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**CENTRAL ASIAN LEGO:
Who is configuring the region?**

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Authors:

Sanat Kushkumbayev, Doctor of Political Science (editor)

Farhod Tolipov, PhD in Political Science

Abdugani Mamadazimov, PhD in Political Science; Associate Professor

Tamerlan Ibraimov, PhD in Law

Galia Ibragimova, PhD in Law

Ella Bychkova, proofreader

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This second publication by the CAPG Almaty Club think tank looks at the dualism of external– internal regionalism, whereby Central Asia's international status as seen from within the region differs from its status as seen from without. The internal region-building and external configuration of the region often differ not only in spatial terms, but also, and more importantly, geopolitically. Frequently, the external configuration and internal self-identification of the region differ significantly. Furthermore, attitudes towards Central Asian integration with the international community vary: the authors of this paper suggest, for example, that the USA supports the idea, Russia rejects it, China is indifferent, and the European Union is doubtful. The authors also take the view that the majority of regional powers support the idea of unity between the Central Asian countries. This paper, which has been produced by scholars and experts in various academic disciplines who are well known in Central Asia, sheds light on this and other interesting and important aspects of the configuration of the region from without.

This publication is intended for the general reader.

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INTRODUCTION

The countries of Central Asia are feeling the direct and indirect impacts of both the ongoing geopolitical transformation of the post-Soviet space and the effects of globalisation. From the start, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have seen regionalism and integration as a long-term prospect.

Global and regional powers have viewed the regional relationships between the Central Asian countries (i.e. what might be called 'internal region-building') in a particular way. Their outside vision of Central Asia as a geographical space and as a geopolitical agent/subject has differed considerably – and still does – from the vision of the countries in the region themselves. The internal region-building and external configuration of the region often differ not only in spatial terms, but also, and more importantly, geopolitically.

These external and internal perspectives of the region have given rise to another phenomenon: a dualism of external–internal regionalism, whereby the global positioning of Central Asia's status as seen from within the region differs from its status as seen from without. Internal regionalism is based on the desire of the Central Asian countries to acquire a higher status as an actor in the international system, whereas external

regionalism is based on maintaining the region's lower status as an object. In effect, this dualism may be described as a dualism of statuses.

The configuration of Central Asia, internally and externally, either as an independent region or as part of larger entities, is reminiscent of building with Lego; the region's geographical outline varies in shape depending on the geopolitical, civilisational, economic and other perspectives.

International research attempting to configure the region is based not only on a geographical understanding, but also on the plans and interests of external powers with regard to its geopolitical reconfiguration. The principles underlying the external and internal configurations of Central Asia are helping to shape development models for the region. These models set out solutions to many of the issues relating to the development of the Central Asian countries and peoples – from their self-identification to long-term prospects.

Here, though, a question arises: is the region of Central Asia self-sufficient, and of value in its own right? If not, is it fated to be merely a part of larger regional entities? In addition, are the external, sometimes apparently attractive, strategies regarding Central Asian regionalism not producing distorted stereotypes by wrongly viewing these 'uncharted' countries of the region as weak, non-self-sufficient and subservient, and as playing merely a transit role in the international system? Using an integration paradigm, we set out to analyse existing regional strategies and projects initiated by

the US, Russia, China, the EU, Turkey, India, Japan, South Korea, and nearby countries of the Islamic world, and to find out the extent to which they correspond to the ideas and interests of the countries in the region themselves.

The development of foreign policy strategy regarding Central Asia

In spite of a certain ambiguity in the perception of Central Asia by the international community, neighbouring and global powers alike have begun to develop their own conceptions of it. In such circumstances, it is natural that old names and characterisations of the region have re-emerged.¹

In the early years of independence for the countries of Central Asia, the region was seen in Russia as a 'Middle Asian underbelly', which, with other post-Soviet regions, was part of the newly established Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

In this new environment, the west did not focus on Central Asia as a distinct region

either, concentrating instead on a new regional entity (the CIS), as shown by the European Union's TACIS (Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States) programme, set up to accelerate economic reform in the CIS.

China saw a revival of its traditional geopolitical notion of 'Western Regions' (Xiyu). The pressure to resolve long-term border issues with three of the countries in the region and Russia, along with the relatively painless solution to this problem, is a large part of the reason for China's positive attitude to the region in general.

There has also been a rise in pro-Islamic, pro-Turkish and pro-Iranian sentiment, based in each case on ideas of a 'centre and periphery', with the region's new countries consigned to the latter. As those countries became part of the international system, however, those sentiments have died down or disappeared.

The region's five countries themselves have been seeking their own national identity, and this has markedly destabilised the image of Central Asia as a region. The region-building process has seen an alternation of centrifugal and centripetal tendencies, as the nation-building process has required use of resources (economic, political, intellectual, etc.) from each of the countries.

Resolving vital issues – water and energy, transport and transit, infrastructure, border controls, etc. – has kept the countries in the region from total alienation from one

¹ See: Five states and/or one region? National–regional dualism in Central Asia. (2016). Almaty: Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGY REGARDING CENTRAL ASIA

another. As they have become part of the global community, issues of coordination, cooperation or joint action within various regional, interregional and global frameworks have also come to the forefront.

The geopolitical transformation of the region has intensified, with major global and regional powers officially announcing and implementing their so-called 'Central Asia strategies'. These documents show that those powers are paying attention to Central Asia, thanks to their particular interests in the region, and setting out their justifications for implementing a more active and long-term policy in this part of the world. The United States, the European Union, Russia, China, Turkey, Japan, India and South Korea have all advanced their own strategies.

Methods used to implement strategies have, however, often contradicted one another, which has increased competition between powers for the region. Notably, there are considerable differences in how the external powers formulate Central Asia conceptually as a geographical space and in how its prospects are assessed. This has prompted the Central Asian countries to seek a better response to these increasing and varied external influences.

The concepts advanced by the external powers regarding the transformation of Central Asia have affected not only the development of the foreign policy priorities of the countries in the region, but also their identity. They have kept the countries of the region in a state of constant geopolitical and

civilisational tension, compelling them to respond to external challenges.

The geopolitical turbulence resulting from the strained relations between the USA and EU, on one hand, and Russia, on the other, is complicating the global framework for understanding a changing world order, and increasing tension in Central Asia. The global community, and, of course, the countries of Central Asia, are experiencing a reverse of the euphoria of the end of the 50-year Cold War at the end of the 1980s, with the confrontation being renewed today. The region-building process will depend on the self-identification of the Central Asian nations and on how the region integrates into the global order.

In analysing the strategies and concepts of the extra-regional powers in Central Asia, it is just important to understand how they perceive and assess one another's interests in the region. Frequently, such assessments contain elements not only of cooperation, but also of rivalry.

Therefore, in developing and implementing their concepts and strategies with regard to Central Asia, leading international stakeholders have accorded differing status to the region, and continue to do so. For the USA, it would seem, the region requires independence from the domination of the great powers and, as far as possible,—to develop as a genuinely independent region. Washington recognises the importance and expediency of cooperating in this area with Russia and China, which many people

typically think of as geopolitical rivals of the USA.²

For Russia, Central Asia is an area of exclusively Russian domination. From officials to the expert community, opposition to non-Russian military bases in Central Asia has been regularly voiced in Russia. Two aspects are key to a stronger assessment of the various concepts and strategies regarding Central Asia: 1) the attitudes of players from outside the region to prospects for integration in the region; and 2) the attitudes of the Central Asian countries themselves to external regionalisation.

² Starr, F. (2002). The United States, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. *Nordic Newsletter of Asian Studies*, (3).

AMERICAN CENTRAL ASIA

The United States of America was one of the first parties to assess the strategic significance of Central Asia on the world stage following the fall of the USSR, and to develop a corresponding strategy. That strategy was based from the outset on the principle of regionalism in Central Asia. The advance of America's strategy in the region has been complicated by the actions of its geopolitical rivals, as well as the inconsistent development of the Central Asian countries themselves.

This situation has been neatly encapsulated in the words of the well-known American geopolitician Zbigniew Brzezinski: "The geostrategic implications for America are clear: America is too distant to be dominant in this part of Eurasia but too powerful not to be engaged...Russia is too weak to regain imperial domination over the region or to exclude others from it, but it is also too close and too strong to be excluded."³

³ Brzezinski, Z. (1997). *The Grand Chessboard: American Primary and its Geostrategic Imperatives*. New York, NY: BasicBooks, pp. 125, 148.

Since then, there have been changes in the nature of the American version of regionalism in Central Asia, and on how it is being put into practice. Initially, Washington conceptualised Central Asia as part of a discourse on the revival of the Great Silk Road (GSR). The US Congress passed the Freedom Support Act in 1992, and the Silk Road Strategy Act in 1999. The former sanctioned American aid to the 12 newly independent states of the former Soviet Union during their transition from communism to democracy and a market economy. The latter covered the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus as part of a strategy aimed at supporting projects to establish transport and communications networks (in particular, TRACECA) between Europe and Asia via the Caucasus and Central Asia.

