

# **A Strategic Playground: What Are Russia's Interests in Post-9/11 Central Asia?**

Written by Chu Kah Leong

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CHU KAH LEONG, MAR 6 2019

Freire describes the facilitation of Russian interests in Central Asia as a simultaneous process of engagement and disengagement that has introduced a great degree of ambiguity in the region.[1] In practical terms, this pointed to the absence of a unified strategic goal that has cast new questions on Moscow's goals and capabilities since the post-9/11 period.[2] This has been accentuated by the rising preponderance of the United States and China in the region, replete with a diverse set of challenges that has left little room for a singular response. This essay will argue that Moscow's interests in Central Asia rest on the need to maintain its strategic relevance in an increasingly competitive and multi-polar environment. In saying so a brief outline of Deyermond's hegemonic theory will be provided to place Moscow's interests within a wider theoretical framework.

This essay will then analyse the evolution of Moscow's interests vis-à-vis its relationship with Washington since the 9/11 attacks. What is seen is a strategic appropriation of Washington's material capabilities to serve Moscow's regional interests, organized along the contours of an increasingly confrontational relationship rooted in the 2005 Colour Revolutions. This in turn necessitates a cooperative relationship with an economically emergent Beijing. Yet this point of convergence has not precluded efforts to limit and minimize Beijing's growing hegemonic influence in the region. All these observations come together to highlight Moscow's interests in regard to key Central Asian states. In this instance the case of Uzbekistan will be used to provide an analysis of Moscow's efforts in preserving its strategic space by way of a persuasion process. Put together, this essay will demonstrate that Moscow's status as a declining hegemon, through an active management of its existing body of influence, did not necessarily mean an end to its hegemonic interests in Central Asia.

### **Analysis**

For the sake of clarity a 'hegemon' in this essay will be one which, apart from demonstrating quantitative superiority in terms of material capabilities, will also include those states that exhibit qualitative capabilities. Deyermond defines this simply as a state that possesses the '...intention to dominate'.[3] In practical terms this includes states that are '...capable of maintaining the norms and practices of their own international system'.[4] In the case of Central Asia this can be seen with the regional integration projects pursued by Moscow in the post-Soviet period. This is, however, marked by a pattern of Russian material weakness in the wake of the Cold War contrasted by the globalization of Washington's hegemonic presence as well as Beijing's rising economic preponderance. With this comes a gap between intention and capabilities that at the very outset qualifies Moscow as a regional hegemon, albeit a declining one.

Deyermond describes hegemonic competition as a multi-levelled phenomenon due to the ability of certain hegemons,[5] most notably Washington, to exert hegemonic influence both at the global and regional levels. This in turn leads to the possibility of concurrent hegemonic competition and cooperation within the same continuum. In contemporary Central Asian terms, this is represented by a triangular hegemonic relationship between Moscow, Washington and Beijing. This consists, foremost, of a Moscow-Washington rivalry, followed by a complex Moscow-Beijing relationship defined concurrently by cooperation and competition. The case of Moscow in this triangular dynamic, consonant to its material weakness, rests on an active management of limited sources of hegemonic

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influence. This in turn points to a policy of material retrenchment that in hegemonic terms entails a flexible strategic goal consisting of selective acts of compromise and deterrence so as to maximize Moscow's strategic leverage at a given period.[6] This was most notably demonstrated by Moscow in regards to its hegemonic relationship with the United States.

At the very outset Washington's hegemonic presence as a security provider developed in inverse proportion to Moscow's hegemonic capabilities in the Central Asian region. Since the early 2000s Moscow's hegemonic reach has been deterred by its inability to confront a series of Islamist movements that threatened the sovereignty of several Central Asian states.[7] This constituted a security vacuum that was consonant to the broader contours of the post-9/11 War on Terror campaign. With this came a renewed set of bilateral ties between Washington and the governments of Tashkent and Bishkek in 2001 that led to the establishment of two US military bases at Khars-Khanabad and Manas. Moscow reacted to this sudden breach of hegemonic space by agreeing to a cooperative relationship with Washington, promulgated in the form of an anti-terrorism strategic partnership in 2002. This seeming act of consensus was, however, indicative of Moscow's retrenchment policy due to the conditions attached to this agreement. Chief among them was an explicit promise by Moscow to refrain from interfering with US-Central Asian bilateral ties in the foreseeable future.[8] Yet there are additional facets which have driven Moscow's hegemonic calculations in this instance.

