

Central Asia: Great Power Games

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Introduction

The central Asian countries are Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, were part of Soviet Union. Ever since the disintegration of USSR, these countries attracted attention of all major powers of the contemporary times, mainly USA, China. This region of the continents started interacting politically, some five hundred years ago, Eurasia (Central Asia in the present context) has been the centre of world power. In different ways, at different times, the peoples inhabiting Eurasia - though mostly those from its Western European periphery - penetrated and dominated the world's other regions as individual Eurasian states attained the special status and enjoyed the privileges of being the world's premier powers.

The last decade of the twentieth century has witnessed a tectonic shift in world affairs. The collapse of the Soviet Union was assumed to be the end of world dominance by the Eurasian countries. Eurasia, however, retains its geopolitical importance. Not only is its western periphery Europe still the location of much of the world's political and economic power, but its eastern region Asia has lately become a vital centre of economic growth and rising political influence.

Eurasia is thus the chessboard on which the struggle for global primacy continues to be played, and that struggle involves geo-strategy - the strategic management of geopolitical interests (Mikhail Konarovsky, 1994)¹. It is noteworthy that as recently as 1940 two aspirants to global power, Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin agreed explicitly (in the secret negotiations of November of that year) that Eurasia should be brought under their control if they really want to dominate and rule over the world. Each shared the assumption that Eurasia is the centre of the world and that he who controls Eurasia controls the world. Even today, the same phraseology applies to Eurasian landmass. It is in this context this paper has moulded to focus on the Great power game in Central Asia and its evolving implications both externally and internally².

U.S. interests in Central Asia

Until 1994, the U.S. seemed not to be very interested in Central Asia. Soon after the Central Asian states gained their independence, American specialists predicted that the U.S. involvement in the region would be 'relatively modest' and advised that the U.S. be restrained in its relations with Central Asia. However, the growing conflict between the North and the South, a phenomenon, which might finally take the form of a conflict between the West and the Muslim world, had eventually changed Washington's view of the region.

U.S. Policy Prior to September 11 Events

One of the major factors for the change in the U.S. foreign policy toward Central Asia had been the dynamism of the Central Asian states, which started quickly establishing formal ties with the world. In order to revive their economies, they intended to build up relations not only with their southern neighbours and the Pacific Rim, but also with the West. By the mid-1990s, the U.S. became concerned that these newly independent states might become involved in a regional arms race, given Kazakhstan's possession of nuclear weapons and

strategically important resources such as uranium in others. There was also fear of nuclear instability that could emerge if Iran or Pakistan would gain access to the Central Asian uranium mines.

U.S. Policy in the Early 1990s

The U.S. supported the Gorbachev's administration as the legitimate government of the USSR until the declaration of Russia's independence and the August 1991 coup. After these events, the U.S. basically was free to make its decisions as to who legally represented the peoples of the Soviet republics. The U.S. took a careful approach of recognizing the republics' declarations of independence but continuing to require the Soviet government to abide by the terms of international agreements and create conditions for a peaceful devolution of authority.

The U.S. Secretary of State James Baker III met with the leaders of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in Almaty on 21 December 1991. During this meeting, the end of the USSR was formally declared and the U.S. intentions and capabilities with this regard were stated. After the meeting, Baker sent the Central Asian presidents a letter stating the major diplomatic points. The U.S. stated that diplomatic recognition was pending upon observance of human rights, adoption of market-oriented economic reforms, and establishment of democratic institutions. Within a short period, the U.S. recognized Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as independent post-Soviet states. Washington did not establish diplomatic relations with Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan until they would demonstrate their commitment to democratic values, human rights, market-economy and arms control. However, due to several factors, the U.S. had to quickly recognize all of the Central Asian states. First, other states expressed their disagreement with their being singled out. Second, the U.S. sympathized with the Russian population that seemed to be trapped in these new countries. Finally, and most importantly, the U.S. was extremely concerned about the threat posed by Iran and Pakistan to Central Asian states. Thus, by mid-spring 1992, the U.S. had consulates in all of the Central Asian republics, which soon turned into embassies. The next step was the U.S. shift from moral and ideological considerations to security issues. The presence of nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, and strategic bombers in Kazakhstan, as well as nuclear weapons technology in some of the other Central Asian states were seen as threats to America's security interests (Gregory Gleason, 1997)³. The U.S. was also concerned that these states or some independent actors within these states could provide the weapons of mass destruction or technology related to these weapons to third parties, especially given political, ethnic and religious links with neighbouring states in the West Asia and Middle East. There was also fear that Central Asians could be indoctrinated by revolutionary ideas of terrorist organizations in Middle East or such states as Libya and Iraq was represented by a red dot on the green area, symbolizing the capital of the new Islamic mega state (Robbins and Robinson, 1992)⁴. Many highly educated national security specialists believed that unless the West undertook preventive measures to contain Iran, it would spread Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia and Middle East.