From the very beginning, America's strategy has been dominated by an approach to Central Asia from a position of open regionalism, meaning, in contrast to closed regionalism: 1) the idea that the region is not self-sufficient; 2) the idea of a natural geopolitical link between Central Asia and neighbouring spaces, such as South Asia or the South Caucasus; and 3), as a consequence of 1) and 2), justification for gaining geopolitical access to the region. The American strategy excluded or ignored the possibility of Central Asia being connected to the Eurasian space, dominated by the USA's rival, Russia. In December 2012, the then US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, spoke forcibly on the unacceptability of a Soviet Union-like reunification of the Eurasian space, and the USA's determination to fight such developments.

In its Central Asia strategy, Washington has always sought to align apparently incompatible goals and principles: normative and value-based goals on one hand, and Realpolitik considerations on the other. Furthermore, both officials and experts have persistently stated that America's goals are: 1) the development of stable, democratic countries in the region, including the resolution of regional conflicts; 2) the promotion of friendly relationships between the countries of the region, and between the USA and their allies; 3) helping to ensure that the region's economy and natural resources are developed as dictated by the laws of the market, and not through exploitation by regional and hegemonic powers.⁴

The difficulties of putting the USA's dual policy into practice, aimed on one hand at fostering democratic values and at promoting America's own geopolitical interests on the other, are constantly making themselves felt. An example is its policy towards Kyrgyzstan while the latter was hosting an airbase for US-led anti-terrorist forces. The violations of the democratic principles of government under President Kurmanbek Bakiyev (2005–2010) had little effect on cooperation between the USA and Kyrgyzstan, or on the considerable financial aid provided to the latter. The USA was well aware of the gradually deteriorating situation with regard to human rights in Kyrgyzstan, but opted to turn a blind eye in favour of "more important" geopolitical interests, in particular the need

for an operational air base in the Central Asian country.

Another example is the relationship between the USA and Uzbekistan, which the Americans have called their key strategic partner in the region. This relationship has been – and is – reminiscent of a roller coaster, with periods of warmth alternating with long phases where their relations have been frosty, if not frozen altogether. Moreover, there has been no major progress on political reform in Uzbekistan in the last 25 years. Clearly, the various ups and downs in the relationships between the countries are the result not of significant changes within Uzbekistan, but changes in the geopolitical situation for the USA, on one hand, and the dictates of Uzbekistan's foreign policy manoeuvring, on the other. All the same, it cannot be denied that the USA, albeit cautiously, has from time to time placed more emphasis on a value-driven approach. For example, when it needed Uzbekistan as a close ally, the USA drew a direct link between aid for the Central Asian country and the need for progress in democracy. The Consolidated Appropriations Act, signed by President George W. Bush at the end of February 2003, set out strict requirements for Uzbekistan. It forbade any aid (not just military) unless the Secretary of State reported to Congress that Uzbekistan had made "substantial progress" in meeting its democracy and human rights obligations.

America's strategy has emphasised the region's value in its own right. Unlike other external powers that see Central Asia as a source of raw materials, a transit zone, or a geopolitical buffer, America sees it as a

⁴ The US Congress Silk Road Strategy Act of 1999.

region in its own right, destined to develop without being dominated by the great powers. In seeking to gain access to Central Asia and ensure a stable American presence in the region, the USA has followed a dual goal – normative and geopolitical.

Over time, America's views of Central Asia have evolved towards incorporating it into larger geographical areas. The concept of a 'Greater Central Asia' (GCA) has emerged, with Afghanistan as an integral part. According to the author behind this concept, "The geographical delineations used by the USA government prevent policymakers from recognising Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan as comprising a single region..."⁵ In effect, GCA is a combination of projects united by a common purpose – to "foster participatory political systems that can serve as models for other countries with large Muslim populations. All these ends are best advanced on a regional basis."⁶

Another variation on America's designs for Central Asian regionalism was the concept of the 'Greater Middle East', an area stretching all the way from the Maghreb to Central Asia, for which the USA is pursuing a common strategy. This concept is based on a simplified conception of the region, on the idea that the countries within this space are ostensibly similar in many characteristics, making it possible to group them together in a common strategy.

Subsequently, the USA has to an extent reconceptualised the region in light of the discourse on the 'New Silk Road' (NSR), for which the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) could form a basis. The withdrawal of international security forces from Afghanistan made Central Asia once again the focus of attention as a vital hub of the NDN that might serve as a starting point for a revival of its role as the centre of the NSR. The operating features of the NDN as an effective network for routes for withdrawing military equipment from Afghanistan has made it possible to put forward the idea of the NSR as an extensive continental transport and trade network.⁷

On the whole, despite attempts to incorporate Central Asia into larger entities constructed by Washington, the region still figures in America's strategic planning in its own right. It is no coincidence that America's aid programmes to the countries of Central Asia have always stood apart, both individually and collectively. They have never been part of larger programmes aimed at GCA or the GME. As a result, the Greater Middle East is no longer so great that it includes Central Asia, while Greater Central Asia remains an abstract concept, nothing more than a symbolic term, a result of an irrelevant and impractical artificial expansion of the region.

For all the variations of America's Central Asia strategy, it is clear that "Central Asia as a great-power-free zone" is a constant

⁵ Starr, F. (2005). A Partnership for Central Asia. *Foreign Affairs*, 84(4), p.164.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ The Northern Distribution Network and the Modern Silk Road. Planning for Afghanistan's future. (2009). Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies.

principle.⁸ It is no accident that the idea that there is some form of correlation between America's presence in Central Asia and the influence of Russia and China in the region is a consistent feature of Washington's thinking. This forces America to treat this part of the world as a categorically separate and independent region.

In this context, it is notable that US Secretary of State John Kerry met the ministers of foreign affairs of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan at a UN General Assembly summit in New York on 27 September 2015, initiating "a new format for regional discussions between the Secretary of State and his Central Asian colleagues".⁹ In this format (C5+1) the issues of common interest to the USA and the Central Asian countries will be discussed. As a practical step to this end, Mr Kerry visited all five countries from late October to early November 2015, and on 1 November 2015 the first meeting of the C5+1 group took place in Samarkand. As such, the USA has had to replace its idea of a Greater Central Asia with a more realistic approach.

Such an approach has the capacity to strengthen the interest of the countries in the region in the political recognition by the USA of Central Asia's internal potential for regional development and its status as a

geopolitical actor on the global stage. At the same time, having rediscovered America for themselves following the collapse of the Soviet superpower, and having already gained considerable experience of engagement and cooperation with the world's political leader, the Central Asian states are now contacting directly with the USA. The fact that all five Central Asian countries are actively participating in a multilateral dialogue with Washington shows that they are interested in the development of this new engagement format. Within this complex process by which the ideas of politicians and ordinary people about the USA are being transformed, enthusiasm and positivity exist side by side with caution and mistrust, not to mention the remnants of Soviet suspicion. However, it cannot be denied that Washington is doing all it can to promote its image in Central Asia through various projects, including aid programmes, assistance in ensuring security and consolidating independence, and the provision of student and academic grants and green cards, in order to create and consolidate a loyal Central Asian constituency.

⁸ Rumer, E. (2007). The United States and Central Asia. In: *Central Asia: Views from Washington, Moscow and Beijing*, Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe.

⁹ Review.uz, (2015). Gossekretar' SSHA provol forum s glavami MID tsentral'noaziatskikh gosudarstv. [online] Available at: <http://review.uz/index.php/novosti-main/item/4706-gossekretar-ssha-provjol-forum-s-glavami-midov-tsentralnoaziatskikh-gosudarstv>.

EUROPEAN CENTRAL ASIA

The European Union's interests and policy with regard to Central Asia are derived from the nature of the EU itself, which today acts on the global stage not merely as an association of independent states, but as a unique centre of soft power, with a consolidated, value-driven foreign policy. Europe's interests in Central Asia stem from but are not limited to the need for alternative energy sources: the two regions share historical, political and economic ties.

There are at least four major aspects of Europe's approach to Central Asia:

1) The EU itself can be counted as a region in this context here, so the EU–CA relationship is an interregional one. 2) Europe has an advantage over other actors in Central Asia, in that its policy is the result of input from all its members, as opposed to a policy developed by a single state. Even compared to other groups, the EU clearly has significantly more authority as an ensemble of states. 3) The EU is a special, networked agent of development: it acts on behalf of its member states, as well as in tandem with

other European and transatlantic structures, focusing predominantly on development issues. 4) Through its involvement in Central Asian affairs, Europe implicitly and explicitly cultivates Eurocentrism among its 'target audience' – the countries and peoples of Central Asia; Europe has, one might say, picked up on the emerging popular Eurocentrism in this part of the world.

Initially, the European Union had a vision and policy that treated the Central Asian countries as a single region. This was reflected in the particular form taken by that policy, which may be termed 'five in one'. In particular, a distinction is drawn in the budgets for programmes developed for Central Asian countries between funds destined for bilateral projects with any one of the five countries, and funds destined for regional projects. At the same time, the strategic objective of gaining direct access to the region was made a priority, and, with the EU playing an increasing role in international politics, coincided with its development of a common foreign and security policy. Unlike America's, Europe's configuration of Central Asia is taking place not within the global context of the mission of a world power, but within a continental context of the geopolitical ties between two regions.