Fundamentally, Moscow viewed Washington's presence in Central Asia as an opportunity to outsource aspects of its security responsibilities within the nexus of the War on Terror campaign.[9] This was followed by a desire to preserve Moscow's strategic relevance both at the regional and global levels. Taken together, Moscow, by acceding to Washington's military presence in Central Asia, sought to offset its deficient anti-terrorist capabilities while reinforcing its hegemonic reputation as a responsible actor in the global anti-terrorist campaign.[10] With this strategic convenience came further hopes for a renewed Russo-American relationship organized along the contours of a *Matryoshka* hegemonic framework. This in turn suggested a convergence of hegemonic interests through the delineation of a Moscow-centric sphere of influence within the broader US-led international order. Implicitly this called for a basis of political equality in which Washington would seek to consult with Moscow on matters pertaining to Central Asian interests in the future.[11] Nevertheless this was based on a flawed line of reasoning that overlooked Washington's hegemonic scope, which rested on the promotion of liberal political and economic norms. This was reflected in a series of popular movements that sought to redraw the authoritarian contours of the Central Asian region.

The onset of the Colour Revolutions challenged Moscow's hegemonic space by threatening the very existence of Moscow-friendly authoritarian regimes in its strategic periphery. This was precipitated in Central Asia by the 2005 Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan. While the broad contours of Bishkek's authoritarian structure remained largely intact,[12] this nevertheless accentuated the revolutionary – and by extension destabilizing – undertones of the movement. Consonant to this was the bloody suppression of popular protests in the Uzbek city of Andijan in 2005 that revealed the escalating character of the movement. At the heart of this crisis lay indications of Washington's tacit involvement in the mobilization of political dissent in the region. This included, among other methods, a process of subversion involving political agents tasked with '...artificially fomenting political upheaval while giving the false impression that such revolts...enjoyed popular support.'[13] To Moscow, what transpired at this point was a process of democratization that would be followed by an expansion of Western influence at the expense of Moscow's hegemonic space. The intended outcome was nothing less than a complete strategic encirclement of the Russian state.[14] As such, Putin's criticism against Washington's 'unlawful' methods in inciting 'permanent revolutions' cast a hypocritical tone to Washington's hegemonic presence in Central Asia and marked a return to zero-sum lines of traditional hegemonic competition,[15] akin to that of the Cold War period.

At the very outset what followed was a complete ejection of Washington's hegemonic presence from the region through a multi-levelled exercise of hegemonic influence. This was foremost represented at the bilateral level by a mutual consensus delineating the disruptive effects of democratic movements on regime stability. This was demonstrated by Moscow's offer of solidarity and understanding towards the Karimov regime in the wake of the 2005 Andijan massacre.[16] In a similar vein, the emphasis on consensus was applied at the multilateral level in the form of a 2012 stipulation that required all member states of the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization

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(CSTO) to seek unanimous consent in regards to the establishment of foreign military bases on their territories.[17] This in effect reinforced Moscow's hegemonic space by allowing it to regulate the hegemonic presence of other strategic rivals. Consonant to this was a multilateral collaboration with Beijing in the form of a soft balancing framework within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Specifically, this meant the use of '...non-military tools to delay, frustrate and undermine...' Washington's material preponderance.[18] In policy terms this foremost led to the 2005 Astana declaration that formally called for the scheduled removal of the Washington-led anti-terrorist coalition from Central Asia.[19] This was followed by official SCO support for Tashkent's move to revoke Washington's military basing rights in its territory. Yet this has also been contrasted by a series of competing interests that have marked the broad contours of hegemonic rivalry in Central Asia.

Deyermond maintains that any situation in which hegemonic activity is observable at more than two levels raises the possibility of simultaneous hegemonic competition and cooperation.[20] Specifically, this referred to the regional hegemonic aspirations of Washington within the umbrella of its global hegemonic identity. Yet the Moscow-Beijing hegemonic relationship also contains key facets of this dichotomous interaction. As previously shown, hegemonic cooperation between Beijing and Moscow has centred on a mutual rejection of Washington's hegemonic presence. This was followed by a concatenation of security ties for the sake of confronting the regional threats of terrorism, separatism and extremism outlined in the SCO charter.[21] Consonant to Beijing's status as a leading global economic power, this mutual relationship has been equally evident among Beijing's bilateral interests in the region. This took the form of a disparate network of bilateral trade ties with individual Central Asian states which grew from an aggregate volume of \$1 billion in 2000 to over \$50 billion in 2013.[22] While this emergent trade network served to facilitate Beijing's economic largesse – and in extension its soft power influence – in the region, it was equally valued by Central Asian political elites as a source of capital both for developmental and political rent-seeking purposes.[23]

