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The Quarterly Journal

Volume XIV, Number 4

Fall 2015

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Central Asian Stances on the Ukraine Crisis: Treading a Fine Line?

Emilbek Dzhuraev *

Introduction

For over a year now, the crisis in and over Ukraine has been a stable fixture among the top issues of concern and deliberation internationally. The subject has become a point of polarized debate, with most contributions favoring one side or the other between the collective “West” and Russia. Similar to most trending debates, especially those as divided as this, the discussion has tended to simplify the issue by lumping everything into singular categories, be they “Russian imperialism,” “American conspiracy,” “Ukrainian fascism,” or “the new Cold War.” However, the matter is far more complex.

This essay offers a mostly non-aligned analytical overview of the positions of five Central Asian countries on the subject. What these countries’ stances elicit is the complexity of the problem and the many-sided effects and challenges the involved and surrounding parties need to face, where it is far from obvious why a country takes this or that stance, or—even more tellingly—why it appears to vacillate. From such an overview, a number of more general conceptual rewards can be derived.

One is the level and character of agency in foreign policymaking by small states, such as the Central Asian five. Both their differences and similarities underscore the fact that a non-trivial level of agency is still left with and exercised by small states even when they seem to be seriously under the domination of a major power.¹ A second point is the fact of structural constraints for multi-vectoralism. All of these countries have at various times claimed to be in pursuit of multi-vector foreign policies, not necessarily having much to show for it. As this paper indicates, robust multi-vector relations—especially in the high-risk and geopolitically sensitive positions in which these states find themselves—require requisite prospects for sustained relations with a plurality of genuinely interested partners.² The third observation is about the place of uncertainty in international relations and for foreign policymaking. Uncertainty, such as that emerging in the wake of the Ukraine crisis, is the condition under which countries—especially the

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¹ An argument suggested by Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

² This is also a thought that occurs in various works. See Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, *Central Asia and Afghanistan: Insulation on the Silk Road between Eurasia and the Heart of Asia* (Oslo: PRIO, 2012) for an analysis of the Central Asian stances on another problem spot – Afghanistan.

smaller states such as those in Central Asia—are able to venture into exerting greater degrees of agency while also facing greater levels of risk of miscalculation and suffering its consequences. The uncertainty about further developments—especially in regard to how Russia will fare—has been difficult for the Central Asian capitals, and the different instances of hedging, daring, speaking out, or keeping silent have shown how, in their different ways, these states have coped with and used the condition of uncertainty.

It is worth pausing here to briefly ask why anyone should care about the foreign policy stances of the Central Asian states on the Ukraine crisis. Besides the possibility that one may be interested in Central Asian politics in general, in which case the Ukraine situation could be an edifying matter to consider, there are three reasons that can stand as justifications. One reason is the significantly increased importance of these countries and of the region as a whole for Russia, one of the primary parties in the crisis. A second reason is the presence of some fears, not entirely unlikely, that some of Ukraine's ills could migrate to (or repeat themselves in) the Central Asian countries.³ A third reason to think about the Central Asian perspectives is because these countries are caught in the center of broad and longer-term developments on the international stage, and over the Eurasian landmass more specifically, and therefore it is worth understanding the views of these countries.⁴

One more point of consideration is in order before proceeding further. In speaking about “the crisis in Ukraine,” one must remember that the crisis is a complex one consisting of several parts, each with a slightly different relevance from the others. To proceed in a chronological order, the first component of the crisis is the Euromaidan and the political destabilization in which it resulted. The second component is the crisis in Crimea which—for the moment—ended with its annexation by Russia. The third component is the de facto war—incompletely ceased since the Minsk II agreement of February 2015—in the eastern Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Lughansk, or the Donbass region. The fourth component is the crisis on the international stage, most concretely expressed in the sanctions and embargoes between Russia and the West.⁵ Keep-

³ For the authoritarian regimes of Central Asia, Ukraine's example of Maidan-style protest politics is an irritant, but an even more disturbing thought concerns the possibility that secessionist moods could be sparked in certain parts of northern Kazakhstan. Perceptions about the latter count, even if, upon closer consideration, it may not be very likely (see Andrey Makarychev, “PONARS memo,” forthcoming).

