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Who will fill the Russian power vacuum in Eurasia?

For many Eurasian countries, their old dependency on Russia has become a risk factor. The countries are now interested in diversifying their partners

In a text published on her ministry's website to mark German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock's trip to Central Asia at the beginning of November, one could read: ‘no later than the start of Russia's war against Ukraine, the states of Central Asia have found themselves caught between many stools, in danger of being instrumentalised by Russia, on the one hand, and China, on the other.’

For the states of the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia, Russia's war against Ukraine is changing the regional balance of power. Russia's influence is declining while China's influence is growing, and new players like Turkey are becoming increasingly relevant. What does this mean for Germany and the EU? How can the resulting power vacuum be filled and what can they offer these countries in the context of their own values-based foreign policies?

Since the start of the war in Ukraine, the region has gotten more attention. Also, because the crises are piling up. In the summer and autumn, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan flared up and renewed border skirmishes between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan took place. In January, a revolt in Kazakhstan was brutally suppressed.

In terms of security policy, these events relate not only to the weakening of Russia. The long-standing demarcation problems along the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border, socioeconomic inequality in Kazakhstan and the negative consequences for the region of the withdrawal from Afghanistan have been acute for some time. But the intensity and duration of these crises, as well as the chances of their containment, are closely related to the reduction of the power Russia projects, politically, economically and militarily.

Old dependencies and regional security

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia continued to act as the guarantor of regional security for the local regimes in Central Asia and partly in the Caucasus (Armenia): on the one hand, by organising the Collective Security Treaty (CSTO) and maintaining military bases in the region (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Armenia) and, on the other hand, by bilaterally balancing out military-technical cooperation.

It is true that Russia continues to operate military bases in Armenia and Central Asia even after the start of the war in Ukraine. At the same time, regulating the access of Central Asian guest workers to the Russian labour market is an important lever for influencing its neighbouring countries. But this combination of instruments is increasingly losing its effectiveness in view of the comprehensive sanctions that are slowly leaving their mark on the Russian economy.

Economic cooperation with Russia has lost its long-term attraction.

Russia's neighbours are already suffering collateral damage from the country's economic downturn. Added to this are mobility restrictions and disruptions to supply chains resulting from the pandemic. Remittances from migrants working in Russia, which are extremely important for the economies of many Central Asian countries and Armenia, are correspondingly lower. The migration movement is currently in the opposite direction: after the decision on partial mobilisation in Russia, hundreds of thousands immigrated to Central Asia and the South Caucasus.

In the future, Russia will have fewer resources to support neighbouring regions economically. Old dependencies are becoming a risk factor. Economic cooperation with Russia has lost its long-term attraction. But this context does not automatically make the West an attractive alternative partner for the South Caucasus and Central Asia. The unprecedented sanctions regime and Russia’s disengagement are making the countries of the region aware of the risks that cooperation with the West can entail.

New players emerge

In comparison, China appears a much more attractive partner. Chinese economic influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus has been growing

for years through infrastructure investments and the *Belt and Road Initiative*. A look at the trade statistics reveals a constant shift in trade flows. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia and, a distant second, the EU, have been the region's most important trading partners. However, over the past decade, the EU's share of the trade volume of countries in the region has fallen everywhere (except Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan), most notably in Armenia, Georgia and Kazakhstan.

By contrast, China's share of trade volume has grown across the region, including Russia. Despite its near-total absorption in Ukraine and relative loss of influence, Russia nonetheless remains a significant player in the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia regions. For Germany and the EU, the Russian invasion of Ukraine may herald a new epoch, but for the states in the region, it does not change their systems of regional and international coordinates as profoundly as it does in Europe. Russia and China remain important power-holders. At the same time, new players like Iran and Turkey are gaining in importance, with their respective military-technical partners in Central Asia – Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

The local rulers are striving to secure their rule, to preserve the territorial integrity of their states and to generate security and prosperity for their respective countries.

During the Karabakh war in the summer 2020, Turkey already profiled itself as a key military player and arms supplier. His balancing position between Kyiv and Moscow makes President Recep Erdoğan a potential mediator in the war in Ukraine. However, Turkey and Iran are purely transactional actors, seeking to play the relative instability in the region to achieve situational – economic or security – gains. Against this background, Turkey is strikingly one of the countries (alongside China and India) that has increased its trade volume with Russia the most in the course of the war.

The message is clear: any perception of a region as 'lying between the stools' is an outdated view of the regional security order inspired by now-extinct geopolitical paradigms. The local rulers are striving to secure their rule, to preserve the territorial integrity of their states, to continue to pursue their distinctively transactional style of foreign policy and, ultimately and above all, to generate security and prosperity for their respective countries. They are interested in diversifying their foreign and economic policy partners (in the spirit of risk spreading). In this context, the EU is just one player among many. These countries' foreign policy orientation is therefore primarily not a question of conviction - according

to the motto: 'join us because we have the better system' – but more the recognition of security policy and economic realities.

Therefore, strategically and in line with its own values, the EU needs to try to expand its influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus on the realistic premises that Russia will remain a major player, China will continue to gain influence, and new players like Turkey will increasingly want to have a say.

Greater account must be taken of Central Asian countries' own perspectives. In most cases, the starting point here will be their desire to stabilise their power.

The goal, therefore, cannot be to force Russia and China out of Central Asia or the South Caucasus. The EU totally lacks the means to do that, unable as they are to make good the missing elements of internal and external security.

Should, however, Germany and the EU nonetheless succeed in helping these states emerge from the current geopolitical and economic crisis with greater stability, a great deal will already have been achieved. For this, greater account must be taken of these countries' own perspectives. In most cases, the starting point here will be their desire to stabilise their power.

Attention should be paid in concrete, small-scale economic cooperation situations, to the fulfilment of production standards, employee and human rights and environmental protection. These will successively have more positive effects than the unrealistically demanding attitudes that marked the German-Russian modernisation partnership.

By recognising and understanding what motivates the Central Asian and South Caucasian partners, one could still do something that would be in the interest of Germany and Europe – namely, practising pragmatic realism (Heiko Maas). What the former foreign minister said only at the very end of his term of office could contribute to a stronger role for Germany in the short to medium term. Because this goes hand in hand with a moderation of one's own claims: it is not all about a global battle of good against evil, of democracies against autocracies, but rather about taking action to the economic advantage of both sides, with a simultaneously stabilising effect in a fragile region. This is not self-deflating, but a timely return to skills that have worked in international cooperation in the past and which we have more or less sovereignly at our disposal.

This may not seem like much to some, given the current thrust for transformation in western capitals, but it can potentially do more to affect the necessary stabilisation in the arc of conflict from the Southern Caucasus to the Pamir mountains than any crude, geopolitical forcing of countries into take-it-or-leave-it situations, with no acknowledgment of the institutional, geographic, ethnic and economic constraints to which states such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan or Armenia are subject.

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