At the same time Beijing has sought to clarify its hegemonic interests vis-à-vis Moscow by acknowledging Moscow's hard power primacy and consequently, its regional leadership.[24] In hegemonic terms what emerges are two seemingly confluent spheres of influence whereby Beijing's economic interests are facilitated in a strategic environment securitized by Moscow.[25] Yet such a clear delineation of hegemonic interests points to a twofold erosion of Moscow's hegemonic identity. The first is the newfound preponderance of Beijing as an alternative economic – and correspondingly strategic – partner in the foreign policy calculations of most if not all Central Asian states. This erodes the coercive value of Moscow's economic instruments as a key facet of hegemonic influence.[26] The second points to the hardening contours of Beijing's economic influence in the region which, unmatched by Moscow's less dynamic economy, may increasingly limit Moscow's hegemonic influence to that of its traditional hard power dominance. The result is a clear subordination of Moscow's hegemonic identity to that of a security provider in the region.[27]

In this regard Moscow has relied on facets of its hard power preponderance to offset Beijing's growing soft power influence in Central Asia. As previously shown, Moscow sought to regulate foreign military interests in the region through a multilateral arrangement that called for unanimous consent among CSTO member states in the event of stationing non-CSTO military forces in their territories.[28] While this was chiefly the result of an increasingly soured Moscow-Washington hegemonic relationship its consensual purview nonetheless extended to Beijing as well. The exclusion of Beijing as a CSTO member despite its growing hegemonic interests in Central Asia has gone far to demonstrate Moscow's intention to limit its hegemonic scope by confining it to a solely economic role. Consonant to this is a further diminishing of Beijing's influence within the SCO framework through Moscow's support for the ascension of India and Pakistan as full members.[29] At the same time Moscow has sought to exploit the deficiencies of Beijing's economic ties with its Central Asian partners by adopting what has been described by Lo as a policy of 'piggy-backing'.[30] This was most notably seen in the construction of the Atasu-Alashankou oil pipeline between Astana and Beijing in 2006. In this instance Moscow tacitly asserted its hegemonic stature vis-à-vis Astana by proposing to help fulfil Kazakh oil quotas by exporting its own oil to Beijing.[31] However, at the heart of this set of hegemonic manoeuvres is the need to manage and account for the multi-vectored interests of individual Central Asian states. It is to this that we now turn.

At the most seminal level Moscow's hegemonic interests vis-à-vis the individual Central Asian states have centred on the preservation and protection of its existing hegemonic space in the region. As previously shown, this involved the

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facilitation of a regional consensus so as to introduce a sense of uniformity in the foreign policy orientations of all Central Asian states. In practice this takes the form of a protective integration system made up of a range of benefits and patronage incentives, managed by a host of institutions such as the CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).[32] Implicitly this also meant the acknowledgement of Moscow as the nucleus of such a regional arrangement.[33] While the existence of such a body of consensus seemingly provides a semblance of predictability to the region, its multilateral unanimity has been often disputed. In this regard the case of Uzbekistan stands out for its marked reluctance as a supporting cog in the Moscow-centric regional order.

Described by Deyermond as a sub-regional actor, what is seen in this instance is an economically weak state harbouring hegemonic aspirations by virtue of its geo-strategic preponderance. This is in turn represented by Tashkent's claim as the cultural hub of Central Asia as well as its hard power advantage vis-à-vis other Central Asian states, namely the largest military in the region.[34] Consonant to this is a prevalent disinterest in Moscow's hegemonic leadership, which in practice has resulted in Tashkent's abrupt withdrawal from the CSTO first in 1999 and more recently in 2012. In this instance Tashkent's move towards a more independent foreign policy orientation has been facilitated by hegemonic rivals such as Washington, who affirmed Tashkent's geo-strategic value by identifying it as a 'pivotal state'.[35]

