


RUSSIA IN CENTRAL ASIA AND THE CAUCASUS


Russia took steps to expand and solidify its spheres of influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus to secure its dominance in the region while continuing to increase its military influence globally. Russia continues to project itself as an effective actor against terrorism in an effort to gain global legitimacy. It has positioned itself to play a larger role in anti-terrorist operations in Afghanistan, possibly in order to take advantage of the planned U.S. withdrawal by the end of January 2017. Russian President Vladimir Putin attempted to maintain control of the volatile North Caucasus region of Russia by appointing strongman Ramzan Kadyrov as leader of Chechnya until September 2016 as clashes between Russian security forces and anti-Russian militants continued. Russia also played a leading role in deescalating the conflict in the South Caucasus as two of its regional partners, Armenia and Azerbaijan, renewed hostilities over the long-disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia continues to arm both sides of the conflict, and its ally Armenia retains the ability to escalate the conflict. Russia's partnership with Iran, which emerged primarily as a result of cooperation in support of the Assad regime in Syria, has intensified through efforts to expand bilateral cooperation in and around the Caspian Sea. Protests erupted across Russia's primary regional partner Kazakhstan in response to new laws on land privatization, prompting the government of Kazakhstan to label the movements as an attempted coup and to crack down on dissent. Deadly clashes took place between unidentified militants and security officials in the western town of Aqtobe in Kazakhstan. Russia expressed confidence in Kazakh authorities' ability to maintain control of the crisis and indicated that it would not get involved at the present time despite its high sensitivity to instability on its southern border and in its partner regimes.




Iran

Russia expanded its emerging partnership with Iran in order to take advantage of economic and political opportunities for the two countries in the Caspian Sea region.


 07 APR: The Russian Foreign Minister met the Iranian and Azeri Foreign Ministers to discuss security issues and a proposed “North-South” Transportation corridor along the western coast of the Caspian Sea.


 05-07 APR: A military conference attended by Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Iran began in Saint Petersburg to discuss maritime security in the Caspian Sea region.


 13 APR: Russia, Armenia, Georgia, and Iran signed a memorandum of understanding in the energy sector and agreed to a roadmap for preparing joint energy projects.


Afghanistan


Russia positioned itself to increase its influence in Afghanistan in the event of a U.S. drawdown by the end of January 2017, potentially fashioning itself as a more effective actor in the global war on terror. Russia postured for increased engagement in Afghanistan in response to the resurgence of the Taliban and the increased presence of ISIS.

 19 APR: Russian Special Envoy for Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov warned that ISIS’s Wilayat Khorasan is trying to expand into Central Asia and Russia, and that NATO forces were not successfully neutralizing ISIS’s capabilities in the region. He further claimed that over 10,000 militants loyal to ISIS were operating in Afghanistan and are “definitely prepared” for hostility in Central Asia and Russia.

 25 APR: The Russian Ambassador to Afghanistan claimed that Russia does not “provide any assistance to the Taliban” and that Russia has “no hidden agenda in Afghanistan.” These statements contradict previous Russian claims that there have been “limited contacts” with Taliban officials.

 28 APR: Afghanistan and Russia agreed to form a combined military-technical cooperation committee in order to jointly combat terrorism.


 24 MAY: The Russian Ambassador to NATO Alexander Grushko claimed that the security situation in Afghanistan is deteriorating, particularly in regions “bordering our allies in the Collective Security Organization.”


 03 JUN: The Russian Foreign Ministry called on Afghanistan’s opposition to distance itself from ISIS and Al-Qaeda. A senior Russian official expressed doubt about the effectiveness of donations from western countries to Afghanistan in the lead up to the Donors Conference on Afghanistan in October. He noted that Russia would continue its bilateral trade with Afghanistan “without involving other institutions.”


Russia/North Caucasus


Russia continued to attempt to control the insurgency in the North Caucasus. President Vladimir Putin appointed strongman Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov as the acting leader of Chechnya until


September 2016, despite his term ending in April. The strongly pro-Russia Kadyrov has maintained authoritarian control over Chechnya since his appointment in 2007. Russia justifies its intervention in Syria by citing the potential threat of radical fighters currently in Syria relocating to the North Caucasus. Several Islamist and militant groups operate in the wider region, including the ISIS affiliate Wilayat Qawqaz, which continued to destabilize the North Caucasus. Russian security forces clashed repeatedly with militants in the consistently unstable territories of Dagestan in southern Russia.


 11 MAR: A possible VBIED exploded near a mosque in the city of Nazran and injured four individuals. Officials were unable to identify the perpetrators of the attack.


 23 MAR: Four ships in Russia’s Caspian Flotilla conducted targeted acquisition exercises in coordination with “Podsolnukh” over-the-horizon radar systems based in Dagestan.