It was Europe that gave birth to the concept of 'Central Asia and the Caucasus', connecting the two regions within a single geopolitical project envisaging transport and pipeline links between Europe and Asia bypassing Russia. This concept is expressed and embodied in the TRACECA programme, launched in 1993. This programme covers the five Central Asian and three Caucasian

(Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia) countries, and has as its main goal the creation of an extensive international transport, logistics, infrastructure, telecommunications and energy network extending from Europe to the Chinese border via the Caucasus and Central Asia. By definition, the project both envisages and encourages intra- and interregional cooperation.

A variation of this concept makes the Caspian subregion a separate area, reflecting the EU's eclectic vision of its objectives in these geopolitical spaces, in which the European countries' own interests overlap with philanthropic and humanitarian ambitions. A clear example of this Caspian strategy is the INOGATE international energy cooperation programme, established in 1996, between the EU and partner countries from the Black Sea and the South Caucasus to Central Asia. It is in the context of the implementation of projects under this energy transportation programme that the issues of the construction of the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline and the connection of Central Asian pipelines to the planned Nabucco pipeline system have taken on such importance. However, the success of Nabucco, the Trans-Caspian Pipeline and other transport projects avoiding Russia remain dependent on how competitive they are against the other pipeline projects which have come to light over the period.

As well as its transport and energy projects targeted at Central Asia, the EU has initiated a raft of current and future projects for Central Asia's regional development, under programs such as Tempus, Erasmus Mundus, the Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA), the Central Asia Drug

Action Programme (CADAP) and others. All these have a) helped to establish European standards in Central Asia, and b) enhanced regional and interregional cooperation. As the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative, focusing on six former Soviet republics (Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia), has developed, the concept of 'neighbours of neighbours' has been introduced.

The EU's relationship with Central Asia has been institutionalised with the introduction of the position of permanent EU Special Representative for Central Asia and the staging of regular EU–Central Asia forums. In Europe, there has been a noticeable increase of interest in the region, not only at the political level, but also among the export community. Analytical platforms, such as Europe–Central Asia Monitoring (EUCAM), Casa Asia's Observatory of Central Asia, the European Society for Central Asian Studies (ESCAS) have stepped up their activities.

Since 1996, a number of Partnership & Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) have been signed between Central Asian states and the EU. These have, in their own way, set the ball rolling for Europe's future strategy with regard to Central Asia. The then European Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, addressing the L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University in Astana on 17 October 2006, said: "We are two regions with a great deal in common, whose interests are intertwined, and who

should have much deeper and more developed relations."¹⁰

By 2007, the EU's experience of cooperation under the PCAs prompted it to adopt a special strategy for Central Asia designed for the period 2007-2013, and to allocate EUR 750 million for its implementation. This strategy called for dialogue and projects in areas such as poverty reduction and increasing living standards, promotion of democratic reform and human rights, construction of a state based on the rule of law, good governance, energy cooperation, economic reform, and supporting intraregional cooperation in Central Asia. This strategy was revised in June 2015 as it was due for renewal. The budget for all the programmes was doubled, to a total of EUR 1.5 billion.

Analysis of the content and experience of implementing the EU Strategy shows that the EU has always sought an optimal balance between regional and bilateral approaches, while tending increasingly, in the course of the implementation, towards bilateral partnership and a more pessimistic view of prospects for regional integration in this part of the world. Even so, for all the growing European pessimism, Central Asia has always kept its 'logo' in the European 'Lego'. EUCAM, a well-known group monitoring Europe's strategy in Central Asia, has looked at the particular dualism of external–internal

regionalism that we have been exploring. 'External' regionalism means 'open' regionalism, and 'internal' signifies 'closed' regionalism. The former "would involve cooperative activity with neighbours external to the region"; the latter "is restricted to the five Central Asian states."¹¹ Furthermore, EUCAM correctly highlights that "With its modest population size the Central Asian regional cooperation does not have much potential if it is not part of a wider, cross-border economic openness."¹²

At the same time, the EUCAM report states: "While there should therefore be no exaggerated or premature hopes for regional cooperation in Central Asia, the quest for a renewed and modern Central Asian regional identity is something that should be viewed sympathetically, with the chance that this would naturally lead to some authentic normative foundations."¹³ Finally, in terms of defining the Central Asian region more precisely, the EU tends to place it within Eurasia rather than attaching it to South Asia, as has been done up to now when organising the EU's foreign policy departments responsible for the post-Soviet space. It would seem that the contradictions and complexity, as well as the value, of Central Asia's regional integration are precisely reflected in this sceptical

¹⁰ Ferrero-Waldner, B. (2006). *The European Union and Central Asia – building a 21st century partnership*. Address to the L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Astana, 17 October 2006. Available as a downloadable document at: europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-06-615_en.doc.

¹¹ Emerson, M. and Boonstra, J. (authors); Hasanova, N., Laruelle, M. and Peyrouse, S. (contributors) (2010). *Into EurAsia: Monitoring the EU's Central Asia Strategy*. Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies; Madrid: Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior, p. 112.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 112.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

assessment of Central Asia's intraregional unity, on one hand, and the recognition of the internal functioning of such unity, on the other.

Appointing Peter Burian as the new EU Special Representative for Central Asia in April 2015, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, said that the appointment demonstrates the EU's continued cooperation with Central Asia, ensuring strong presence in our engagement on key issues including the rule of law, security, energy, water, education and human rights, confirming Central Asia's strategic importance on a regional level.

The most interesting and important aspect of the EU Strategy, and the main thing that the countries of Central Asia can gain from their cooperation with the EU, is that the latter, which today is a comparatively (if not the only) successful world region which has fully implemented its own integration project, may share its experience with them. Adriaan van der Meer, formerly Head of the Delegation of the European Commission to Kazakhstan, spoke about this directly in a speech in 2007: "We are ready to expand our experience of regional cooperation in the countries of Central Asia."¹⁴ Unlike the USA, Russia or China, whose Central Asia policies have given rise to stereotypical geopolitical ideas and reflection and,

¹⁴ van der Meer, A. (2007). 50 let Evropeiskoi intergratsii – chemu mozhno nauchit'sia?. Address by the Head of the Delegation of the European Commission to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to the American University of Central Asia, Bishkek, 22 March 2007.

accordingly, force the region's states to find a balance between them, the European Union has pursued a relatively innovative approach to the region based on its own regional experience and regional identity. It has proposed a value-orientated strategy aimed at the whole region that by its very nature is bound to be of interest. On 21 December 2015, EU High Representative Federica Mogherini, speaking at an EU–Central Asia meeting with the foreign affairs ministers of the region's five countries in Astana, underlined that the new EU Strategy in the region was "a strong sign of the political investment by all EU Member States and the European institutions in a strategic partnership, a strategic relationship with Central Asia".¹⁵

For their part, the Central Asian countries have shown interest in these proposals, but, paradoxically, have so far been relatively restrained and cautious in this area, as they themselves stuck between a geopolitical and normative choice, and hence as of yet have paid little attention to what Europe sees in them, namely the notion of a regional community.

¹⁵ <http://www.astanatv.kz/news/show/id/43962.html>.

RUSSIAN CENTRAL ASIA

Russia has changed its attitude to Central Asia several times in the post-Soviet period. In the early 1990s, Moscow was building its relationship with the west, and took an indifferent position to the Central Asian countries. In the mid-1990s, the Kremlin introduced the doctrine of multipolarity as a basis for Russia's foreign policy. Central Asia was re-envisaged as an area where Russia's interests were privileged, serving as a buffer against the dangers from parts of Asia surrounding it.¹⁶

Russia understood Central Asia better, and worked more closely with it, than any other extra-regional power interested in the region. Through the cultural, civilisational and language ties retained from the imperial and Soviet past, Moscow sought to consolidate its position as a regional power in Eurasia. Russia's military presence in Tajikistan, and the export of hydrocarbons from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to Russia or via Russian pipelines, are areas of cooperation that have been retained since the collapse of the USSR. In Central Asia, this cooperation was not regarded as comprising

¹⁶ Rumer, E., Trenin, D. and Zhao, H. (2007). *Central Asia: Views from Washington, Moscow, and Beijing*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe.

a systemic approach. Because of its economic weakness and lack of a consistent strategy in Central Asia, Russia has ceased to be an attractive partner for the region.¹⁷

Russia began to take a pragmatic approach to its relations with the Central Asian countries following the political reshuffle in the country in the early 2000s and the improvements in its economy. An ideological reassessment of events in Russia's modern history took place, with the collapse of the USSR being called "the greatest geopolitical disaster of the century".¹⁸

Moscow was compelled to rethink its Central Asian policy by the growing threats of terrorism and extremism around the turn of the millennium. Russia's leaders recognised that the Taliban's seizure of power in Afghanistan in 1996, the acts of terrorism in the USA on 11 September 2001, and the subsequent military campaign by the international coalition forces against the Taliban, supporters of al-Qaeda, with a foreign military presence in Central Asia, posed a direct threat to Russia's national interests. To strengthen its influence and preclude the drift away from Russia, the Kremlin started to incorporate the countries of the region into its own integration projects. Russia increased its cooperation with Central Asia in the fields of politics,

¹⁷ Paramonov, V. And Stokov, A. (2008). *The Evolution of Russia's Central Asia Policy*. Central Asian Series. Shrivenham: Defence Academy of the United Kingdom.

