The Ukraine Crisis's Central Asian Echoes

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The Ukraine crisis—the annexation of Crimea and Russian military intervention in East Ukraine—is the most serious crisis in the post-Soviet sphere since the collapse of the Soviet Union for many reasons. It is a far graver crisis than was the 2008 Russian-Georgian war, the impact of which was limited. The Ukraine crisis has become a serious confrontation between Russia and the West, and, perhaps even more concerning for Russia, is testing relations between Moscow and the Central Asian republics. While the Ukraine crisis is being followed attentively throughout the Central Asian Republics, it is not perceived identically by people in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Still, it could constitute a turning point when it comes to the Central Asian countries' perception of Russia.

The best way to assess the Ukraine crisis's impact in Central Asia is to examine local public opinion (despite the impossibility of rigorously determining Central Asian public opinion in the western sense). In doing so, it becomes evident that there is no single and unanimous opinion about this major post-Soviet crisis across the Central Asian republics.

In Kazakhstan, the key Central Asian player in the Eurasian Union, there is no clear consensus on the Ukraine crisis. Some polls suggest that more than 50 percent of the Kazakh population supports the Eurasian Economic Union and Putin's response to the clashes in Ukraine. Undoubtedly, it is impossible to underestimate the influence of Russian media in Kazakhstan, when interpreting such polls. Recent rapid ruble decline had led to massive shopping tours to Russia from Kazakh border regions. Kazakh customers felt the benefits of importing Russian goods without paying any customs taxes. However, it is hard to predict how this level of support (or lack of condemnation) will change in the coming months or years, especially as the Kazakh economy faces serious troubles due to Western sanctions against Russia and low oil prices.

As for the public reaction in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, elite and popular perceptions are determined by the toll Russian economic problems has already taken on these countries' economies. For instance, there has been a marked depreciation of the som, the Kyrgyz national currency, and decreases in remittances sent from Russia to either country. Political pressure from Moscow, however, pushes both countries to demonstrate loyalty: either by joining the Eurasian Union in Kyrgyzstan's case, or by initiating a free trade zone between the country and the Union, in Uzbekistan's case. In the event of Kyrgyzstan's and Tajikistan's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union, Russian leverage over these countries will increase. Both host CSTO military bases, which Russia is trying to intensively modernize. All these factors tie Uzbekistan's hands, as Tashkent will be obliged to deal with Russia in order to solve its bilateral issues with Bishkek or Dushanbe. Russia supports both countries' aspirations to build water dams, aspirations Tashkent strongly opposes. Meanwhile, upcoming Uzbek presidential elections in 2015 will push Tashkent to reset relations with Russia. This is because Uzbek authorities fear Islamic radicalism linked to Afghanistan or Syria, where many Uzbeks are evidently participating in combat, while seeking Russian support to tackle this threat.

Another important consideration is the official reactions of Central Asian governments. Kazakhstan and other Central Asian republics expressed their commitment to the territorial integrity of all countries in the international community and are trying to approach Moscow with cold-bloodedness. There is also understanding that Russia protected its own national interests in Ukraine.Central Asian states also know that further continuation of political stalemate will bring severe damage to them, therefore, they try to convince Moscow that solutions to crisis should be found.

At the same time, it should not be underestimated that Russia doesn't want to be considered an aggressor again, especially in relation to its allies in the Eurasian Union. Moscow would lose face if it played such a game with its Central Asian neighbors. Meanwhile, it is understood in Central Asia that Russia is in serious economic trouble and will not bother with the annexation of other territories, which would saddle the Russian budget with huge burdens. Moreover, Russia cannot risk further isolation that would be the result of any new aggression in Central Asia. Despite this, Moscow would try to prevent major conflicts in the region by means of CSTO.

The Ukraine crisis poses questions for how the Eurasian Union project will be perceived in the future among Central Asian leaders. First of all, in general, it makes sense to talk about two different Eurasian Unions—one that existed prior to the Ukraine crisis, and one since that crisis began. As for Kazakhstan, there is a clear understanding that economy will face hard times, not only because of weakened Russia hit by sanctions, but as the result of global energy market shifts. That is why Nazarbayev announced his new economic plan "Nurly zhol—The path to the future" which aims at developing infrastructure around the country. He also further intensified Kazakhstan's ties with European Union, by signing an enhanced partnership agreement during his October visit to Brussels. Francois Hollande's Astana visit was very important in this context as well. On his way home from Kazakhstan, Hollande visited Putin. Many experts viewed this visit as the result of a Kazakh push to foster a dialogue between the European Union and Russia. Going forward, Astana, therefore, could play the role of a back-channel or mediator, as it did for Iran and P5+1 regarding the nuclear issue. As Astana seeks to pursue a multi-vector foreign policy, it will strive to help solve the Ukraine crisis, particularly because of the damage sanctions do the Kazakh economy. In order to implement its economic policy, Kazakhstan announced that it would transfer some of the money collected in the National Fund to the economy. This signals that Kazakhstan is prepared for difficult times and will continue to support the Eurasian Union. But it also signals Astana's discomfort with the ongoing crisis, for which it holds Russia and the West responsible.

Kyrgyzstan is a country that does not have so much space to maneuver in relation to Eurasian Union, and this has nothing to do with the Ukraine crisis. The country is small and very dependent on Russia in many terms. Many experts also argue that the Eurasian Union could limit Chinese involvement in Kyrgyzstan, especially the re-export of PRC goods to Kazakhstan and Russia.

However, a better analysis of the situation shows that, in reality, it will be difficult to limit Chinese involvement in Central Asia. Analysts think that Chinese investments and loans are becoming one of the main drivers of regional economies. However, increased Russian political leverage outweighs Chinese factor in defining Kyrgyzstan's aspirations to join Eurasian integration. While the prospects of EAEU is bleak, if sanctions will continue and oil prices will decline further, Bishkek will look for intense affairs with Beijing.

Regarding the other major Central Asian country, Uzbekistan, his criticism of Eurasian Union blended with earlier freezing of CSTO membership created serious tensions with Moscow. Despite this, Tashkent has no option but to deal with Russia. Recent signs of rapprochement provide evidence that Islam Karimov seeks to benefit from Russia's weakened position and use it to increase exports from Uzbekistan. Besides, at present, Tashkent has no interest in making dangerous wagers, as the succession of power draws near, and further risks to Uzbek stability are emerging from Afghanistan and other Central Asian neighbors. Therefore, the possibility of angering Russia with a strictly pro-Western attitude is off the table for Karimov. He knows that Russia also seeks cooperation, as it needs to find new markets, new sources of food deliveries from non-Western countries, new supporters or loyal allies. These considerations have led to pragmatic, rational behavior on both sides and to the initiation of a détente in Russo-Uzbek relations.
It is hard to determine whether the Ukraine crisis will mark a sharp turning point in the Central Asian countries' perception of the Eurasian Union. After the initial shock the crisis brought, Central Asian states have gradually come to the conclusion that they should continue dealing with Russia. Still, none of these states are prepared to be totally controlled by Russia, while all of them seek to balance Russia's influence by dealing with the West and China. There are strong indications that Beijing will take advantage of Central Asia's balancing act by promoting itself as a less aggressive partner than the West or Russia. This will prove to be a good strategy for installing itself as a hegemon in Central Asia in the coming years.