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Russia in Central Asia: Interests and Influences

Russia's predominant interest in Central Asia is geopolitics, a theme that is recurrent throughout since the Tsarist conquest. The Central Asian Republics (CARs) are like Russia's 'soft underbelly'; and thus, any destabilizing factor there is considered by Russia as a threat to its own security. Secondly, Russia's contemporary ambition of establishing itself as a 'pole' in a multi-polar world could not be fulfilled without restoring influence over the CARs. Thirdly, the CARs are landlocked, and therefore have traditionally depended on Russia for trade and transit.

Russia's influence over CARs is mainly through its multilateral organizations, like the CIS, CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union. It has also developed significant bilateral relations with each of the CARs. Kazakhstan enjoys very close relations with Russia because of the geopolitical reasons. However, it also balances relationship with other major powers through what is called the 'multi-vector' foreign policy. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are economically and strategically dependent on Russia, and host most of its military presence in the region. Russian-Uzbek relations have followed a zig-zag pattern since independence. Ties with Turkmenistan are minimal due to its status as a neutral state. The Paper throws light on Russia's interests in Central Asia, and the role it plays in the regional geopolitics. It discusses Russia's relations with each of the CARs, and its interplay with other actors like China, USA and India.