¹⁸ Putin, V. (2005). *Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation*. Available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>.

military technology, economics, culture and media.

These pro-Russian initiatives had varying degrees of success. The Central Asian states were sceptical of the Kremlin's unifying initiatives. The CIS was treated as a means of "civilised divorce" for the former Soviet republics. The Tashkent Collective Security Treaty of 1992, which set out Moscow's obligations in terms of military technical cooperation with the Central Asian countries, led in practice to minimal collaboration in the military sphere. And when, in 1994, Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev proposed the idea of creating a Eurasian union, Moscow ignored it. It was only in the 2000s that Russia started to integrate with the Central Asian states under the new frameworks of the Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC), the Eurasian Customs Union (EACU), the Eurasian Economic Space (EAES) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). However, Russia's integration initiatives in the region have focused mainly on its relationship with Kazakhstan. Other countries in the region, such as Uzbekistan, have mixed feelings about the Kremlin's initiatives.¹⁹ The

¹⁹ RIA Novosti. (2012). Uzbekistan vtoroi raz vykhodit iz ODKB. *RIA Novosti* [online]. Available at: http://ria.ru/defense_safety/20120628/687288392.html; Rosbalt. (2015). Karimov: Uzbekistan ne prisoedinit'sia k EAES. *Rosbalt* [online]. Available at: <http://www.rosbalt.ru/exussr/2015/01/13/1356288.html>; Panfilova, V. (2015). Islam Karimov opasaetsia destabilizatsii strany. *Novaia gazeta*, [online]. Available at: http://www.ng.ru/cis/2015-01-15/6_uzbekistan.html.

economic grounds for Kyrgyzstan's accession to the EAEU in August 2015 appeared unconvincing, with geopolitical motives being a more likely reason.

The fact that Russia is forcing the Central Asian countries to join pro-Russian integration associations is distorting how the region is constructed from within. There remain concerns that Moscow's integration projects represent a new form of dependence and restriction of the sovereignty of the countries of the region. Another reason for this wariness regarding Russia's initiatives is that nation-building is an ongoing process in the Central Asian states, and the issue of delegating some share of their sovereignty to a supranational structure is still sensitive. Tajikistan is thought by Russian experts and politicians to be the next candidate for membership of the EAEU, and its wariness of the union is also clear in this regard.

Today, Russia sees Central Asia as susceptible to destabilisation as a result of the internal political situation there and the threats arising from neighbouring Afghanistan. Moscow is trying to help the Central Asian states to avert the risks and ensure regional stability.²⁰ While these

²⁰ See: Russia's Interests in Central Asia: Contents, Perspectives, Limitations. (2013). [online] Moscow: Russian International Affairs Council. Available at: http://russiancouncil.ru/common/upload/RIAC_Central_Asia_En.pdf, and Assisting Development in Central Asia: Strategic Horizons of Russian Engagement. (2013). [online] Moscow: Russian International Affairs Council. Available at: http://russiancouncil.ru/common/upload/WP_Central_Asia_10_eng.pdf.

regional threats should not be underestimated, it is a mistake to consider Central Asia solely in terms of security. This hinders an objective assessment of the region and holds back the advance of economic and socio-cultural ties between Russia and the countries of the region.

Russia has mixed feelings about the idea of integration between the Central Asian countries themselves. Moscow sees their attempts to create a common integrated structure for cooperation on strictly regional issues as a challenge to its own interests. Some Russian experts believe that a disunited Central Asia with a plethora of intraregional problems would be more in Russia's interests, as such a region would be more amenable to outside influence.²¹ The Kremlin prefers cooperation with the countries of the region under the umbrella of organisations patronised by Russia – the EAEU and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). A further option, cooperation on a bilateral level, appears to be better for promoting Moscow's interests than engaging with an overarching regional structure.²² In 2004, Russia joined the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO), which at the time comprised four of the region's countries. In 2005, CACO

²¹ Zatulín, K. and Migronian, A. (1997). SNG: nachalo ili konets istorii. K smene vekh. *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*. Available at: <http://www.zatulín.ru/index.php?§ion=digest&id=35>; Safranchuk, I. (2015). Globalization in the Minds: Central Asian Countries and Eurasian Economic Integration. *Russia in Global Affairs*. [online] Available at: <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Globalization-in-the-Minds-17369>.

²² *Ibid.*

merged with the EAEC, which soon after ceased to exist. The Russian establishment is firmly convinced that Central Asia should be regarded not as a single region, but as a group of states, each of which has its own foreign policy priorities.

Although Moscow has stated that it understands the objective nature of the diversification by the Central Asian countries, creating ties with other states and organisations in which Russia is not involved, in practice it sees this as an anti-Russian development. The growth of cooperation between the Central Asian countries and China, the EU, the USA, NATO and the OIC is often regarded as a continuation of the 'Great Game' of the region, with Moscow attempting to hold back various economic and energy-related projects (TRACECA, the Trans-Caspian Pipeline, the 'New Silk Road', etc.). The Kremlin often resorts to economic pressure on the Central Asian countries in order to dissuade them from cooperating with western partners.

At the same time, the examples of cooperation between Russia, the Central Asian countries and the USA in finding a solution to the situation in Afghanistan, and the increased engagement between Russia, the region's countries and China under the SCO confirm that the region can be a platform for cooperation.

Analysis of Russia's configuration of Central Asia and the promotion of its tactical and strategic goals in the region shows that for pragmatic reasons Moscow remains a partner for the countries of the region, and is seeking to develop both bilateral and

multilateral frameworks for cooperation with them. Retaining its position in the Central Asian energy market remains an important objective for the Kremlin. Russia continues to present the image of a power able and willing to support the Central Asian countries against declared threats to regional security.

However, a lack of resources is preventing it from influencing the directions taken by foreign policy and socio-economic development of Central Asia. Moscow still lacks an integral and articulated strategy in the region. The multi-vector policy declared and adopted by the Central Asian countries with regard to diversifying their international relations has been a natural reaction, first and foremost, to the Kremlin's inconsistent and changeable policies.

The changing geopolitical circumstances in the world have led to changes in Russia's foreign policy strategy, including toward Central Asia. As a result, Moscow's policy is seen in the region as being ad hoc and adjusted under the influence of the actions of other extra-regional players, with no stable and clear conception of the region reflected in the overall system of Russia's national interests. Clearly, this state of affairs cannot satisfy the Central Asian states in the long-term, as they expect a clear and consistent strategy from Russia, minimising its geopolitical ambitions and prioritising the principles of mutual benefit and respect for the right of choice.

CHINESE CENTRAL ASIA

China's view of the emergence of the new states on its north-west border, which has brought risks and challenges for Beijing, has varied over time. It has had a number of territorial disputes with the new post-Soviet states on its border, and the lack of any treaties or legal framework on defining its borders with them has exacerbated the problem and been a source of concern for Beijing. As the Central Asian states have consolidated their sovereignty, this has encouraged ideas of separatism in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR).

At the same time, China has been modernising, and has seen Central Asia a channel for promoting its economic interests in Europe. The volatility of the post-Soviet space in the early 1990s pushed Beijing to seek to resolve its territorial issues with the Central Asian states as quickly as possible. China's assumption was that the fundamental principles of the security and integrity of its territory would be ensured once its borders with each Central Asian state and Russia were defined once and for all and confirmed by treaty.

Beijing supported a proposal from Moscow for multilateral talks on the issue. There were objective reasons for this: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which were holding border talks with China as legal

successors of their respective Soviet republics, did not have the necessary archives, cartographic material, or historical, legal, methodological or other necessary materials. The framework of a 'joint delegation' with Russia enabled the three Central Asian countries to obtain the necessary records of the Sino-Soviet negotiations, as well as consulting and political support. China supported Russia's proposal to establish a multilateral framework of negotiations on the issue, a sign that it was not ready to treat Central Asia as a separate entity at the time.

A '4+1' formula defined Beijing's initial view that Central Asia was following in the Russia's foreign policy orbit, rather than developing independently as a self-sufficient region. The 'Shanghai Five' (later the SCO), based on this formula, laid the foundations on which the relationships of countries considered were built. Subsequently, the SCO became the main platform for the expansion of China's regional cooperation with the countries of Central Asia. The organisation offset Beijing's ambitions in the region.

Cooperation between Beijing and the Central Asian countries has been increasing since 2000, as China has sought to step up its trade and economic ties with them. China views investment in the Central Asian economies as another means for neutralising the threat of Uyghur separatism, which might find support in the region. Although Central Asia's political elites remain wary of China, Beijing has consolidated its image as a key partner and ally of the countries in the region.