 25 MAR: President Putin appointed Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, whose term was to end on April 05, as the acting leader of Chechnya until September 2016 elections.


 11 APR: Four unidentified suicide bombers were reportedly killed in an attack on a police station in Novoselitsky, east of the Russian city of Stavropol.


 15 APR: Unknown assailants opened fire at a police checkpoint in the Russian province of Dagestan, wounding two officers.


 06 MAY: Russia’s Federal Security Service (FSB) reportedly thwarted a planned terror attack in Krasnoyarsk and claimed to have arrested “several people” from Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.


 09 MAY: Six Russian police officers were wounded in a clash with unidentified militants near a checkpoint on the outskirts of Grozny, Chechnya.


 14 MAY: Nine Russian police officers were wounded and one killed while storming a house occupied by unidentified militants in Derbent, Dagestan.


 21 MAY: The FSB reportedly arrested four suspects linked to ISIS in a raid in the northern Caucasus region of Ingushetia.

 24 MAY: Unidentified gunmen shelled a transmission tower in the Shamil District of Russia’s North Caucasus region of Dagestan and fired on police and engineers when they arrived to inspect the damage.

 24 MAY: Five gunmen from a group “connected with the Islamic State” who had allegedly formed a cell in Ingushetia were detained by Russian security forces.








 24-26 MAY: The International Conference of High Representatives for Security Issues was held in Chechnya and attended by more than 75 countries. Russia’s representatives called for increased intelligence sharing to monitor terrorists returning from conflict zones and warned that the internet is being used to “destabilize” and “undermine the national sovereignty” globally.

 29 MAY: Russian Security forces reportedly killed the leader of the militant “Derbent Group,” which reportedly had ties to terrorist activity in Derbent.

 03 JUN: The head of the Russian Republic of Ingushetia claimed that local security forces had killed five members of underground militant groups in the Nazran district.








South Caucasus


Russia maintained its position in the South Caucasus as a regional mediator and a foil against NATO-member Turkey. Russia supported global efforts to de-escalate hostilities as its ally Armenia and trade partner Azerbaijan clashed over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia had acted as both a mediator and a supplier of arms to both countries since the signing of the ceasefire agreement in 1994, which ended the Nagorno-Karabakh War and effectively froze the conflict. Russia's strategic interest is best served by maintaining this frozen status due to the high cost of escalation. Armenia's ongoing dependence on Russia's security guarantee allows Russia to maintain several thousand troops, as well as armor, artillery, several fighters and the S-300 air defense system, on Armenian territory and on Turkey's eastern border. Continuation of the frozen conflict also forces Turkey to maintain diplomatic and military support for its ally Azerbaijan, which requires borrowing resources against managing its domestic situation and NATO commitments. The aggravation of Turkey lies within a greater strategy to expose NATO weaknesses by spreading Turkish resources to multiple theaters in an effort to destabilize President Erdogan's government. A significant escalation of this conflict that would lead to its resolution would result in Russia losing this leverage and open a corridor of instability that would connect Russia's Northern Caucasus region with the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East.


-  03 MAR: A Russian Deputy Prime Minister made an unscheduled visit to Azerbaijan to reiterate its obligation to pay for \$4 billion in weapons purchased from Moscow in recent years following Azerbaijan's indication that it may not be able to make promised payments.
-  10 MAR: President Putin met the President of Armenia in Moscow to discuss security, trade, energy cooperation, and the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.
-  01-05, APR: Heavy clashes between Azeri and Armenian forces occurred along the borders of the contested Nagorno-Karabakh enclave. The leaders of the OSCE, including the U.S., France, and Russia urged a cessation in hostilities.
-  11 APR: A Russian Deputy Prime Minister reiterated Russia's position that it will continue to sell arms to warring neighbors Armenia and Azerbaijan in order to deter further escalation of the conflict.
-  05, 16 MAY: The Armenian government approved a draft law which, if passed, would recognize the independence of the Armenian-separatist enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. The Armenian government later rejected further discussion of the bill.
-  16 MAY: The Presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan met with the U.S. Secretary of State, the French Foreign Minister, and the Russian Foreign Minister in Vienna to discuss the recent surge in violence in Nagorno-Karabakh. The leaders agreed to increase the presence of the OSCE monitoring mission in the region and hold future talks on the future of the contested region.
-  24-26 MAY: Special police forces from the member states of the Collective Security Treaty Organization concluded the training exercise "Cobalt-2016" in Armenia. The President of Armenia called for the CTSO to establish the "legal and practical fundamentals" for expanding cooperative anti-terrorist measures within the CSTO.


