

Central Asia – Russia: Opportunities and Limitations in Building a Joint Future (Foresight Analysis)

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Abstract: Central Asia now plays an important geopolitical role in the balance of power in Eurasia. Russia's role in the region is evolving, but it remains one of the leading ones. The pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine have shifted the situation out of homeostasis. So it is now important to address the issue of security, support for small and medium-sized businesses, and the preservation and development of cultural and humanitarian links. Based on the Foresight procedure this article draws conclusions about the way forward for multilateral relations in the “Central Asia-Russia” format on the basis of the outcome documents announced by the Heads of the Central Asian States and the Russian Federation after their meeting. Using the rapid Foresight tools (anticipation, design, programming and projection), conclusions are drawn about the important position of the Russian Federation as a regional actor in the external policies of the Central Asian States. Its current position is strong, but not uncontroversial. The thesis of the interpenetration of the Russian and Central Asian economies has also been elaborated, since the backbone of

low-diversification economies are energy and energy-transit. At the same time, one cannot ignore the powerful resource of soft power. The vast area of frontier communicativeness formed by the Kazakhstan-Russian border is a unique resource that can be exploited in the future. The article was based on the results of a scientific discussion held at the National Communications Development Research Institution (NIIRC), Moscow, Russia in 2022.

Keywords: foresight studies, Central Asia, Russia, image, future, multilateralism, international relations

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Introduction

In October 2022, Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, organized a real marathon of high-level summits, the decisions of which have an impact on the political situation in Eurasia. This marathon ended with the summit “Central Asia-Russia”.

The main purpose of the meeting of the heads of six states was to discuss the prospects for multilateral cooperation in the region in a situation of global instability and increasing external pressure. The presidents came to the conclusion that it is important to join forces in such matters as:

- Security. The situation in the region is determined by the level of stability and security in each of the states. The security of Central Asia and Russia is in the area of responsibility of such organizations as the CIS, SCO, CSTO and CICA. In addition, countries are considering different aspects of security within the framework of bilateral relations, focusing on the development of new ways to counter threats, on the development of preventive diplomacy, in order to level the hybrid and informational triggers that are often used to provoke conflict. In addition, the countries of the region need to pay attention to the borders, the unsettledness of which is a cause for tension..

- Support for small and medium businesses and the launch of joint ventures. For the region, an important factor in maintaining financial and economic stability will be the preservation and development of trade and economic ties. Work is important to remove trade barriers and reduce protectionist measures. We should also not forget about intra-regional activity.

- Attention to cultural and humanitarian cooperation, which, as a part of the development of second track diplomacy, will help to effectively resist attempts at disengagement¹.

From the point of view of system analysis, it is important how the initiatives of the heads of state can be integrated into the current political situation. Taking into account the

¹ Central Asia–Russia Summit: what the presidents of the six countries talked about. Available from: https://www.inform.kz/ru/sammit-central-naya-aziya-rossiya-o-chem-govorili-prezidenty-shesti-stran_a3990740 (accessed: 27.12.2022).

great variability of the situation and the fact that decisions are made for a short period of time, it is important to use expert assessments for analysis, one of the varieties of which is foresight as a tool for assessing the strategic directions of socio-economic and innovative development that can have an impact on society in the medium and long term².

The purpose of this article is to show the possibilities and limitations in building a joint future for the countries of Central Asia and the Russian Federation.

Achieving this goal involves the analysis of expert assessments in the context of general intellectual search based on the basic functions of Rapid Foresight (forecasting, designing, programming and projection), as a result of which it is possible to develop practice-oriented recommendations to government bodies, on the basis of which it is possible to form a common agenda for the region Central Asia as a territory of prosperity, prosperity and peace.

Materials and Methods

This article is based on the results of a foresight session conducted on the Rapid Foresight technique, a foresight technique developed by the RE-ENGINEERING FUTURES group. The peculiarity of this method is that it makes it possible to achieve a representative result faster than using classical foresight techniques (1).