⁴ If one such long-term and far-reaching development concerns the disconcerting likely scenarios in Afghanistan, the other—increasingly salient in current discussions—is China's economic Silk Road belt launched by China westward across Central Asia and toward Europe. See Scott Kennedy and David A. Parker, “Building China's ‘One Belt, One Road’,” *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, 3 April 2015, <http://csis.org/publication/building-chinas-one-belt-one-road>.

⁵ An extended analysis of the Ukrainian crisis ought to consider further aspects, such as the crisis of public international law, the crisis of the nation-state and the concept of self-determination, the crisis of diplomacy, the hollowing of sovereignty, the crisis of opposition politics and free speech in Russia, and the crisis of deliberation on the world stage, to name just a few.

ing these several elements of the crisis in mind has some significance for an accurate overview of the Central Asian countries' behavior on the matter.

An Overview of the Central Asian Countries' Behavior

There has been some variation among the five post-Soviet Central Asian countries' approaches to the crisis in Ukraine. The variation, of course, is mostly of degrees and not so much of substance—all five are generally aligned with Russia—but the differences are nonetheless very informative for understanding the behavior of each. A quick overview of the concrete postures and actions of each country is in order, to be followed by some general remarks.

Kazakhstan has clearly been the most actively engaged among the five countries. Commenting on the early stages of the crisis, President Nursultan Nazarbayev maintained that the roots of the upheaval lay in the poor socio-economic situation in the country—and not so much on the “Europe vs. Russia” choice—and that the main failure of Ukraine's government was being preoccupied with politics and neglecting economic development. Being mostly silent on the question of who bears the responsibility for the Donbass crisis, the Kazakh government has actively called for a diplomatic solution, with Nazarbayev offering his middleman services (competing with President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus), and offering to host any negotiations to resolve the crisis. Kazakhstan has also recognized the Crimean referendum—to underscore, the “fact of the referendum”—which over time has meant the only meaningful thing it could, albeit tacitly: recognition of the validity and legitimacy of the referendum. However, Astana abstained from the UN General Assembly vote on the resolution that effectively found the referendum illegitimate and invalid.⁶ Not least importantly, Nazarbayev, back to back with Lukashenko, paid a blitz visit to Kiev to meet with President Petro Poroshenko and reaffirmed his commitment to cooperation between the two countries. The visit was seen as a mild but clear signal of independence from Moscow.

Kyrgyzstan's position on the crisis has been notable in one aspect: it was the only country among the five to congratulate Ukraine, almost immediately after ex-president Viktor Yanukovich's flight, on the occasion of its second revolution and the ousting of a corrupt regime. Furthermore, in formal statements from its foreign ministry, the country both recognized the legitimacy of the new interim government in Kiev and refused to grant recognition to the de facto deposed Yanukovich (who continued to claim his legitimate mandate long after being ousted). All three motions were the opposite of Moscow's position at the time. Quite likely induced by Moscow's disapproval, Bishkek became mostly silent, only issuing a statement recognizing the results of the referendum in Crimea as “objective reality” following the March 16 balloting. Bishkek became somewhat more active in the more recent period, when President Almazbek Atambayev made the Ukraine crisis a prominent point of discussions in meetings with European

⁶ “General Assembly Adopts Resolution Calling upon States Not to Recognize Changes in Status of Crimea Region,” United Nations: Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, 27 March 2014, available at <http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/ga11493.doc.htm>.

leaders in his late March 2015 tour, calling for a political solution to the crisis (in eastern Ukraine) and the need to end sanctions. He reiterated that Kyrgyzstan, based on its own experience in 2010, sympathized with the Ukrainian Maidan, but he also dutifully noted that the referendum in Crimea was a fact that must be recognized because it reflected the true majority choice. Kyrgyzstan, rumored to have been one of several countries “threatened” by Russia in case of a wrong vote in the UN, abstained from the vote.⁷