China is investing in the creation of a network of transport and energy infrastructure that will not only link it with Central Asia, but will also support its push towards the west. Beijing sees investment in infrastructural development within Central Asia as necessary in order to accelerate socio-economic development in the XUAR.

Since 2013, a new geopolitical project, the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), has been a priority for China. Its goals are to boost trade and the economy by connecting China and Europe through a rail and road network across Central Asia and Russia. The transport and transit links established in the region thanks to China's investment could solve a problem common to all the Central Asian countries – their lack of access to the sea. However, a number of factors are turning this project, spearheaded by the 'fifth generation' of Chinese leaders effectively into a geostrategic concept.

While working with the Central Asian region as a whole under the umbrella of the SCO, China is also building long-term partnerships with each country in the region individually. Beijing realises that there are unresolved intraregional issues between the Central Asian countries, so dealing with them on a regional level could lead to halting China's projects. If a project entails the involvement of several Central Asian countries, China comes to an agreement with each of them separately. The way Beijing is taking into account the specific features of 'Central Asian diplomacy' has been acknowledged in the region, with the various parties expressing their satisfaction.

China has set about using multilateral integration platforms to promote its initiatives. An example of this is its agreement to link its SREB project with the EAEU. Beijing knows that in Central Asia it has to deal with Moscow, which regards the region as a sphere of Russian influence. Russia's priority status in terms of ensuring the region's security even benefits Beijing, which is concerned that ideas of separatism in Xinjiang could receive unofficial support in Central Asia.

China's cooperation with Russia in Central Asia under the SCO and other multilateral associations is, however, accompanied by attempts of Moscow, wary of a stronger Chinese presence in the region, to hold back Beijing's projects and initiatives. An example of this is the creation of the SCO Development Bank. Without engaging in polemics, China has transformed approaches and set about creating its own regional multilateral projects. These projects – the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and One Belt, One Road/the Silk Road Economic Belt – are based on the principle of multilateral cooperation, but with Beijing as the main centre of influence.²³

China's Central Asia strategy is shown in the fact that, while not openly competing for dominance in the region, it is strengthening

²³ Gabuev, A. (2015). *Ufy druz'ia: pochemu SHOS i BRIKS znachat dlia Rossii bol'she, chem dlia drugikh uchastnikov*. [online] Carnegie Moscow Center. Available at: <http://carnegie.ru/2015/07/07/ru-60620/id1r> [Accessed 11 Feb. 2016].

its political influence through deeper bilateral trade and economic ties.

At the same time, China's infrastructure projects require cooperation between the Central Asian countries through the regional platforms of the SCO or SREB. Beijing looks unlikely to object to further consolidation and regionalisation among the countries of the region, as this would benefit its initiatives and projects. The lack of consolidation between the Central Asian countries brings the danger of China's projects being implemented exclusively on China's terms.

In general, the countries of the region are interested primarily in the economic aspects of China's strategy, and recognition is growing that China is not seeking, now at least, to ascribe political conditions to its economic activity. This gives a kind of *carte blanche* to the Central Asian countries, which are using the opportunities being made available to tackle a number of pressing and important national and regional issues.

TURKISH CENTRAL ASIA

Initially, Turkey took a proactive position in Central Asia, and was one of the first countries to recognise its newly independent states. In 1992, Turkish President Turgut Özal proposed putting the long-held idea of creating a united Turkic world into practice to the Central Asian countries and Azerbaijan. However, these initiatives produced a mixed response in the region. While agreeing that linguistic, cultural and religious ties were important for cooperation, the Central Asian countries were not entirely happy with the proposed model of interaction, which cast them in subordinate roles.

At the same time, many Turkish politicians believed that Ankara could and should be a guide for the region in terms of market economy and political democratisation. In this context, the Central Asian countries viewed Turkey in two ways: as a Muslim power, and as part of the geopolitical west, given that the country is a member of NATO and has long made clear its desire for closer ties with the EU and eventual membership in it.

An important role in bringing countries with Turkic populations together is played by the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TÜRKSOY), established in 1993. As well as achieving stable economic growth and

consolidating Turkey's regional status and significance, Ankara has tried to convert these factors into a strengthened position in Central Asia.

Initially, there was excessive euphoria among Turkish politicians and intellectuals at the prospect of this hypothetical Turkic world, and many of Turkey's expectations have not been met. There have been both pragmatic and ideological reasons for this. Although both Turkey and the countries of Central Asia are secular states, there are still differences in the role religion plays in their societies. Creating a political community based on ethnolinguistic ties is no easy task. Their similarity of languages and cultures was conducive to the development of political and trade and economic ties between Turkey and the Central Asian countries, but there were natural limits to the potential of this similarity, with the result that Turkey became an important, rather than key, foreign partner of those countries.

The idea of a Turkic world was given a boost when the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States (Turkic Council; CCTS), comprising Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey was founded on 3 October 2009 and based in Istanbul. This followed the establishment in November 2008 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Turkic-speaking Countries (TURKPA), comprising the same four countries. The members of the CCTS also invited Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, two countries of great importance for full-scale cooperation between the Turkic-speaking states, to join. The two countries, however, are not known for their enthusiasm for

multilateral organisations. In particular, Uzbekistan is wary that such frameworks for cooperation could infringe upon its sovereignty. Not being a formal member of the CCTS, Turkmenistan, by virtue of the specific nature of its politics and its neutral status, is seeking to pragmatically develop bilateral ties through multilateral platforms. The country's leader attended a summit of the organisation in 2014, at which, in particular, transport infrastructure development plans were discussed. In general, Ashgabat, unlike Uzbekistan, has a relatively warm relationship with Turkey.

At the launch of the CCTS, its then Secretary General, Turkey's Halil Akinci, announced far-reaching plans to "strengthen the sources of eternal brotherhood". At the same time, said the Turkish diplomat, no one was to be the "elder brother", and the mutual interests of all the countries were to be taken into account.²⁴

Turkey proved to be unable to unite all the Turkic-speaking Central Asian countries, but it is making pragmatic use of all the options, both bilateral and multilateral. For political reasons, its most difficult dealings continued to be found in its relationship with Uzbekistan. Tashkent has been pointedly lukewarm to Ankara's initiatives. Although Turkey has introduced visa-free entry for all the Central Asian countries, including Tajikistan, Tashkent has retained its visa

restrictions for Turkish citizens. Kazakhstan, by contrast, welcomes Turkey's activities in the region. The two countries' relations are not clouded by political differences, creating a favourable atmosphere for trade and economic cooperation. Kyrgyzstan is highly interested in both political and financial and economic support from Turkey, and is seeking to strengthen its friendship with the latter. Finally, Tajikistan has been on the periphery of Turkey's strategy in the region, but Ankara is rethinking the country's importance to regional stability and security.

Elements of "soft power", such as educational programs, joint schools, colleges and universities, and grant awards are all playing a role in Turkey's relationship with Central Asia. Turkey's mix of the secular and religious, its open economy, and the democratic principles underlying its politics, make it attractive to a significant proportion of society in the Central Asian countries.

A not insignificant factor in how Central Asia is perceived in Ankara is Turkey's Eurasian status, which politicians and experts interpret in different ways. For some, it means a commonality between Turkey and the Turkic peoples of the Caucasus and Central Asia; for others, it is a wider platform that also includes Russia, Iran and China. An even wider interpretation among Turkish experts includes Pakistan and India. A consequence of Ankara's changing position is that Turkey has become a dialogue partner of the SCO and has also shown interest in working with the EAEU.

Ankara has reconsidered its strategy in the region. Turkey is not seeking to be a bit

²⁴ Salaeva, A. (2010). *V ramkakh Soveta tiurkoiazychnykh gosudarstv planiruetsia sozdanie Tamozhennogo soiuza*. [online] <http://1news.az/>. Available at: <http://1news.az/economy/20101217045324209.html>.

player in western policy incentives here, but to play a more independent role, though at the same time positioning itself, as before, as a connecting link between Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Another obvious obstacle to Turkey's ambitions is its lack of a border with any of the Central Asian countries. In addition, Turkey's limited investment potential, and the structure and scope of its trade and economic ties with them prevent from being a key external player.

As such, the idea of Turkic unity remains an attractive advertisement for the development of ties between the countries of the region and Ankara, while serving to support Turkey's international ambitions. Through an emphasis on their linguistic, historical and cultural ties, the Central Asian countries are able to present a kind of symbolic unity with Turkey at the level of international politics. Furthermore, the rhetoric about Turkic brotherhood is used with regard mainly to the relationships between the countries of the region and

Turkey, sometimes in their relations with Azerbaijan, and, tellingly, not so often in their relationships with one another. The crisis that has developed in Turkey's relationship with Russia since 24 November 2015 constitutes a serious test for the idea of Turkic unity. It is telling that the countries of Central Asia have taken a neutral and restrained position on this issue.