The foresight session was held on November 24, 2022, the session was organized by the Eurasian Monitoring Center for Analytical Research, Astana International University. The session was attended by scientists from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The discussion touched upon a wide range of problems that characterize the situation in Central Asia.

The topical problems of the region were: internal problems and contradictions, such as problems with water, issues of cross-border cooperation. The public outcry related to how the perception of the Russian Federation as the largest regional player is changing is important.

Predicting the future, the experts concluded that there is a high probability of destabilization associated with both internal factors and growing geopolitical pressure. At the same time, a positive scenario for the development of the Central Asian countries and the Russian Federation is possible provided that relations are depoliticized. The diplomacy of the second track will be the tool that will allow you to form positive trends.

Also, in the analytical processing of the results, data obtained in the course of work within the framework of program-targeted funding of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan BR10965282 “Kazakhstan-Russian border: historical context and new geopolitical reality” related to the analysis of the current situation in the

² What is foresight? Available from: <https://foresight.hse.ru/whatforesight#:~:text=> (accessed: 27.12.2022).

Kazakh-Russian border area were used. In particular, when modeling the future, the results of public opinion polls that were made in 2021-2022 were taken into account. Polls show that residents of the border regions of Kazakhstan are quite positive and want to continue interacting with Russia.

Results

The foresight session was based on the formation of development tracks. The main attention was paid to scenario forecasting of the transition from the current situation to the desired future through the development of a package of recommendations and initiatives that can be used by the relevant bodies and structures.

Analytical work was built through segmentation and objectification of the multilateral interaction between the Russian Federation and the Central Asian republics. The assessment was carried out in a multidimensional coordinate system, taking into account the impact on the region of the conflict in Ukraine, the risks of internal destabilization, the impact of disproportions in social and economic development. We consider the result of the session to be a scientifically based forecast of how the situation in Central Asia will develop, in a situation of changes, "continued present" and "probable future".

The analysis began with an assessment of the CA+Russia cooperation model. Interaction takes place both in a bilateral format (Russia, Central Asian countries) and within the framework of existing multilateral formats (EAEU, CSTO, SCO, etc.). The model is not stable. Destructive tendencies are due to the influence of centrifugal tendencies and the reaction of the republics to Russia's foreign policy. An analysis of the information field, conducted by the experts of the CAI "Eurasian Monitoring" in October-November 2022, showed that the perception of Russia's foreign policy has ceased to be only positive. This conclusion was made after evaluating the reaction of readers of news aggregator channels in Telegram ("For you Bake", "Ne-Khabar"). In preparation for the foresight session, CAI Eurasian Monitoring experts assessed the information resources of the Kazakhstani segment of the Internet in order to understand how the understanding of the role of Russia as one of the significant players in determining the geopolitical situation is being formed. Based on this, it is worth recommending that the bodies and structures of Russia intensify their policy in the region in order to maintain the status quo. At the same time, direct propaganda methods cease to be effective; on the contrary, they cause rejection, especially among younger age groups focused on network methods of influence. It is important to form programs within the framework of track two diplomacy that will work systematically, avoiding pain zones and triggers, such as reactions to mobilization, relocation, support/non-support for NWO, sanctions policies, etc.

There are difficulties with ideas about the future in relations between the countries of Central Asia and Russia. A positive scenario is possible in the formation of models of interaction on an equal position. This requires an analysis of the corridor of opportunities associated with Russia's withdrawal from the conflict with the West. The acute phase of

the conflict increases the risk of increased sanctions and an increase in the negative impact of the conflict itself on the region. The forecast of experts on this issue is neutral or restrainedly pessimistic. The conducted foresight session suggests that the influence of the Russian Federation in the region will at best remain at the same level or will gradually weaken and Russia will be replaced by other players.

Another problem that was analyzed by experts is related to how the image of the Russian Federation is being formed in the information space of Central Asia, it is necessary to understand how the image of a neighboring state is formed.