The distinction of being the least actively engaged on the subject of Ukraine would go to Tajikistan. President Emomali Rahmon has avoided such engagement beyond pro forma declarations and signing multilateral statements, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) statement supporting Russia that was adopted at the SCO summit in September 2014 in Dushanbe. Heavily dependent on Russia in many ways and caught in a highly difficult geopolitical position, Tajikistan is generally not known to venture into activism on international issues when they do not pertain to the country directly, and this time has not been an exception. When it comes to a headcount, it is safe to count Dushanbe among Moscow’s friends – like Kyrgyzstan. It chose to abstain from the UN vote on Crimea (as opposed to voting “no”) – a move that indicates neither of these countries is comfortable fully siding with Russia, for various possible reasons.

Turkmenistan’s relative comfort in being mostly absent from any discussion of Ukraine is afforded by the country’s principle of “positive neutrality” in foreign policy. President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov has not gone on record defending Russia in any aspect of the crisis, nor has he offered pro-Western views. Turkmenistan has, however, been open to and engaged with Kiev directly. Most recently, the Turkmen vice-prime minister (and minister of foreign affairs) visited Kiev, meeting with Poroshenko and engaging in discussions of bilateral trade including, potentially, the supply of Turkmen natural gas to Ukraine. Turkmenistan also avoided signing a joint CIS statement calling for lifting Western sanctions against Russia during a ministerial meeting in Bishkek in early April 2015, when the statement had to go as a Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) motion due to Ukraine’s opposition to it in the CIS meeting. Like the Kazakh and Uzbek delegations, the Turkmen UN delegation voted to abstain from the UN Crimea resolution vote.

With the third abstention in the UN General Assembly, Uzbekistan may be the most independent (from Moscow) in its position on Ukraine, relative to the other four regional countries. With independence having become the catchall ideological cornerstone of the country, Uzbekistan’s foreign policy pivot in its most recent version has been one that turned askance at, though certainly not away from, Russia. Its most important recent disengagement has been abandoning its CSTO membership amid Moscow’s advances since mid-2012 (after Vladimir Putin’s return to presidency) toward foreign policy “harmonization” among the organization’s members. President Islam Karimov and the

⁷ Louis Charbonneau, “Exclusive: Russia Threatened Countries ahead of the U.N. Vote on Ukraine: Envoys,” *Reuters*, 29 March 2014, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/29/us-ukraine-crisis-un-idUSBREA2R20O20140329>. The report quotes a Russian diplomat responding to allegations thus: “We never threaten anyone. We just explain the situation.”

Uzbek foreign ministry have reiterated on several occasions that Uzbekistan stood unequivocally for the principle of the territorial integrity of states – a clear disapproval of the Crimean secession and its annexation by Russia, yet have never said so explicitly. Nevertheless, Uzbekistan is by no means anti-Russian or pro-Western in its stance, and has offered its token of moral support. In a notably friendly gesture toward Putin during the Dushanbe SCO summit, Karimov called for the need for clear understanding of Russia's centuries-old stake in Ukraine and of the brotherly ties between the peoples of the two countries. In a December 2014 visit by Putin to Tashkent, it was notable that the question of the Ukraine crisis was virtually unmentioned.

This quick overview of the activities and positions of the five countries in regard to the Ukraine crisis makes it possible to draw several light generalizations.

First, there is a moderate but undeniable level of diversity among these countries' positions on Ukraine. All five are supportive of the Russian side of the crisis to various degrees, but are indicative of various relevant considerations at play and, potentially, could be helpful in thinking about possible developments in the near future.

Second, for all countries except Kyrgyzstan, the first component of the crisis—the Euromaidan—was an unwelcome event about which they either remarked critically, saw as evidence of socio-economic failures of Ukraine's government (as opposed to political/democratic reasons), or tended to quietly overlook.