In general, the Central Asian countries have learned lessons from their relationships with Turkey, and at least three of them (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan) welcome the development and extension of ties with the country, while at the same time recognising the limits of what Ankara can do. Central Asia's key intraregional issues and challenges can be successfully resolved only by the countries of the region themselves. At the same time, Tajikistan's involvement in the regional process, a country which has relatively deep historical, cultural and ethnic-territorial ties with its Turkic-speaking neighbours, is strong.

IRANIAN CENTRAL ASIA

The post-Soviet period has seen the start of a popular revival of Muslim values in Central Asia, which has led to increased interest in the region from the Islamic world. The leading Islamic states have sought to expand their presence in the region through increasing the role of Islam in Central Asian politics.

During the civil war in Tajikistan (1992–1997), Tehran supported the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRP), part of the opposition to the government. Having retained their secular nature, the Central Asian states have been more wary of Iran's influence. The preference shown by them for economic cooperation has led Iran to modify its Central Asia strategy. Cooperation has been based on a shared culture and history that has been called on to strengthen economic cooperation between Iran and the Central Asian countries.

Historically, Tehran has seen Central Asia as part of Greater Khorasan, a region that covered the eastern parts of what is now Iran, as well as Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The modern concept of an alliance between the Persian-speaking countries is also based on the idea of ethnolinguistic, religious, cultural and historic ties between Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan. However, Iran's cultural influence

in Central Asia is limited by the fact that the prevailing branch of Islam in the region is Hanafi Sunnism, whereas Iran is Shiite.

Economic cooperation between Iran and the Central Asian countries was strengthened in 1992, when the latter, on Tehran's initiative, joined the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO). A priority of this cooperation under the ECO has been integration between the member countries in the fields of transport and communications, energy, agriculture, industry, science and education. This cooperation aims to bring the Central Asian countries closer to the Iranian economy.

Under the ECO, a railway line has been built-connecting Mashhad, in north-east Iran, via Serakhs in Turkmenistan, to Tejen, linking Iran to Central Asia by railway and opening up the shortest route from the region to the Middle East and Europe. The expansion of its trade and economic ties with the Central Asian countries has, from Iran's point of view, partly compensated its strained relations with countries around the Persian Gulf. The need to strengthen security in Iran's northern and eastern regions makes Central Asia strategically important for it.

Another area shaping Iran's long-term presence in Central Asia is its interest in the Caspian region. Apart from Iran, the latter includes two Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) which explains Iran's close ties to them.

A barrier to Iran's cooperation with the Central Asian countries has been their

cooperation with the west, with which Iran has a troubled relationship. The dispute between the global powers and Iran over the latter's nuclear programme, Iran's political and economic isolation, and accusations against Iran of support for terrorism have restricted cooperation between Tehran and the Central Asian countries.

Now that Iran's nuclear programme is no longer an issue, it is important for the Central Asian countries to recognise that an increase in role and influence of Iran in the Islamic world and its surrounding regions will bring new opportunities, but will also complicate the regional agenda. Even now, Iran is strengthening its cooperation with the Central Asian countries by participating in the SCO as an observer.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), an agreement reached in July 2015 on Iran's nuclear programme, will lift the sanctions, which will remove any remaining obstacles to Iran becoming a full member of the SCO. Since the sanctions have been lifted, Iran has stepped up its cooperation with the Central Asian countries in the economic, transport and logistics sectors. Tehran's announcement in light of the JCPOA that it plans to join the WTO and enter into trade agreements with the EU and Central Asia²⁵ could lead to a diversification of the economic ties between Iran and the Central Asian states. Iran is showing an

increasing interest in China's infrastructure projects in Eurasia, which is leading to competition between Iran and the Central Asian countries.

In light of Iran's ambitions, a new wave of interest in Central Asia from other Islamic states is likely. The region's countries will need new tactics and strategies to work with Iran and other Muslim countries. A balanced approach to partnership among the Central Asian countries could pave the way for clear and coordinated action on bilateral and regional issues. Overall, the Central Asian countries see Iran as an important regional player and partner in trade and economic as well as transport and communication fields, with additional interests in security, and Tehran is seeking to realise its potential in a pragmatic way, without focusing on ideological differences.

²⁵ *Evropeiskaia pravda*, (2015). *Iran gotovitsia vstupit' v VTO i khochet ZST s ES*. [online] Available at: <http://www.eurointegration.com.ua/rus/news/2015/07/23/7036210/> [Accessed 16 Feb. 2016].

**SOUTH ASIAN CENTRAL ASIA:
INDIA AND PAKISTAN**

With regard to external influences on Central Asia, the increasing role of India and Pakistan, whose cooperation with the Central Asian states has historic roots, cannot be ignored. However, over the past two centuries the ties between the countries and regions have been indirect, as India, in the past, and Central Asia, until relatively recently in historical terms, belonged to two global empires – the British, and the Russian, followed by the Soviet Union. Consequently, India and Pakistan did not have their own plans with regard to Central Asia. In addition, the substantial economic and social problems in both South and Central Asia meant that expanding cooperation between them was not a priority.

As the economic and political potential of the countries has developed, their foreign policy approaches have also changed. In 2003–2005, for instance, India signed bilateral agreements with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan on cooperation in the fight against terrorism. Military and political cooperation between India and Tajikistan has been increasing since the signature of an agreement on cooperation in 2002, particularly at Tajikistan's Ayni Air Base, which is strategically located with regard to India's major geopolitical rivals, China and Pakistan.

India is an emerging economic giant, with one of the world's fastest-growing economies. Naturally, and inevitably, its economic ambitions have influenced its foreign policy. Given as well the increasing geopolitical challenges faced by the "world's largest democracy", it is clear that Central Asia would be a natural focal point for its interests.

According to India's foreign policy strategy, Central Asia is part of its 'extended neighbourhood', where the main objective is to balance the influence of global powers, reduce the risks and threats for India, and expand opportunities for cooperation. The Central Asian states see India not only as a country they can cooperate with and fight threats with, but also as a vehicle for promoting their own increasing influence in the world. Like China and the USA, India has its own 'New Silk Road' concept or initiative, aimed at strengthening cooperation with the Central Asian countries. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the region in July 2015 was aimed both at consolidating the level of cooperation already achieved and at setting new objectives in this area.

In general, India's interests in Central Asia and, accordingly, its activities in the region can be divided into three areas:

— Economic: this means access to the region's energy resources, primarily oil and gas, and expansion of the market for Indian products. It also means the creation of a transport corridor via Central Asia between India and greater Eurasia, which is a significant market for India.

CENTRAL ASIAN LEGO: WHO IS CONFIGURING THE REGION?

— Geopolitical: India today has two main geopolitical rivals, Pakistan and China. Both, with varying degrees of success, are seeking to influence the countries of Central Asia and to promote their interests through them. Naturally, India cannot stand idly by, and also aims to pursue a policy of expanding its engagement in the region's affairs.

— Cultural: this area includes everything that falls under the category of 'soft power', the use of which is a must for any country with pretensions to a significant role in the world's geopolitical games: educational, cultural, medical and social programmes, etc.

Pakistan's interests in Central Asia are to a large extent based on the same factors as India's. Pakistan is a major country with a large population and significant economic potential. It is a serious regional military power, with its own geopolitical interests. Correspondingly, Pakistan's interests in Central Asia can be divided into the same three areas:

— Economic: expansion of the market for its products. Development of infrastructure projects, in particular oil and gas, road infrastructure and electricity projects. A clear example of such cooperation is the CASA-1000 Project on electricity generation in Central Asia for sale to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

— Geopolitical: here it is important for Pakistan, just as it is for India, to have its own sphere of influence in the region. With

Pakistan and the Central Asian states all being Islamic countries, that influence will have a specific character and will take a rather different direction from India's.

— Cultural: here, the Islamic factor also plays a major role, with Pakistan seeking to use it as an effective soft power tool.

Both India and Pakistan are potentially major economic and political powers with the capacity to influence the development of Central Asia through wide-ranging projects. At the same time, their potential to influence the region remains to a large extent latent and hence unrealised. Unlike China for instance, neither India nor Pakistan has of yet the significant economic clout needed to support their infrastructure and financial projects on a large scale. The several dozens of projects they have in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and other countries in the region cannot compare with China's hundreds, if not thousands. Unlike the US, they do not pretend to global leadership through promoting their geopolitical influence and democratic values. Finally, neither has any serious geopolitical ambitions for claiming, like Russia, that Central Asia falls under its sphere of influence.

One thing worth noting is that interest in the countries of this region from India and Pakistan will grow as, accordingly, will their desire to play a more significant role. It is clear that the main incentive for India in this process will be increasing its economic power and its desire to counterbalance the influence of its main rivals, China and Pakistan. For Pakistan, its economic needs and desire to strengthen its influence

through its religious ties with the Central Asian nations will also be important.

