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Central Asia Among Giants: Taking a Leaf from ASEAN

By Raffaello Pantucci

SYNOPSIS

Sandwiched between China and Russia, with which they have just held high profile engagements, and eager to develop relationships further afield, the five countries of Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – feel at the heart of international tensions. They are currently juggling a complicated web of relationships both locally and further afield, but in a world of growing geopolitical tensions between great powers, a more durable answer is going to have to come from within. Looking to emulate the ASEAN model could be one way to navigate these choppy waters.

COMMENTARY

Central Asia sees Russia as an important partner. Going by numerous economic indicators, the Central Asia-Russia relationship has tightened over the past year. Trade and investment are up, while more Central Asians are choosing to work in Russia than before.

And Moscow has made a point of investing more in these relationships – President Vladimir Putin has visited all five countries, while senior delegations of Russians have become ubiquitous across the region. Additional investment in soft power through the dispatch of teachers and opening of schools have sought to restore Russian influence in the region.

At the same time, Beijing emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic with a focus on Central Asia. President Xi Jinping's decision to make Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan his first stops post-zero COVID highlighted the importance of the region to China. This was affirmed again with the grandeur of the summit held in the Chinese city of Xi'an on 19-20 May, which was attended by the leaders of the five Central Asian countries.

To Beijing, Central Asia is important because of its proximity and close connection with the sensitive province of Xinjiang. It is also the place where China has traditionally inaugurated major strategic initiatives like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or the Belt and Road Initiative.

There is also a strong desire in Central Asia to connect with China. Most obviously, there is a desire to ride on the country's economic growth, but it is also a case of trying to balance their relationships with Russia. Landlocked and highly dependent on its neighbours, Central Asia has always attempted a policy of strategic balancing aimed at creating opportunities through multiple relationships.

This was also evidenced by the second EU-Central Asia Economic Forum held in Almaty, Kazakhstan, on 18-19 May, almost concurrently with the Xi'an summit. While attracting far less media attention, the forum was as significant as the Xi'an summit as it showed the European Union's strong commitment to the region.

EU Has Obstacles to Overcome

The EU has always struggled to raise its profile in Central Asia notwithstanding it being a consistent region of focus and major investment. In part, this is a structural issue with the EU where member states are the ultimate arbiters in their international relations. But it is also because the EU has maintained its normative and values approach to foreign policy while European companies are not always as keen because of geopolitical risks.

There is also the problem of geography. For the EU to do more, it would need to be better connected to the region. Current European thinking on Central Asia is how to find a way to trade with the region that does not pass through Russia. Many of the main trade arteries from Central Asia flow northward through Russia and then into Europe. Since the invasion of Ukraine, this has become fraught, but it remains a critical link for the region. For example, two-thirds of Kazakh oil exports pass through Russia, notwithstanding the war and sanctions.

There is a growing emphasis on developing the "Middle Corridor" route which would cut across the Caspian, southern Caucasus (or Iran), and then through Turkey or across the Black Sea to Europe. Presently, some oil and a limited volume of goods flow through this route. The work to expand it was discussed at both the Xi'an and Almaty summits. But, besides tensions with Russia and Iran, the "Middle Corridor" solution poses risks for Europe as its source in China begins in Xinjiang, a region which is already a focus (and could become more so) for European sanctions.

Difficulties with Afghanistan

It is not only geopolitics that complicate things. The Taliban takeover in Afghanistan may have reduced violence in the country, but it has created new tensions for Central Asia. It is not clear how much the Taliban are interested or able to control the militant groups that operate within their country and are hostile towards Central Asia.

In addition, the Taliban's decision to dig the Qosh Tepa Canal, which will divert water from the Amu Darya River to northern Afghanistan, is a major source of concern to

bordering Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. For them, the water diversion will impact negatively on their southern communities, and the primitive way the canal is being dug presages water leakages and environmental degradation.

The region has struggled to get the Taliban to listen to their concerns. The Uzbeks especially had placed great emphasis on bringing Afghanistan into regional discussions even before the Taliban takeover but have not found a commensurate level of respect and engagement about their concerns. Recent border clashes with Iran, and growing tensions between Kabul and Islamabad, highlight that the Central Asians are not alone in struggling to manage the Taliban.

Ukraine War Poses Challenges

The Ukraine war presents different challenges for the region. Thus far, the economic fall-out has not been as bad as some initially predicted, but the reality is that it is unclear how long this will continue.

The war has also highlighted the inherent threat posed by Russia – a revanchist power whose leadership has expressed views on Kazakhstan which are not dissimilar to the narratives deployed to justify the invasion of Ukraine. In September 2014, the year Moscow first started its incursion into Ukraine, Putin told a youth rally that then-President Nursultan Nazarbayev had “created a state [Kazakhstan] on a territory that never had a state”.

At the same time, the region has consistently relied on Russia as its main external security provider. Besides having bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, Moscow was quick, as the Taliban took over in Kabul, to rush through arms sales and to hold joint military training exercises with the countries that share a border with Afghanistan.

Although rejected by Tajikistan, Moscow did offer to broker peace between it and Kyrgyzstan following their recent border clashes. Russian soldiers were also deployed under the auspices of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) when requested by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev of Kazakhstan in response to the turmoil that shook his country in January 2022. Russia’s losses in Ukraine raise questions whether it can continue playing this role as well as its credibility as a military force.

Of concern too is the growing narrative that the region is a conduit for sanctions evasion. Trade data suggest that certain sanctioned products from Europe are increasingly being bought and then re-sold in Central Asia before going on to Russia. Some regional companies have already fallen foul of western sanctions.

The number of Russian companies and individuals going to Central Asia has also increased. No doubt, some are seeking to flee the Kremlin’s grasp, but some others are likely doing this to stay outside the cross-hairs of western sanctions. This has not gone unnoticed in the West, with EU Trade Commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis’ warning against sanctions evasion in his speech to the forum in Almaty.

Learning from ASEAN

One interesting topic which has come into greater focus recently has been the fostering of a Central Asian so-called “C5” grouping, which aims to bring the five countries together in solidarity and in more ways to create a regional approach. This is not without its problems, but it has in recent years shown more promise than in the past.

More regular summits and engagements have produced some common perspectives, and the growth in C5+ formats (as evidenced by the summit in Xi’an, which joins a roster of C5+ formats including Japan, the EU, the US, and Russia) shows the emergence of an interesting grouping.

Within this, the recent visit to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan by President Halimah Yacob of Singapore, a strong advocate of ASEAN, evokes the possibility of an interesting set of lessons for the region. Central Asia might learn from ASEAN which also brings together a range of countries with very different sets of issues and problems but are fundamentally driven by wanting to give themselves better collective heft on the international stage and being able to resolve their own problems by themselves.

This is the goal which Central Asia should be working towards. While it is not possible to detach itself from Russia and China – and the West will always be an over-the-horizon partner – it is really for the region to determine its own future. Working and thinking collectively in this direction should be the key goal, as it is the only viable way for the region – vulnerable to pressures all round – to navigate choppy geopolitical waters, now and in the future.

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