Third, all countries have effectively—even if only through the backdoor—recognized the “reunification” of Crimea with Russia as a legitimate occurrence. Even though publicly none of the countries has offered unequivocal recognition of its legitimacy, they have done so by increasingly rendering Crimea a non-issue in their interaction with Moscow. Despite its references to the sanctity of territorial integrity, even Uzbekistan has let it go and has not raised it as an issue with Russia.

Fourth, the main focus in reference to the crisis in Ukraine has been the crisis in the eastern Ukrainian regions. Uzbekistan's call on respect for territorial integrity may be interpreted as applying to this component of the crisis. None of the countries have ventured to specifically place responsibility for the conflict on any party, and all of them—when occasions have demanded—have spoken of the need to settle the conflict peacefully, refraining from violence, and resorting to diplomacy. Kazakhstan has been the most active here, with Nazarbayev positioning himself as a mediator and offering that Astana hosts negotiations.

Fifth, while the international repercussions of the Ukraine crisis, the fourth component, have of course touched on Central Asia, they have not been a major or sustained question in their observable foreign policy postures. The sanctions on Russia and Russia's embargo on Western goods have affected the region in rather immediate ways, and they have called for an end to these measures. However, it is possible that precisely this aspect of the crisis—its international effects, such as the exchanges of sanctions and generally the world's division into two camps—lies beneath the noticeable maneuverings of the five countries on the subject.

Sixth, these countries' positions on the Ukraine question can indeed be viewed as five cases of maneuvering or hedging on a sensitive matter vis-à-vis their close relations

with Russia. Admittedly, one could typically forego the present analysis—as is often done—and just say that Central Asia is effectively a dependent bandwagoner of Russia on the world stage. As the case is now emerging, that would be a premature foreclosure of an edifying analysis, as these states’ bandwagoning after Russia is far from uniform, and even the weakest client-states—Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—have resisted embracing Russia’s case entirely.

The Determinants of Central Asian Stances on Ukraine: What Are the Stakes?

The last point above leads to the broader question of what determines Central Asia’s behavior on the matter. Why is it not sufficient to dismiss Central Asian states as merely loyal clients of Russia? The brief overviews of each country’s case and light generalizations across them provide some basis to venture toward some answers to the question. The question can and should also be posed more broadly: what considerations and circumstances led the Central Asian states to hold their specific lines of policy and rhetoric? The following are proposed as a set of inferences from the record outlined above and some generally available observations about Central Asian politics. In the absence of more in-depth and inside information, these propositions are the best that may be put forth at the moment.

There may be, and probably are, many factors at play that have shaped and will continue to shape the five countries’ positions on the Ukraine crisis. Some of them, such as psychological factors affecting the relevant leaders’ thinking, are very difficult to glean and yet certainly have something to do with the matter. Apart from those unknowns, there seem to be at least four major factors involved and, although they are interrelated in various ways, each is a separate factor that deserves examination.

The first, and certainly the strongest factor that has defined much of the region’s posture on Ukraine, is the states’ close relationship with Russia. All five countries have significant ties to Russia, though these vary in intensity. It is important to consider that these relationships are not one-dimensional but complex, and, ultimately, based on pragmatic, “business-only” considerations on each side, rather than on feelings of eternal brotherhood or other unconditional allegiances. On the subject of Ukraine, at least three facets of the importance of these relationships are noteworthy.

One way in which these relations have factored into the equation may be referred to as the “wins and losses” of aligning with versus opposing Russia. Some balance exists between the gains each country hopes to achieve and risks or threats it wants to fend off in holding a position on Ukraine in the face of Russian partnership, as Russia is clearly in a position to quickly and significantly affect the fortunes of these countries. Hence, the more “immune” a country is to such influence (or the more it perceives itself immune), the freer that country has been to express views at variance with Russia’s—e.g. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan—albeit in the broader context all five would be classed as aligned with Russia.

