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## Learning to co-exist: Russia's resurgence through Central Asian cooperation

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Central Asia, after the Soviet disintegration, has become one of the most important regions, not only for the Asian continent but also, for the global geo-politics. The region - comprising of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan - is rich in minerals and natural resources. With an attractive overall GDP in excess of 160 billion dollars, the region is sure an attraction for energy sector investors and global policy makers. This importance has also been realized by key regional players, especially Russia, in form of maintaining good ties with all these Central Asian states. Though it is virtually impossible to maintain equal ties with all states, keeping in view the different vested interests and policies, Russia has been successful in maintaining fruitful ties with most of them.

Looking deep into these ties, one would find out that the nature of these ties is directly related to strategic importance of these states. Interestingly enough, most of these also act as buffer Muslim states for Moscow because of the moderate nature of religion in these territories. Of all these states, Turkmenistan maintains an isolation policy, Uzbekistan looks towards the West, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan provide feasible cooperation to Moscow whereas Kazakhstan

maintains a neutral outlook. Getting into detailed relationship of these states, below is how each of them stands in terms of ties with Moscow.

Starting with *Uzbekistan*, it serves as the primary buffer for Moscow and Asia. Having a good chunk of region's energy resources, it also acts as an important element of Moscow's energy network. Russia maintains good ties with the country's military and elites but ties with an independent-minded president, Islam Karimov, are not ideal. Although socially Russia may not have influence over the country, yet, keeping in mind the strategic importance, it maintains a force around Uzbek borders in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan coupled with maintaining key political links in Fergana valley. In economic perspective, Russia is one of the major importers of Uzbek goods whereas the remittances from Uzbeks working in Russia also make up a good chunk of Uzbek foreign exchange.

*Kazakhstan* on the other hand holds an important and strategic position for Russia as it acts a conduit for to access Central Asia. The border shared among both the states is as long as 5000 miles that is mostly unguarded. This border makes it important for Russia to assure internal stability for its neighbor as it could easily be affected by any instability in the country. Kazakhstan, contrary to Uzbekistan, maintains good ties with Moscow as its natural resources in form of oil and gas provide good investment opportunities for Russian investors. The political and social aspects also remain on the positive half as Russian leaders enjoy good terms with Kazakh President, PM and elites whereas approximately 25% of Kazakh population comprises of Russians. Overall, with good relations and economic might, Kazakhstan is an important partner for Russia both socially as well as economically.

Talking about *Tajikistan*, it maintains an anomalous position for Russia. Having a border with Afghanistan, it acts an important state both for USA and Russia. Russia, for long, has also bore the evil of drug trafficking in its territory from Afghanistan via Tajikistan. Furthermore, the recent affiliations of Tajik leaders towards USA, especially its foreign minister, Homrokhon Zarifi, has made the situation critical for Moscow. On the other hand, Russia provides the largest employment market for Tajik workers. The number of Tajik workers employed in Russia is so huge that the remittances from the country make up a huge chunk of Tajik GDP. Even with recent affiliations for USA and the Pilot scandal, alleging a Russian and Estonian pilot for smuggling in Tajikistan, Moscow still maintains a soft stance towards the country realizing the fact that most of the Tajik families look towards Russia for their livelihoods. Billions of aid and food items are provided to Tajikistan by Russia in return of electricity via negotiations with its neighbors. It is also interesting to notice that three strategic partner states, that are, Russia, China and Iran, have a strong influence in the country which also benefits Tajikistan for its security and strategic interests.

***Turkmenistan*** acts as a buffer for Russia separating it from the violence in Afghanistan and Pakistan. With its rich resources of natural gas, it has, for many years, remained an area of interest not only for Russia but also for USA. Russia imports a good chunk of its natural gas for export from Turkmenistan that has one of the largest gas reserves, having the sixth and thirteenth largest gas fields in the world. With the Trans Afghan Pipeline project waiting to be implemented for almost two decades, Russia sees it as somewhat a move against its economic interests. If the proposed gas pipeline, from Turkmenistan passing through Afghanistan to Pakistan and even India, goes according to plan, Turkmenistan would get another conduit for its gas exports that would directly impact the Russian economy and would benefit the American investors. The Russian administration enjoys fruitful ties with the Turkmen president, Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov, the security officials as well as the business elite. With efforts from Russia to completely integrate Turkmenistan in the Eurasian Union, the situation provides positive signs for future as the union can prove to be a productive body for the region.

Finally comes ***Kyrgyzstan***, a state that possesses the highlands in the critical Fergana valley which helps it to keep an eye over Uzbekistan. With the announcement of Kyrgyz President, Almazbek Atambayev, to end the lease of US base in his country, the relations with Russia have further improved in recent times. Although Atambayev has been criticized for reaching a deal with Moscow over the US base lease, analysts believe that the rational decision from the newly elected President came on grounds of keeping Russia's strategic importance in perspective. Russia currently holds a multiple number of bases and military installations in the country which helps it in keeping a check over foreign maneuvering in the region. Russia provides economic assistance to Kyrgyzstan through refined energy supplies, aid and soft loans. Kyrgyzstan also receives huge sums of money from Russia in form rent for the latter's military bases and installations.

It is somewhat astonishing to analyze the fact that an economy that was about to crumble in early 90's after the Soviet disintegration has regained its spot as one of the major world economies. The addition of Russia towards the BRICS states as well as its ever growing GDP and gas exports have again made it an important player in global and regional politics. The manner in which Moscow is coexisting with its neighbors and Central Asian states provides a good model to other developing and conflict hit states as to how a successful coexistence with the neighbors would provide good dividends for the country.