According to V.L.Bozadzhiev, the image is formed through the perception by the societies of the Central Asian countries of political institutions, the head of state, the army, elites, political consciousness and mentality, foreign policy and much more (2:438-439). The image of the country is created as a construct of three components: compliance of the political leader of the nation with common values, awareness of the status of the country, understanding of the role played by the country in the international arena (3:20).

An image is a certain filter through which an understanding of what is happening in a neighboring country occurs. The media are crucial, and they shape the image, doing it sporadically. Under the conditions of the information revolution, the control of this process is practically impossible (4). In October-November 2022, a media content analysis was carried out. We studied mainly electronic media, the content of news aggregators. The analysis showed that Russia is perceived through such information frames as the economy (tense stability due to the large inflow of rubles; real estate prices; business relocation and risks of secondary sanctions); social processes (relocation, attitude towards Russians, reaction of Kazakhstani); security policy (the situation at the border, the process of transition itself, accounting for foreign citizens). The beginning of the mobilization became a serious informational reason for the increase in the number of publications about Russia. There are clear differences in assessments: Russia is assessed differently in the Russian-language and Kazakh-language media. Kazakhstani media, published in the state language, are critical of the northern neighbor. Media published in Russian are more neutral, but the tone of publications is far from complimentary. The image of Russia is ambiguous: one Russia is a neighboring country, towards which the population of Central Asia has a positive or neutral attitude; the other Russia is a belligerent country with an aggressive foreign policy that causes a negative attitude not only from public opinion leaders, but also from ordinary citizens. Those who leave their reactions in Telegram react negatively to the line of Russia's foreign policy, which concerns its conflict with the countries of the West. Accordingly, if it is important for Russia to maintain its influence in the region, serious efforts are required to form a positive image. For the countries of Central Asia, an attempt to "lock in on itself" will become a big reputational risk, reacting negatively to cooperation in the CA-RF format. The foreign policy of Kazakhstan is built on a multi-vector approach, which is based on equal cooperation with all the main actors of international relations.

In connection with the sanctions pressure, there is an obvious risk that secondary sanctions will be applied to the trading partners of the Russian Federation, which are located in Central Asia. Consider supplies: now we have to rebuild logistics, because of the

withdrawal of Western companies from Central Asia from the Russian Federation, it was necessary to change the logistics supply chains. The problem is that the EU is the largest importer, since Kazakhstan's oil is imported by Europe, and on the other hand, Russia is also a significant trading partner.

It is known that the North-South project is being carried out across the Caspian Sea. Prospects for cooperation are possible, but, on the other hand, the Asian market will also demand discounts on raw materials, including hydrocarbons and uranium. This is a consequence of the fact that Europe has set the bar for oil prices (5:110). This is unprofitable for both Kazakhstan and Russia. Since Kazakhstan has to look for workarounds, and for Russia its status in the region is reduced.

The main thing in building long-term plans is to rely on an assessment of the information field of Kazakhstan and take into account how the image of the Russian Federation is being formed as the largest player in Central Asia in the media.

When preparing scenarios for the future, it is necessary to pay attention to the policies of important players. Countries such as the United States, China and the EU countries, when building their policy in Central Asia, first of all, as is typical for all states, solve problems.

The general trend has also affected the Russian language, now it is popular only in Bishkek and in several other cities. Alas, Russian diplomats do not see this as a problem.

Compare with the USA. United States public diplomacy is more developed in Kyrgyzstan. And this should be taken into account when thinking about what will happen in the relations between our countries in 5 or even 20 years. The dynamics of changes in the global agenda, perhaps they will be cardinal, will force us to reconsider relations, but it is difficult to predict exactly how.

Strategic proposals are needed to develop a plan for public authorities to develop relations between Russia and Central Asia. We need special mechanisms of interaction that can strengthen existing and sustainable forms of activity. This plan should take into account the peculiarities of the region and provide new opportunities for the countries of Central Asia. It is especially important to take into account such initiatives as "One Belt – One Road" and logistics and transport projects, such as "Greater Eurasia".