It is reasonable to assume that both India and Pakistan take a neutral stance on intraregional cooperation projects in Central Asia, leaving this matter to the countries in the region themselves. At the same time, it is clear that the political elites in both countries perceive the region as a coherent entity. As such, it is clear too that the

increasing economic and geopolitical potential of India and Pakistan is of interest to the Central Asian countries themselves. Their sales markets, infrastructure and access to seaports, their vast human potential and cultural heritage all could and should be the matter of close attention to the countries of the region. All things taken into account, the Central Asian countries can be creators, rather than mere subjects of region-wide projects.

architectures. All this compelled Japan to pay more attention to Central Asia.

JAPANESE CENTRAL ASIA

Japan's Central Asia strategy has been slow to develop, but consistent and coherent. The reasons for this slowness have been: a) Central Asia's distance from Japan and its position right in the heart of the Eurasian continent, making it low on the list of geographical priorities for an island nation; b) a lingering default perception of the entire post-Soviet space as an area of Russian hegemony; c) a lack of serious economic interest in developing trade and economic cooperation with the Central Asian countries. Consistency and coherence are constant features of Japan's policies, including with regard to Central Asia, and have been shown in the gradual recognition of the region's specific geographical location and strategic importance, on the other side of the global powers which Japan borders.

An initial factor in Japan's new discovery of Central Asia was the fact that the emergence of the new states coincided with a fundamental transformation of the entire world order and its international security architecture. It was a time when the concept of a political space stretching "from Vancouver to Vladivostok" was put forward, and new challenges and threats to regional and international security arose, in particular after the spread of terrorism and extremism from Afghanistan, with the post-Soviet countries caught, as it were, between the emerging Eurasian and transatlantic security

Rejecting from the beginning the concept of a geopolitical Great Game, Japan has focused on a developmental strategy for Central Asia, including the ambitious idea of constructing a 7,000-km gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to the Tarim Basin in western China. As such, Central Asia has revived the memory of the Great Silk Road for the Japanese too. Japan's first strategy in this area was indeed called 'Silk Road Diplomacy'. Adopted in 1997, this became part of a wider 'Eurasian Diplomacy' project. Among other things, it provided for unprecedented aid from Japan to the countries of the region in the form of loans and grants. By volume, Japan's aid to Central Asia amounts to 30% of the total development aid provided by the major powers and OECD members. At the same time, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) began to open offices in the Central Asian capitals. Japan has even discussed joining the SCO, but no consensus has been reached. In time, Japan has recognised the importance of regional cooperation and integration in Central Asia. Akio Kawato, former Ambassador of Japan to Uzbekistan, writes: "I suggested to Uzbek officials that regional integration such as ASEAN would serve the interests of all Central Asian countries in strengthening their political status and economies."²⁶ Geopolitical rhetoric was also part of Japan's configuration of Central Asia: the region was

²⁶ Kawato, A. (2002). What is Japan up to in Central Asia? In Len, C., Tomohiko, U., and Tetsuya H., ed., *Japan's Silk Road Diplomacy. Paving the Road Ahead*. Washington, DC: Johns Hopkins University-CACI, p. 22.

thought of as "a buffer region for the maintenance of peace" as it was surrounded by Russia, China, Iran and Afghanistan.²⁷

In 2004, Japanese prime minister Junichirō Koizumi declared a 'Central Asia plus Japan' initiative, which defined Japan's two main policies in Central Asia: 1) "to further enhance efforts to strengthen bilateral relationships and develop closer ties between Japan and each Central Asian country"; and 2) "to advance dialogues with the entire Central Asian region in order to promote intraregional cooperation aiming at further development of the Central Asian countries".²⁸ As such, great emphasis was put on encouraging and supporting regional integration in Central Asia. This strategy calls for political dialogue, intraregional cooperation, promotion of business, intellectual dialogue, as well as cultural and person-to-person exchange. One example that readily comes to mind here is the special graduate programme for students from Central Asia at the University of Tsukuba. In terms of intraregional cooperation, particular attention has been paid to energy, water, transport, communications, trade, investment, the environment, the fight against common threats such as terrorism, the illegal drug trade, and the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

Finally, a logical development of Japan's foreign policy strategy, including with regard to Central Asia, is its promotion of the concept of an 'Arc of Freedom and Prosperity', based on proactive, value-orientated diplomacy. This concept covers a wide geographical area, including Central and Eastern Europe, the Black Sea region, the Middle East, Central and South Asia and the ASEAN countries. This strategy was promoted in a historic regional tour of all five Central Asian countries by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe from 22 to 28 October 2015. This strategy is bound to attract interest in the region, as shown by overall successful reception of the Japanese leader's tour in Central Asia.

As such, Central Asia features once again as an independent region in Japan's global outlook. Furthermore, the countries covered by this new strategy form an area in which Japan is able to use soft power, projecting ideas of democracy, human rights, the supremacy of the law and reform. Japan has no doubts as to Central Asia's value in itself or in its identity and, furthermore, has constantly sought to convince the region's countries of the importance of and need for regional integration.

²⁷ The Daily Yomiuri, (1997). Central Asia Should Serve as Eurasian 'Buffer Zone'. P.15.

²⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, (2006). *Japan's Official Development Assistance White Paper 2005: 3. Central Asia and the Caucasus*. [online] Available at: <http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/oda/white/2005/ODA2005/html/honpen/hp202030300.htm>.

SOUTH KOREAN CENTRAL ASIA

There are several aspects to South Korea's foreign policy. Chief among them are: 1) Building peace and trust on the Korean peninsula – i.e., reconciliation with North Korea; 2) continuing to strengthen its relationship with the USA, a key economic and military partner of the country; 3) creating cooperation mechanisms in East and North Asia; and 4) its 'Eurasia Initiative': it is this initiative of which South Korea's policy towards the Central Asian countries is part. Announced on 18 October 2013 by South Korea's President Park Geun-hye, the Eurasia Initiative proposes the "opening and denuclearisation of North Korea through the peaceful prosperity of Eurasia" and "resurrection of the Silk Road". In this context, the initiative chimes in with China's SREB megaproject.

The key terms in South Korea's conception of Eurasia are 'One Continent', 'Peaceful Continent', 'Eurasia Era' and 'Silk Road Express', running from the Far East (starting with South Korea), through Siberia, Central Asia, the Urals and the Caucasus to Eastern and Western Europe. President Park "emphasised that energy infrastructure including electric power networks and gas and oil pipelines in the regions should be connected by making use of their geographical characteristics wherein the world's largest producing and consuming countries coexist." She added: "The

strengthened networks of logistics and energy in Eurasia will not only reduce the logistics cost and revitalise world trade but also contribute to the growth of the world economy through stabilised raw material prices."²⁹

As such, another important part of the Eurasian Initiative with regard to the countries of Central Asia is developing methods and tools to promote South Korea's interests in the region. Those interests centre on trade and the economy. For this reason, South Korea does not seek to compete with the foreign policy concepts of other actors in the region, and takes a positive view of, for example, China's SREB initiative, which, from South Korea's point of view, is a logical continuation of the region's development. The construction of rail and road links in particular enables goods to be transported from the Korean port of Busan to Europe via Central Asia in half the time taken to ship them by sea, which is economically attractive.

South Korea's policy towards the five Central Asian countries is characterised by rationality. Developing the region would mean greater opportunities for the sale of Korean products there and the development of joint projects. South Korea's relationship with the Central Asian countries is largely based on a 'consumer' approach, with South Korea as a producer of goods, and the countries of the region playing the role of

²⁹ The National Unification Advisory Council, (2013). *President Park Geun-hye's "Eurasia Initiative"*. [online] Available at: <http://www.nuac.go.kr/english/sub04/view01.jspx?numm=36> [Accessed 16 Feb. 2016].

prospective buyer. In terms of cooperation in different sectors of the economy, specific considerations apply to each of the Central Asian states.

Uzbekistan is the region's biggest importer of goods from South Korea, while Kazakhstan is its biggest exporter to it. This is not surprising, as primary products, of which Kazakhstan is a major producer, make up the bulk of the region's exports. South Korea imports cotton from nearly all the Central Asian countries, aluminium from Tajikistan, gold from Kyrgyzstan, and uranium, copper, zinc and iron from Kazakhstan. More than half the aid budget of the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) for the countries of the region goes to joint development programmes in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, which shows Korea's priorities at a more specific level here.

Besides trade, Seoul has major joint projects in Central Asia. The most important and significant include auto manufacturing in Uzbekistan. Another area is South Korea's involvement in the growth of Kazakhstan's thermal and nuclear power industry. With the other Central Asian countries, Korea focuses on different areas of economic cooperation. For example, a number of projects are under implementation in Kyrgyzstan: the development of industrial greenhouse facilities in Chuy Region, the cultivation of medicinal herbs in the Issyk-Kul basin, and the construction and operation of small-scale hydroelectric power plants. In Turkmenistan, cooperation in the gas industry is a more logical option.