The second aspect of the “Russia factor” is an extension of the first, if not its opposite: the unease among all Central Asian countries of being bound up with Russia too

tightly. If the first consideration has effectively been a “pull” factor for alignment with Russia, this second consideration may be seen as the “push” aspect of the Russia factor. None of these countries, for example, share the Kremlin’s (or Putin’s, rather) enthusiasm for any neo-Soviet Union. In this respect the Ukraine question, with all its complexity and essential contestability, has given them openings to sound out their differences with Russia here and there, however meek and painless they may be.

A third consideration in which the “Russia factor” has played a role is the possibility—even if remotely—of repetition of the crisis in Ukraine in the Central Asian states’ own turfs. At least four components of the “Ukraine crisis” have been pointed out above, and each of these four could, at least hypothetically, take place independently of the other three. To prevent their own version of Maidan, Crimea, Donbass, and/or the sanctions from coming their way, the Central Asian states have had to calibrate their proximity/distance to Russia’s position on Ukraine. Being too closely aligned with Russia could facilitate the contagion with one virus, but being too far could lead to contagion by another of the three threats. The threat perception regarding each of the four components of the Ukraine crisis may be different for each Central Asian country, but ultimately all of them feel vulnerable to contagion in some way or another.

The second major determinant of the Central Asian positions on the crisis is the miniscule level of Ukraine’s own importance to these countries, juxtaposed with the overwhelming influence of Russia. None of the five countries in the region have, up to the present point, had any significant economic, political, or other relations with Ukraine. In shaping the Central Asian positions on the crisis, this factor works more as the way of easing the detachment of these countries from needing to genuinely consider Ukraine’s end of the stick; one might say that they are unencumbered in this respect. Thus, this condition allows a country to avoid feeling compelled to speak up on the various aspects of the crisis, to sound clearly pro-Russian in some aspects without concern for hurting its relations with Ukraine, and to take a more critical stance only when a matter of principle touches directly on the country’s own concerns (i.e., regardless of Ukraine), such as the question of territorial integrity or legitimacy of the “revolutionary” government.

A third determinant of the Central Asian stances on this crisis is the fact that they want to have good, fruitful relations with the world beyond Russia and Ukraine. In this regard, the Ukraine crisis has created an atmosphere of relatively (messy) indeterminacy and polyvalence and, hence, a moment rich with opportunity to open doors to some third countries (and thereby also easing up Russia’s tight embrace). How a country (its government, its leader) speaks on Ukraine—and even *that* it speaks up about Ukraine at all—is what determines the level and direction of the doors opening up to the country. Kazakhstan’s active mediation efforts have been a case in point. Kyrgyzstan’s president recently took a tour of Europe – a reception he would probably not have enjoyed, had it not taken place in the shadow of the Ukraine situation.

The fourth determining circumstance is, in a way, the obverse of the third: the Central Asian countries’ actual relations (with variation, to be sure) with the world outside Russia are not very strong. In response to the preceding passage, one may ask: if these

countries truly desire stronger relations with the rest of the world—and especially with Western countries—why did they not simply more wholeheartedly embrace the Western positions, or at least feel free to lead independent policies without constant glances at Russia? The reason, somewhat similar to Ukraine itself, is that the Western countries never came close to the level of intensity of transactions that Russia has had with Central Asia. Given such an unequal balance, it would be a risky gamble for these countries to brace for a full-blown pro-Western (and pro-Kiev) position on the crisis.⁸

There are directions other than the West; there is of course China – that other giant with whom the Central Asian countries can and do have intensifying relations. The issue with China vis-à-vis the Ukraine crisis is that China’s own position has not been very easy to read. Undoubtedly, some of the more daring moments of Central Asian remarks on Ukraine, such as Uzbekistan’s reminders about territorial integrity, owe to the perception that China would concur, and it is there to balance Russia’s weight in the region. That said, the Central Asian countries continue to have significant inhibitions regarding close partnership with China. Thus, this desired but far from granted strong relationship with the rest of the world largely explains the Central Asian countries’ hesitation and hedging remarks on Ukraine.

