

## Exile on Silk Road: The rise of the near abroad

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There is a case to be made among historians that the Silk Road was the eighth wonder of the world: not a monument in stone, but a monument to furthering the cause of humanity, allowing for the transmission of economic, cultural and political exchanges between East and West in a manner previously unthinkable and surviving as a vital network for almost two thousand years. As the encroaching forces of globalism and history left the vitality of the Silk Road behind, and the twentieth-century empires were forged, many of the nations through which the Road passed – most particularly the Central Asian states commonly referred to as the ‘*stans*’ - saw their fortunes decline with it. Now, these forgotten nations of the Silk Road are rising once more, although the question of whether they will facilitate a trade in ideals, or drive a wedge between them, remains to be seen.



Although the Silk Road was most commonly associated with China, it is Russia which dominates the nations of today, attempting to control them either by actual force (Afghanistan), or the threat of the same, coupled with economic dependency (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan et al). Considering that Central Asia is permanently viewed in Moscow as Russia's own backyard - particularly with Beijing's eyes increasingly being drawn eastward - Russia has, for decades, kept a thumb on the region via dominant trading relationships and infrastructure projects on which the Central Asian nations rely, political bodies such as the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and the Eurasian Economic Union which, in truth, serve predominantly as soapboxes for the Kremlin, and occasional reminders that Moscow is the strongman in a ring of featherweights, as neatly evidenced by the dispatching of Russian troops into Kazakhstan last year (just prior to the invasion of Ukraine) to quell anti-government protests, or the on-a-whim closures of the Caspian pipeline which provides 80% of Kazakhstan's oil. And by and large, the Central Asian nations have long marched to Russia's drum on issues ranging from trade deals and development projects, to military exercises and political positions.

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But in this, as with so many things, the war seems to have proven the last straw. None of the governments have openly and explicitly come out in favour of Putin's invasion, and all have broadly complied with international sanctions, thereby isolating Russia even further in political and economic terms – and right on Moscow's doorstep too. That this has stood for so long can be ascribed either to the crystallisation of Russia's true nature into the spotlight – it runs on such self-interest that the country will simply ignore those that it no longer deems useful – or for the simple fact that it has virtually nothing to threaten them with.

The Central Asian nations themselves are cognisant of the legacies of Russian dominance, yet equally mindful that their first priority must be to save their own economies (and by extension, countries) from collapse; and adhering to the former serves only to push the possibility of the latter further away. Already beginning to bridle under the continued Soviet-style paternalism exerted by Moscow on sovereign nations, the war has provided the final impetus for these chains to be, if not totally broken, then at least loosened considerably. While Central Asia cannot divest itself of Russian influence and support entirely, for geographic reasons as much as practical ones, a balance can definitely be better struck.

Uzbekistan has denied repeated orders (or 'requests') to re-join the CSTO and Tajikistan to join the EEU, both slaps in the face to Russia's contention that it is the main guarantor of economic success and security in the region, while China is increasingly being talked about as the major alternative regional trading partner (if one extends 'regional' by virtue of the fact that Beijing is as Chinese as Kashi or Kashgar), pledging billions in the Belt & Road Initiative (a successor of sorts to the Silk Road) and seeking further co-operation on oil/gas pipelines across Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan – and of course, working together on the security dimension of Islamic separatism in the Uyghur regions in China's far west, with Beijing keen that Central Asia leaves China's own Muslims isolated.

Plus, and perhaps most dangerously from Moscow's point of view, the degree to which Central Asia is actively being courted by the West as both a worthwhile region in its own right, and as a proxy battlefield in the ongoing Great Game. The December 2022 'Global Gateway' summit in the Uzbek capital Samarkand saw the EU commit (albeit in broad terms) to increased infrastructure and trading co-operation with Central Asia, with France and Germany taking the lead in promoting bilateral trade – with the UK once again risking being left out in the cold with government and business alike, so far not seizing the moment. The USA for its part is going harder, seeking permission to open military bases in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as a prelude to deeper engagement calculated to irritate China as much as it will benefit the 'stans'. No longer is Central Asia viewed by the West as a remote region with little value or possibility; instead it is their 'near abroad' just as much as it is Russia's.

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A response to this is not as simple as Putin would like. Aggression and threat will bear little fruit given that the myth of the mighty Red Army has been exploded, and despite a charm offensive to woo the Central Asian nations with displays of soft power and further economic incentives, the ongoing adherence to sanctions is a major stumbling block. While Putin may find broadly sympathetic ears at the tops of governments, he is dealing not just with changing times but with changing people, and once those of the Soviet generation across Central Asia are no longer in command, the younger generations who see Putin's Russia for what it truly is will be nothing like as pliable.

Moreover, any future Central Asian policy Moscow might have had has been dampened, perhaps permanently, by the 'brain drain' of Russians fleeing their country for Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and the like – not only those fleeing conscription (who will not be sent back) but young and educated citizens and entrepreneurs who do not see a future under Putin. If this cohort leverage not only their skills to boost their adopted Central Asian homelands, but highlight Russia's abuses at the same time, then the Kremlin's soft power across the region may be as diluted as its military might. It is understood that even Uzbek-born Alisher Usmanov, long described as 'Putin's favourite oligarch', is looking to cut ties with the Kremlin and see the sanctions on himself lifted, so toxic has the spectre of Putin become. His shift would be emblematic of Central Asia, so long a happy hunting ground for Russian influence and control, emerging from the Kremlin's shadow; one that it would find difficult to cast again.

A note here, too, on both ends of the Silk Road. In Turkey, Erdogan has been a staunch ally of Putin, but has faced growing discontent domestically and internationally for his destructive economic policies and repression of social and political opposition and there are no guarantees he will win re-election in June – with a new President perhaps likely to cleave closer to the West. And in China, it has long been established that Beijing has been a lot 'cooler' in its support for Russia than the Kremlin desires. Russia risks losing friends all along the Silk Road and cannot hope to fight, even with soft power alone, on so many fronts. The expected spring offensive hitting Ukraine in the coming months therefore takes on a greater urgency, not just (with a victory) to allow Russia to concentrate efforts elsewhere, but (with the prospect of failure) to determine whether it is even worthwhile in the first place.

While the uncoupling of Central Asia from Russia might not seem the existential threat to the latter that the prosecution of the war in Ukraine clearly is, it represents another hammer blow to the re-emergence of the Soviet ideal, in both geography and practicality, that Putin has worked for so long to bring about.

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With Ukraine actively humiliating Moscow in the theatre of war and NATO expanding further onto Russia's borders, for yet more former Soviet territories in Putin's own backyard to repudiate him is more than a professional embarrassment, it is a personal failure; and with both China and the West vying to fill the economic and political gaps while Putin's own citizens flee to the very countries denying him, the days of the Eurasian Land Bridge and Trans-Aral Railway being heralded as 'the new Silk Roads' and allowing Russia to put itself on a par with the wonders of old, seem very far away. If the past is a foreign country where things are done differently, then the near abroad may yet be the future.

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