Kazakhstan

Russia monitored destabilizing events in its close regional partner Kazakhstan. Russia maintains a particularly close relationship with Kazakhstan, its main ally in Central Asia, in an effort to preserve a group of pro-Russia countries in the region. Kazakhstan is a supporter of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Kazakh authorities conducted a crackdown on a protest movement against an unpopular law on land privatization. Kazakh authorities accused the imprisoned Kazakh businessman Toqtar Toleshov of intending to use the protest movement to orchestrate a coup, and detained multiple senior members of the Kazakh government who allegedly supported his plans. The short-lived protest movement was likely also motivated by high levels of corruption within and dissatisfaction with the current regime of President Nazarbaev. Several clashes occurred in the western town of Aqtobe, 60 miles from the Russian border, in western Kazakhstan between Kazakh security forces and unidentified militants between June 05-08. Russia announced that it did not intend to increase troop strength near the Russia-Kazakhstan border following the clashes.

-  01, 05 MAY: President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbaev cited the current crisis in Ukraine as a potential outcome of national disunity in face of a series of protests against the potential privatization of land. President Nazarbaev later postponed implementation of the plan.
-  08-09 MAY: President Nazarbaev attended Victory Day celebrations in Moscow where he praised the state of Russia-Kazakh relations.
-  16 MAY: A Kazakh lawyer filed a lawsuit against the Russian-Kazakh channel "First Channel-Eurasia" for claiming that protest movements against land privatization had been organized by "unidentified individuals" in a "fifth column."
-  21 MAY: Authorities arrested hundreds across Kazakhstan in response to widespread public protests against a new land privatization law.
-  25 MAY, 06 JUN: The General Prosecutor's Office of Kazakhstan labeled the protests against a land-privatization law as an "attempted coup." Kazakh authorities claimed that Toqtar Toleshov, a prominent businessman who had been detained on different charges, had funded the protesters and intended to launch a coup. Multiple Kazakh officials with alleged ties to the businessman were arrested.
-  31 MAY: President Putin met with other members of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council in Astana to discuss economic and trade policy. The leaders agreed to begin negotiations on a trade deal with China.
-  05-08 JUN: Multiple clashes between unidentified militants and security forces occurred in the town of Aqtobe. At least 20 people were killed. President Nazarbaev announced the start of a counterterrorism operation in the region and claimed that the militants had "received instructions from abroad." Russian officials expressed confidence in Kazakh authorities and claimed that there was not any reason to increase troop strength near the Kazakh border.


 08 JUN: Russian Minister of Defense Shoigu arrived in Astana to attend a conference of the defense ministers of all members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to discuss military cooperation in the face of the threats of “terrorism, extremism, and separatism” and mutual air defense. Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu met with the Minister of Defense of Kazakhstan to discuss mutual air-defense systems.


 08 JUN: President Nazarbaev claimed that the gunmen who attacked Kazakh security forces in Aqtobe received instructions from abroad and warned that “signs have emerged” of a potential “color revolution,” similar to the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, in Kazakhstan.


 08 JUN: Unknown gunmen opened fire on security guards near a children’s camp near Aqtobe.


Other Countries


Russian military and security forces continued their outreach to Tajikistan and Turkmenistan in what may be an effort to expand Russian influence in the region. These efforts could also lay the groundwork for increased presence near the border with Afghanistan. The Russian backed Eurasian Union and Shanghai Cooperation Organization met to discuss improving economic coordination.


 10-16 MAR: 2,000 Russian soldiers supported by Russian fixed and rotary wing aircraft and ground vehicles began drills with 50,000 Tajik soldiers in Tajikistan.


 06 APR: A Russian Deputy Foreign Minister met with his Tajik counterpart to discuss counter-terrorism efforts, particularly how to “effectively repel terrorist and criminal threats emanating from Afghanistan.”


 20 MAY: Russian Prime Minister Dmitriy Medvedev met with the prime ministers of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan in Yerevan, Armenia at a regular session of the Inter-Governmental Council of the Eurasian Economic Union. The leaders discussed the creation of a common market for oil products.

 23 MAY: Russia’s Interior Minister claimed that he and his Tajik counterpart agreed that Russia and Tajikistan should expand their cooperation in the war on drugs.

 23-24 MAY: Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, and the foreign ministers of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan attended a meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Tashkent. The leaders discussed the possibility of India and Pakistan joining the organization, agreed to an economic development plan for the organization, and confirmed that they would develop and implement “measures for the joint fight against all forms of terrorism, separatism, and extremism.”

 07-10 JUN: Russian paratroopers visited Tajikistan to discuss military cooperation and plan joint military exercises with the Tajik military.

 08 JUN: The Russian Minister of Defense arrived in Turkmenistan to meet with the President of Turkmenistan and senior military leaders to discuss expanding military and military technical ties.

 09 JUN: Shoigu met with the President of Turkmenistan in Ashgabat and promised that Russia would provide Turkmenstan’s armed forces with military equipment, training, and support in Caspian Sea operations.