Confronted by a defiant Uzbek leadership and the window of opportunity this has provided for the facilitation of rival hegemonic interests, Moscow has moved to align its hegemonic interests vis-à-vis Tashkent through a persuasion process. At the broadest level this rested on a convergence of normative beliefs – namely state sovereignty and stability – that proved a useful contrast against Western criticisms in instances such as the bloody aftermath of the 2005 Andijan incident.[36] The latter led to a renewed affirmation of mutual support through the 2005 Treaty of Allied Relations, which stipulated that an attack on either party would be treated as an aggression against the other.[37] However at the heart of this process is an acknowledgement of Tashkent's search for political space within the Moscow-led regional order. In this regard what transpires is a policy of moderation in which Moscow has refrained from openly challenging Tashkent's foreign policy preferences by insisting on its adherence to Moscow-centric multilateral frameworks such as the CSTO.[38] Moscow in so doing sought to dispel notions that its bid for regional cohesion would be incomplete – and in extension imperfect – without Tashkent's involvement.[39] Within this continuum Moscow has turned to existing economic resources as a means of keeping Tashkent within its hegemonic orbit. Indeed, Moscow's move to forego ninety-five percent of Tashkent's outstanding debts in March 2016 points to the broad strands of economic leverage[40] that has largely maintained Tashkent's distant – but nevertheless existent – allegiance to Moscow's hegemonic sphere.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that Moscow's interests lie in preserving its strategic primacy through the exercise of its hegemonic influence in post-9/11 Central Asia. Contrary to simplistic assumptions, however, this objective has taken on a multifaceted undertone that in practice has led to a skilful application of existing resources for the maximization of Moscow's position vis-à-vis involved actors in the region. While Moscow appeared to assent to Washington's newfound military preponderance in the wake of the post-9/11 period, this represented a calculated move to shift facets of Moscow's security responsibilities to the global hegemon. The divergent strands in the Russo-American relationship were deepened by the Colour Revolutions and compelled Moscow to observe a policy of deterrence through the mobilization of a regional consensus aimed at the complete ejection of Washington's physical presence in the region. This was followed by a cooperative relationship with an economically emergent Beijing based on convergent normative beliefs through the SCO framework. This has not precluded Moscow from containing Beijing's growing economic largesse in the region through a concatenation of policies aimed at diluting Beijing's hegemonic influence both at the bilateral and multilateral levels. At the core of these interactions is the need to maintain a cohesive regional model that provides salience for Moscow's hegemonic identity. In this regard the case of Uzbekistan has been presented as a challenge to the Moscow-centric regional status quo. Moscow has responded by persuading Tashkent of the merits of continued involvement in the existing hegemonic fabric, while taking care not to openly challenge Tashkent's policy preferences. Taken together, this essay has provided the tools for debating the multifaceted contours of Moscow's interests in an increasingly diverse and competitive region. It is time for the debate to move beyond the broad lines of great power competition to the more crucial debate on the continued

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sustainability of authoritarianism in the region.

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## **Notes**

[1] Freire, (2009), 129.

[2] Cooley, (2012), 51.

[3] Deyermond, (2009), 153.

[4] Williams, Goldstein and Shafritz (eds.), (1994), 494.

[5] Deyermond, 151.

[6] Gilpin, (1984), 193.

[7] Buszynski, (2005), 548.

[8] Ibid, 548.

[9] Kim and Indeo, (2013), 284.

[10] Ibid, 548.

[11] Cooley, 54.

[12] Lewis, (2010), 214.

[13] Beachain, (2010), 209.

[14] Wilson, (2009), 370.

[15] Ibid, 372.

[16] Beehner, "Documenting Andijan", <http://www.cfr.org/uzbekistan/documenting-andijan/p10984>

[17] Cooley, 58.

[18] Ferguson, 202.

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[19] Ibid, 211.

[20] Deyermond, 159.

[21] Aris, (2009), 158.

[22] Cooley, "China's Changing Role in Central Asia and Implications for US Policy: From Trading Partner to Collective Goods Provider", [http://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Cooley%20Testimony\\_3.18.15.pdf](http://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Cooley%20Testimony_3.18.15.pdf)

[23] Starr and Cornell (eds.), (2014), 169.

[24] Ibid, 167.

[25] Ibid, 171.

[26] Lo, (2008), 111.

[27] Kotkin, (2009), 136.

[28] Cooley, 58.

[29] Asia Times, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization Turns Pan Asian", <http://www.atimes.com/article/shanghai-cooperation-organization-turns-pan-asian/>

[30] Lo, 100.

[31] Ibid, 100.

[32] Malashenko, (2013), 44.

[33] Ibid, 44.

[34] Deyermond, 164.

[35] Ibid, 163.

[36] Fumagalli, (2007), 263.

[37] Ibid, 264.

[38] Malashenko, 209.

[39] Ibid, 211.

[40] Ramani, "The Implications of Tightening Russia-Uzbekistan Ties", <http://thediplomat.com/2016/05/the-implications-of-tightening-russia-uzbekistan-ties/>

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