On the whole, the development of relations between South Korea and the Central Asian countries is marked by a pragmatic approach and stable, albeit not rapid, growth. This was evidenced by, for example, South Korean president Park Geun-hye's Central Asian tour in 2014, which was significant in terms of shaping foreign policy priorities, and the staging of the ninth South Korea–Central Asia Cooperation Forum in Seoul in early October 2015. In this context, South Korea's approach mirrors Japan's strategy in the region, with a similar model of cooperation.³⁰

In its Eurasia strategy, Seoul is pursuing two key goals. Firstly, it wants to open up North Korea and engage it in an integration process between the two countries. Secondly, it wants to take advantage of the resource potential of the Eurasian countries, and the Central Asian states in particular. At the same time, Seoul is giving a clear signal that it is ready for mutually beneficial cooperation, offering technology in exchange for access to sources of raw materials. Thus, economic interests are at the forefront of South Korea's relationships with the countries of the region, with the former playing the role of a producer and supplier of goods, and the latter the role of consumer of goods and supplier of raw materials. In addition, South Korea is acting as a benchmark for the Central Asian countries in matters of technology. The pragmatism of this strategy is shown in the fact that South Korea is ready to work with

³⁰ The strategies of the US's allies, Japan and South Korea, who initially adhered to a '5+1' formula, may also have influenced the change in Washington's approach, as it established a similar format.

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the region as a whole if its individual countries are interested, or on a bilateral basis, developing trade and investment cooperation. Seoul has made clear that it has no geopolitical aspirations for power in the region. Within this context, the Central Asian countries have shown interest in South Korea's initiatives aimed at diversifying their foreign relations.

FROM CENTRAL ASIAN LEGO TO REGIONAL COOPERATION
(IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION)

**FROM CENTRAL ASIAN LEGO TO
REGIONAL COOPERATION (IN LIEU OF
A CONCLUSION)**

The foreign policy strategies of the global and regional powers we have been looking at have highlighted not only the existence of the geographical region known as 'Central Asia', but also their special political attitude toward this region. In developing their Central Asia strategies, they have thus engaged the countries of the region – collectively and individually – in the system of international relations.

The experience of being part of the international system that has been gained by the Central Asian states has highlighted a dualism of external–internal regionalism. This dualism has an impact on shaping the identity of the region's countries and people, as well as the strategic decisions of the leaders of the Central Asian countries.

An ultimate resolution of this dualism depends on the ability of the Central Asian countries to provide a collective response to all the external configurations of the region through their own internal configuration. The internal model does not necessarily have to contradict the external ones. This dualism is a logical consequence of the direct geopolitical, historical and civilizational conjugation of this region with areas belonging to powers that have been

permanently active on the geopolitical stage. Therefore, some form of connection between the region and the great geopolitical landscape surrounding it is entirely natural and inevitable.

But what form should that connection take? The external configurations of Central Asia all have their strengths and weaknesses, their pros and cons. Central Asia cannot exist and develop without actively engaging in interregional and continental projects. Many people have termed this engagement 'integration', which has led to noticeable terminological confusion and distortion of the five countries' extra-regional, regional and subregional self-determination. Involvement in major projects having wide geographical scope is not yet integration.

There are a number of principle differences between the external configuration of Central Asia and the region-building efforts undertaken by the five countries themselves.

1) None of the proposed initiatives of external regionalism contain principles, mechanisms or legal frameworks that might drive integration.

2) Such institutional foundations have existed (in the shape of the Central Asian Cooperation Organization) within Central Asia.

3) Major initiatives are coming from one particular power, but despite their seemingly multilateral format, they all have

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a character of the unilateral dominance of the interests of that power.

4) With all their attractiveness, all these initiatives on external configurations of Central Asia entail not integration between states, but a particular way of incorporating the region into larger entities. Because of this, they will remain ad hoc (situation-dependent) configurations, the stability of which will depend on international geopolitical conjunctures.

5) As a result, the Central Asian countries are doomed in these external configurations to a subservient and dependent role.

6) Despite their rhetoric regarding unity, the external configurations of Central Asia often divide the countries of the region, as they not only fail to provide ways of resolving intraregional problems and conflicts, but also add new extra-regional issues as well.

It is no accident that attitudes to Central Asian integration vary, and we can assume, for example, that the USA supports the idea, Russia rejects it, China is indifferent, and the European Union is doubtful. We also believe that the majority of regional powers support the idea of unity between the Central Asian countries. As for the Islamic world, it obviously cannot have a common framework or strategy with regard to Central Asia, since as such strategies emerge from a single political centre, which doesn't exist in the Islamic world. Even so, there is a civilisational and geopolitical gravity between this world and Central Asia that

also has some potential to influence the national and regional transformation.

It should be noted that any major external regionalisation project in which Central Asia features as part of a larger region will undermine and weaken Central Asian own integrity. Owing to the fact that the Central Asian countries have constantly sought and put forward national rather than regional responses to every kind of external construction, the space has narrowed of and the previously established basis has been weakened for regional unity.

In their search for national models and strategies, the Central Asian countries have quite often themselves facilitated external reconfiguration of the region, by giving the impression that they are unwilling to move towards regional cooperation and unity. The logic of independence and national regionalism dictated Central Asians to respond to the challenges of external regional models with greater cooperation and consolidation. Instead, however, they have stopped trying to develop an intraregional platform, having merged the CACO into EAEC, which in turn was disbanded in 2014. The main lesson the Central Asian states need to take from their experience of engagement in various externally configured macro-regional entities is that if they have to participate in such models, where Central Asia is integrated into larger entities, this is best done jointly, by initiating and promoting within them a common position agreed by the five states, thus asserting their regional identity.

FROM CENTRAL ASIAN LEGO TO REGIONAL COOPERATION **(IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION)**

As such, our analysis brings us to the question not only of what the region of Central Asia is, but also what it is not. And it is not is an organic part of the regional constructions created by various great powers. The region is not ready to perceive external integration, because it has not yet completed its own internal political design. How the region should be conjugated with surrounding areas is also an issue.

The problem of the dualism of external–internal regionalism is being resolved to an extent with the help of the extra-regional powers themselves. These powers are, on the one hand, still unable to incorporate Central Asia within a wider regional structure, and on the other have always explicitly or implicitly assigned to Central Asia (even simply by calling it by that name) an independent regional significance, and have ultimately confirmed the region's autonomy and value in its own right. In this context, 2015 was fairly symbolic: the year saw several important events for Central Asia that underlined the regionalism present in that part of the world. In particular, the EU reviewed its Central Asia strategy;

the Japanese prime minister, Shinzō Abe, visited all five countries in the region for the first time, highlighting the importance of regional cooperation; the C5+1 format was created, and the US Secretary of State visited all five countries in the region, also for the first time; the Indian prime minister, Narendra Modi, was another world leader to visit the countries. These global powers thus clearly recognise that the five Central Asian countries are inseparably linked by regional ties. Although none of the other powers has emphasised Central Asia's regional dimension in its strategy, they also clearly recognise it.

Having outlined the specific features of Central Asian Lego, we believe it is important to turn to an analysis of the specific aspects of conceptualising a Central Asian common regional space and of looking for solutions to current problems in the relationships between the region's countries.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Sanat Kushkumbayev (Astana, Kazakhstan) is a political expert and PhD holder in Political Science. He has worked in think tanks and universities, as well as Kazakhstan's foreign service. His research interests include foreign policy, international relations, and regional cooperation and security in Central Asia.

Abdugani Mamadazimov (Dushanbe, Tajikistan) is Chair of the National Association of Political Scientists of Tajikistan and Associate Professor of Foreign Regional Studies, Tajik National University. He holds the equivalent of a PhD in political science. He is the author of four research monographs and more than 50 research and analytical articles in Russian and foreign print publications.

Farhod Tolipov (Tashkent, Uzbekistan) is the Director of Caravan of Knowledge, a non-governmental educational and research institution. A political scientist, holder of a PhD in political science, and specialist in international and regional security, contemporary geopolitics, and regional integration in Central Asia, he is the author of more than 130 research publications and one monograph.

Tamerlan Ibraimov (Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan) is Chair of the Board at the Centre for Legal and Political Studies. He holds the equivalent of a PhD in Law from Kyrgyz National University, as well as an LLM (Master of Laws) degree from American University Washington College of Law, Washington DC.

Galia Ibragimova (Tashkent, Uzbekistan) is a political scientist and consultant at the PIR Centre for political research in Moscow. She holds a PhD equivalent in political science and is a graduate of the Project Management Professional programme at the Uzbekistan–Japan Centre for Human Development. She has been published by such editions as of *Vostokovedenie*, *Indeks Bezopasnosti*, Russia Direct and the Russian International Affairs Council. Her research interests include security and development in Central Asia, and IT/cyber security.

**Central Asian Lego:
Who is Configuring the Region?**

Authors:

Sanat Kushkumbayev, Doctor of Political Science (editor)

Farhod Tolipov, PhD in Political Science

Abdugani Mamadazimov, PhD in Political Science; Associate Professor

Tamerlan Ibraimov, PhD in Law

Galia Ibragimova, PhD in Law

Ella Bychkova (proofreader)

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Individual entrepreneur N. A. Volkova, 212/1 Ulitsa Raiymbeka, Almaty

Tel.: 8 (727) 330 03 12, 330 03 13.