Establishing joint ventures for Russia and the countries of Central Asia will help their relationship in the future. Thus, Russia is trying to use the countries of this region for import substitution, which should have a positive effect on the economies of the Central Asian countries. In general, over the past five years, trade has doubled.

It is especially important to change financial instruments, which will allow to exclude political factors from the economy. In particular, in the energy sector, the Russian Federation is ready to provide practical assistance in restoring the unified energy system of Central Asia, and this, of course, will increase the energy security of all countries in the region.

The introduction of digital technologies, the construction of nuclear power plants – all this is the creation of new types of cooperation in the field of generating capacities. The discussion of the development of the transport corridor of Greater Eurasia deserves special attention. These are primarily such corridors as East-West and North-South. It is very important to understand each of these projects and their goals.

The scientific and educational community is faced with the task of effectively developing international integration through new forms of cooperation. And information interaction plays a significant role in the process of international scientific and educational integration. The main topics for discussion are such issues as personnel for the school and the science of vocational training, scientific cooperation, humanitarian projects, general educational programs, the study of the Russian language, the exchange of information between preschool and secondary education systems. The main goal is to develop the dialogue between our countries in the cultural and humanitarian spheres.

Long-term cooperation between the countries of Central Asia and the Russian Federation in the field of higher education, the launch of new educational projects, the improvement of the functioning of existing ones can have a significant impact in raising the international rating of universities and scientific organizations, will enhance international cooperation between the countries of Central Asia and Russia and will allow for a constructive dialogue between representatives of education, science and business.

According to the experts who took part in the foresight session, our countries have a high peacekeeping potential, and it is important to focus on development in this area. For intellectual dialogue, a digital platform for discussions about a shared future is very important.

The experts came to the conclusion that in order to improve relations between Central Asia and Russia, first of all, an intellectual dialogue is needed, similar to that carried out within the framework of the project "Kazakhstan-Russian border, historical aspect and geopolitical reality".

The future is unclear today; everything will be clear when the results of the activities of both regional and global players are determined. If the current system of international relations holds, the reorganization of the geopolitical structure of Greater Eurasia will make it possible to move towards a full-scale strengthening of the role of non-traditional players for this region.

Conclusions

Russia's position in foreign policy in Central Asia is very important. This position is currently not indisputable, but is still strong. On the part of Kazakhstan, there is a diversification of geo-economic development tracks in order to regulate and contain negative trends. Western diplomacy in Kyrgyzstan is more successful than Russian diplomacy. But do not forget that the economies of Central Asia and Russia are interconnected. These are mainly backbone parts of low-diversified economies: energy and energy transit. There is a significant growth in industry and trade. In a situation of geopolitical uncertainty, the Russian Federation definitely needs to use the situation to open new supply chains that are necessary as part of the development of import substitution projects. And it is important for the Central Asian states not to fall under all sorts of sanctions. It is important to correctly assess the situation and show some pragmatism.

We should not forget about soft power. The significant potential of communications due to the Kazakh-Russian border is a unique resource that can and should be used. Based on the study, 80% of the population of the border zone with Russia is positively disposed towards the development of relations. But, on the other hand, there are also violations of the information space, there is a stratification of the image of Russia and its foreign policy. Russia is perceived as neutral in the eyes of most people, although there is a growing tendency in Kazakh society to view Russia's foreign policy in Central Asia negatively. When planning the future of Russia, it is important to take into account the opinion of its "neighbors" and reconsider how it presents itself. At the same time, it should be understood that Russia cannot unambiguously define the information field. It is important to take into account modern trends in the formation of images in the public mind.

Expert communication and the possibility of public diplomacy through contacts with intellectuals and scientists will make it possible to influence centrifugal tendencies and create new effective platforms for dialogue. It is intellectuals and scientists who can become the engines of ideas of peace and creation.

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