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RUSSIA IS IN NEED OF A NEW CENTRAL ASIA POLICY

WILL THERE BE ONE?

One year ago, Russia had a firm foothold in Central Asia. However, Moscow's decision to invade Ukraine, its military defeats, weakening economy, and international isolation have undermined its position in the region. Can Russia adapt its policy in Central Asia to the new reality?

In January 2022, Central Asia's most stable autocracy – Kazakhstan – was struggling with a political crisis. Peaceful protests had spiralled into violence, and a part of the ruling elite challenged President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's leadership. Tokayev resolved the situation by appealing to the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to intervene, sending shockwaves through the expert community.

The CSTO contingent, made up primarily of Russian troops, arrived in record time and halted the split within the elite. That allowed Tokayev's forces to violently suppress the demonstrations, leaving 238 dead.

Moscow seemed to emerge as the biggest winner in Kazakhstan's tragic events, having apparently succeeded in revitalizing the CSTO and leaving Tokayev with a debt of gratitude. Moscow's clout in Central Asia appeared solid despite its limited resources and the sustained rise of China.

Now, a year later, Russia's position in Central Asia is noticeably weaker and its future uncertain.

Launching the war in Ukraine shook the foundations of Moscow's relations with the five post-Soviet governments of Central Asia. Russia is a major, if not the principal, partner of all five, and yet none of them support the war. Instead, they position themselves as neutral, as

demonstrated in how they voted in the March 2022 UN General Assembly resolution calling on Russia to withdraw from Ukraine. Central Asian states either abstained (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) or chose not to turn up (Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan).

Yet it would be wrong to interpret the Central Asian governments' balancing act as a veiled attempt to break away from Russia. Instead, it signals an effort to renegotiate their relationship with Moscow. Russia's attack on Ukraine, its inability to win the war, its international toxicity, and its economic downfall have changed the parameters of the Kremlin's engagement with Central Asia. In this

new reality, Russia must reassess its regional policy.

First and foremost, Russia will have to clarify its approach to regional security. Until now, Moscow has acted as Central Asia's security provider with relative success. However, its decision to invade Ukraine and its inability to ensure victory now preclude such a role.

Moscow will have to convince Astana that it is indeed a security provider and not a security threat. This will be difficult given Kazakhstan's long border with Russia, the sizeable ethnic Russian minority populating the border zone, and the regularity of comments made by Russian elites contesting Kazakhstan's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

When it comes to the other four Central Asian states, Moscow needs to address the red flags that have emerged from its seeming obsession with dominating Ukraine at all costs, and its inability to do so.

From the perspective of the Central Asian governments, the Kremlin should focus on helping them more, not on invading Ukraine. However, Russia has done the exact opposite. It has refused to mobilize the CSTO in support of Armenia in its conflict with Azerbaijan. It has also chosen to ignore the intensifying conflict between

two of its military allies, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. These instances have caused concern and resentment among the Central Asian governments.

Moreover, Russia's battlefield losses call into question its ability to provide security, even if there were the political will to do so. Until now, Moscow has been a reliable supporter of the region's authoritarian leaders during moments of domestic unrest. With its limited resources drained in Ukraine, Russia's preparedness for future interventions is uncertain.

In addition, Afghanistan has the potential to pose a major security challenge for Central Asia. In 2022, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan were targeted in cross-border rocket attacks by the Islamic State. Can the Central Asian governments rely on Russia if their security situation deteriorates?

There are also shifts in spheres other than security that require Moscow to reassess its policy in Central Asia.

The war in Ukraine and Western sanctions have weakened the economic foundation of the Russia-Central Asia relationship. Central Asian economies are still indirectly dependent on Russia and will suffer from Russia's economic decline. However, the fact that Western sanctions are not targeting

Central Asia has given the region's governments newfound leverage. They may help Russia somewhat in circumventing the sanctions, but will expect Moscow to reward their assistance accordingly.

Russia's invasion has also complicated Russia-Central Asia relations at the societal level. Since February 2022, hundreds of thousands of Russians have relocated to Central Asia. Although there has been no open resistance to their arrival, their presence has increased competition in the rental and labour markets and put extra strain on the social sector.

In combination, these shifts suggest that Russia's foothold in Central Asia is rapidly eroding. However, this change comes with great uncertainty. Central Asian elites are clearly coming to an understanding that they expect both more distance and more benefits from Moscow. In contrast, there is no clarity in Moscow's position.

If Russia duly recognizes that the structural predicament calls for a new regional policy, is willing to refocus its resources within Central Asia, and adopts an approach that responds to local needs, it will still have a chance to remain a prominent actor in the region.

If not, it will eventually be forced to abandon its regional predominance in Central Asia./