These determinants—“the Russia factor,” “the Ukraine (non-)factor,” the want of third-party relations, and the weakness of third-party relations at the moment—have arguably been some of the most definitive factors shaping and shaking up the stances of these countries on this complex crisis. As noted above, these are not exclusive and exhaustive explanatory factors; yet, neither are they strictly separable. The actual moment of decision at any point is probably the effect of a combination of these and some other considerations. Among such likely other considerations, one may raise the question of the personalities of some of the presidents, the question of whether the societies’ prevailing views have any influence, or the question of specific institutions’ influences, be it the CSTO, the SCO, the CIS, or others. But lest this exercise become an unwieldy and endless enumeration of possible and proximate factors, if one sticks somewhat strictly to the question of these countries’ stances on the Ukraine crisis (and not their broader foreign policy lines as such), and takes their hitherto observed activities in this regard as the basis of analysis, then it seems that the combination of these four factors goes a good distance to explain the matter.

Conclusion

This article has offered an attempt at analyzing and drawing some general observations about the five Central Asian countries’ stances on the ongoing Ukraine crisis. As such, this paper is not an engagement in judgment as to which party bears the greatest responsibility for the situation. Instead, it is an exercise in considering some important

⁸ One may note in passing that precisely these drastically imbalanced ties with Russia made Kyrgyzstan’s joining of the Eurasian Economic Union a foregone deal – as President Atambayev reiterated a few times in interviews, Kyrgyzstan “had no other choice.”

aftermaths of the crisis (though it is not yet over) for presumably non-primary parties to it.

The crisis in Ukraine has caused a major shakeup of the international arena. It has cast many principles, relationships, and priorities into a state of indeterminacy. What the eventual spoils of the conflict will be for a country has become a matter of a rather pronounced level of contingency, fate, or—as Machiavelli would prefer—“fortuna.” In such a situation, able statesmen cherish the possible opportunities but also proceed with prudence. For all countries touched by the Ukraine crisis in some way or another, this has been a time to proceed with extraordinary prudence while also looking for windows open to prudent daring. The Central Asian governments have, in their somewhat differing ways, found themselves touched precisely such: in the midst of close relations with some of the major parties in the conflict, in bringing their own interests and liabilities to the situation they appear to have acted both with prudence and with a safe level of daring. This may be called the “pragmatism” of the foreign policies of the Central Asian states.

Based on the analysis, one general conclusion is that none of the Central Asian countries could afford themselves a position entirely opposed to Russia’s. All have close ties with Russia, all of them share significant interests with Russia, and all of them have non-trivial reasons to fear reprisals from Russia for opposing it.

More interestingly, there are differences among the five countries. They are in many ways very different countries, and their differences on Ukraine, accordingly, need to be taken seriously. One general point to consider is that the differences between the countries’ positions are reflective of the differing levels of their attachment to Russia (enthusiastic or compelled), differing sorts of foreign policy ambitions they have, and different perceptions of their own vulnerabilities that may be affected by their policy stances on Ukraine.

This last point leads to one further, final conclusion. If, for a moment, the language of dichotomy—pro-Western versus pro-Russian—is to be allowed, it seems warranted to say that the more pro-Russian positions by these countries seem to be less the reflection of their “genuine,” considered positions; conversely, their more “pro-West” (or Russia-critical) positions appear to be more notable and genuinely important. Put otherwise, aligning closely with Russia on the Ukraine crisis is something these countries are likely to do by default, and such stances have little credibility. Taking positions that are opposed to that of Russia, on the other hand, is something these countries would be doing as a result of careful consideration and a degree of daring, and therefore such stances would carry a much higher level of credibility. These sorts of generalizations are very important and require critical revisiting as the situation develops.

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