787	13,489	8,298	5,191
2008	29,267	16,144	13,123	3,021

S o u r c e: National statistics structures of the Central Asian countries.

Russia, however, has re-adjusted its economic policy: it is prepared to grant loans to the Central Asian countries for geopolitical reasons in exchange of regional support of its interests. The loan of \$2 billion extended to Kyrgyzstan that coincided with Bishkek's decision to close down the American base on its territory is one of the pertinent examples.

Today, Russia is prepared to exploit the region's economic problems created by the world financial crisis to strengthen the regional position of Russian businesses. In January 2009, RF Minister of Economic Development E. Nabiullina made public the intention to set up a special structure to coordinate the process of buying up depreciated assets in the neighboring countries by private businesses and the state. Moscow, the financial resources of which are limited, is unlikely to launch a wide-scale program of economic expansion but the new approaches to Russia's economic involvement in the post-Soviet expanse speak of the Kremlin's greater interest in Central Asia.

Results

Despite the cardinal and, on the whole, positive changes in Russia during Putin's presidency and the early period of Medvedev's presidency, the results of Russia's Central Asian policy remain highly ambiguous.

On the one hand, the centrifugal trends have slowed down; Russia has strengthened its position and largely removed a great deal of the Central Asian countries' mistrust in it and its policy. Its Cen-

tral Asian policy became much more flexible, pragmatic, and consistent mainly because Moscow became aware of the region's strategic importance and thanks to its much greater financial possibilities. The Central Asian capitals, in turn, moved away from their skeptical attitudes of the latter half of the 1990s to accepting the signals from Moscow about its willingness to show much more determination to draw closer in the political, economic, and military spheres. This boosted Russia's importance for each of its Central Asian partners.

On the other hand, Russia failed to fill the regional geopolitical and geo-economic vacuum for the simple reason that it has still not arrived at an understanding of the urgency of full-fledged and diverse relations with the Central Asian states at the bilateral and multilateral levels. This explains why no real changes occurred in the economic sphere (with the exception of the oil and gas sector). Russia still sees the region as a strategically important tool needed to revive its Great Power status and a trump card to be laid on the table when dealing with the West.

Conclusion

To boost the efficiency of its Central Asian policy the Kremlin should offer a new, and tempting, cooperation program based on accelerated economic integration as the foundation of real allied relations in all other spheres. The future of Russia's relations with the Central Asian countries largely depends on the Kremlin. In fact, Russia's economic and geopolitical potential makes it the only driving force behind comprehensive economic development of the Central Asian countries and the guarantor of their security. The Kremlin, however, has not arrived at an understanding that the region's importance is not exhausted by its contribution to Russia's stronger foreign policy position; Russia needs it for its own effective and comprehensive economic development.

- First, if economic cooperation remains at the present extremely low level, the Central Asian countries will slowly but surely turn to other power centers. Sooner or later the region's mineral riches will stir up even greater rivalry among the leading powers and economic blocs. Russia, with its economy oriented toward the export of raw materials and its weakened industrial and scientific potential, is not the obvious victor. It looks more probable that China, which is rapidly building up its economic presence in the region, will win the race for the huge mineral resources (energy, non-ferrous metals, and precious stones).
- Second, the current building up of Russia's political and military presence in Central Asia divorced from adequate economic cooperation can hardly guarantee that the countries will continue drawing closer together. This is best illustrated by the EurAsEC, which has not developed into a full-fledged economic community. It looks as if the fundamental discrepancies among the regional countries' economic strategies are the main reason for this: Uzbekistan and Belarus, as well as Tajikistan to a lesser extent, are not ready to embrace the neo-liberal model accepted by Russia, Kyrgyzstan and, to a great extent, Kazakhstan. Their reluctance is well-justified: the neo-liberal model is fraught with numerous risks; today, there is a more or less unanimous opinion in the expert community that the current global financial crisis was caused by the collapse of the neo-liberal economic model.
- Third, Russia has obviously underestimated Central Asia's strategic importance caused by the weakness of Russia's analysis and experts who regard the region as an "economic burden" which would be better left alone. They are losing sight of an important aspect: even in Soviet times the region was deliberately reduced to an unprofitable status and forced to live on subsidies. Russia's ruling elite and the academic community, as well as the Russian public, are still convinced that "the region had no economic value."

This means that as long as Russia continues indulging itself in chaotic, sporadic, and inconsistent economic integration across the post-Soviet expanse any, even the best, programs in any spheres of its domestic and foreign policies will contradict all the other programs and run up against cul-de-sac dilemmas that defy solutions within narrow national and sectoral frameworks or within narrow disciplines. They will never allow Russia to achieve its main goal: wide strategic and tactical possibilities.