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## *Russia's nuclear power expansion: recent developments in Central Asia*

The last two years have seen an increased activity in the development of the nuclear energy sector in Central Asian states. These nuclear advancement endeavours have been actively supported by the Russian Federation. In October 2018, Moscow and Tashkent concluded an agreement on the first Uzbek nuclear power plant (NPP), to be built by Rosatom, Russia's state-owned atomic energy corporation and worlds' principal supplier of nuclear reactors. The Uzbek NPP will be the only nuclear power producer in Central Asia since nuclear reactors in Kazakhstan were shut down in late 1990s. Kazakhstan, where the Soviet Union conducted 456 nuclear tests in the period between 1949 and 1989, and which has since been apprehensive towards the idea of renewing the nuclear power industry, is also now considering constructing an NPP with Russia's assistance. Furthermore, following President Vladimir Putin's official visit to Bishkek in March 2019, an agreement between a Kyrgyz and a Russian company was signed on front-end operations, i.e. uranium mining and enrichment, in Kyrgyzstan, to be funded by Russia. Any geological studies or development of radioactive elements were however banned in June after a series of public protests calling to prohibit uranium development in the country. Tajikistan, which possesses some uranium deposits, signed an agreement with Russia on cooperation on the peaceful uses of nuclear energy in 2017. Yet, no further agreements specifically related to the deposits have been made. Turkmenistan, which holds the world's fourth-largest gas reserves, does not possess any known uranium deposits or have a proclivity for exploring nuclear energy options.

This heightened activity in boosting the region's nuclear energy sector poses several questions: What are Moscow's goals in supporting and promoting nuclear developments in Central Asia? What impact will these developments have on Central Asian republics given Russia's position as an important player in the region, but also taking into account the interests of other global powers such as China and U.S.? What would be the most beneficial course of action Central Asian states could take in this position?

The world's leading supplier of nuclear reactors, Russia has been strengthening its presence in overseas markets and prevailing in nuclear power plant construction and servicing work. According to Rostam's 2017 annual report, the international revenue of the corporation equalled \$6.1 billion. Out of this amount, \$2.5 billion resulted from NPP construction work while all of Rosatom's overseas orders amount to \$133 billion. Russia has begun NPP construction in China, Belarus, India, Bangladesh, and Turkey and, apart from Uzbekistan, has signed contracts with Egypt, Armenia, Iran, and India and China for more units to be built there. Additionally, it has conducted substantial work on contracts with Finland and Hungary. More documents that provide a basis for potential future negotiations have been signed with Algeria, Bolivia, Cambodia, Cuba, Ghana, Nigeria, Paraguay, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, Zambia, and Tajikistan.<sup>1</sup> In this light, it seems logical that Russia would actively support, or even push for, any undertakings in the nuclear energy field in the region that it has close relations and historical connections with. This would strengthen Russia's position as a global leader even further.

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<sup>1</sup> Nevine Schepers, "Russia's Nuclear Energy Exports: Status, Prospects and Implications" in *Non-Proliferation and Disarmament Papers*, No. 61, February 2019, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), [https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-02/eunpdc\\_no\\_61\\_final.pdf](https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-02/eunpdc_no_61_final.pdf)

Russia's current stature and growth as a determined nuclear service provider, however, is worrisome to some Western commentators who believe that Rosatom's surge could potentially lead to the descent of global nuclear governance standards and increase in Russia's geopolitical power and influence.<sup>2</sup> Almost 30 years after the break-up of the Soviet Union, Russia continues to have a strong political and economic presence in Central Asia. Russia is notably involved in building the security architecture of the region through its leading roles in regional security organizations, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (CSO). Moscow aims to be the number one security provider through furnishing the region with the Russian military technology and equipment at lower prices, organizing joint military exercise, and stationing military bases in two Central Asian states – Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.<sup>3</sup> In terms of economic impact, two Central Asian republics – Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan – belong to Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) that also has Armenia and Belarus as its members. Moreover, Russia is the biggest migration hub for labor migrants from post-Soviet republics, especially from Central Asian countries. In 2018, out of the \$13.99 billion of remittances wired from Russia to former Soviet republics, almost 69 percent was sent to Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, China has started outrunning Russia in the region on trade, investment, and infrastructure development. The United States, another important player, continues to play a significant role in regional security and the humanitarian sector in Central Asia despite its shrinking strategic presence there. Moreover, the U.S. influence in the energy field, particularly in Kazakhstan, where American companies are the biggest shareholders in the country's oil and gas sector, remains strong.<sup>5</sup>

This research project aims to analyse the effect the recent nuclear power evolvement in Central Asia will have on the region at this angle of the great power competition. The project also seeks to examine ways forward for the involved Central Asian republics in this context.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Fabio Indeo, "The Role of Russia in the Central Asian Security Architecture" in *The OSCE Academy Policy Brief Series*, Brief #48, June 2018, [http://www.osce-academy.net/upload/file/PB48The\\_Role\\_of\\_Russia\\_in\\_the\\_Central\\_Asian\\_Security\\_Architecture.pdf](http://www.osce-academy.net/upload/file/PB48The_Role_of_Russia_in_the_Central_Asian_Security_Architecture.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Sam Bhutia, "Russian Remittances to Central Asia Rise Again", 23 May 2019, Eurasianet, <https://eurasianet.org/russian-remittances-to-central-asia-rise-again>

<sup>5</sup> Zhao Huasheng, "Is Russia's Strategic Presence in Central Asia on the Decline?" in *Bishkek Project*, accessed on 1 July 2019, <https://bishkekproject.com/memos/27>