Russia and Central Asia

In the early days of their independence, the leaders of the Central Asian states firmly believed that maintaining good relations with Russia was at top of their priorities list. Gregory Gleason, in his book *The Central Asian States: Discoveries of Independence*, provided statements made by the Central Asian leaders in this regard in December 1990. President Akaev of Kyrgyzstan stated: "No matter what new ties we establish in the West

and East, no matter how great our urge to merge into eastern, western, or worldwide economic community, our ties with Russia and our friendship and cooperation with the Russian people will always be special. We will give this priority. President Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan said: “We attach the highest significance to ties with Russia. And this is understandable. For many years we lived side by side. We have many common tasks which we have to solve”. Turkmenistan’s Deputy Prime Minister Nazar Suyunov said that Russia would remain Turkmenistan’s main economic partner. Khalykberdy Ataev, Foreign Minister of Turkmenistan, stated that Turkmenistan should maintain special relations with Russia.

Central Asia is important for Russia from an economic perspective. Yet it is even more important for military and security reasons. There are three main explanations for such importance. First, the Central Asian states present the first defensive line for Russia against possible foreign invasion initiated outside of the CIS. Second, Russia views Central Asia as a buffer zone between itself and Iran, Afghanistan and partly China. Third, Russia is concerned about the effects of independence of the Central Asian countries on Russian minorities⁵. It is worried that strong nationalist movements in the region would further encourage Russia’s dissatisfied Russian minorities to seek independence.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia continued to play a ‘special role’ in Central Asia due to geographical, demographic, economic and military factors. Moscow adopted its own ‘Monroe Doctrine’ over the territories of the former Soviet Union, perceiving a variety of Russian interests in the region. Security was an important factor that involved Russia into the affairs of the Central Asian countries. All post-Soviet Central Asian states had difficulties in creating national armies because of lack of funds, equipment and manpower. The lack of manpower happened due to the fact that the Soviet troops on the territory of Central Asia were commanded mainly by Russian officer corps. For example, in Kazakhstan, the Defense Ministry set troop strength of 70,000 but the dependency on Russian officers was approximately 97 percent. Maxim Shashenkov argues that Russia’s post-independence policy in Central Asia has been reactive rather than pro-active and lacked an agreed-upon vision of Russian interests and priorities. It has yet to develop a realistic foreign policy and comprehensive strategy for the region. Until Russia continues to struggle with its own problems and manages to adapt to Eurasia’s new geopolitical environment, the uncertainty in its policy towards Central Asia will remain. Currently, Russia is experiencing an identity crisis and attempting to establish national, ethnic and geopolitical definitions for the new entity that has never existed in its present borders and that has left more than 25 million ethnic Russians outside its frontiers.

Russia’s military doctrine defined the frontiers of the former Soviet Union as the strategic frontiers of the Russian Federation, which served as a shield to Russia from ‘far abroad’ countries. At the present time, Russian frontier guards are present in all Central Asian republics with the exception of Uzbekistan. Russian expeditionary corps are stationed in Tajikistan. There is also a large number of the Russian population living in Kazakhstan⁶. On July 1, 1990, Kazakhstan adopted the law that made Kazak language the state language of the republic. Although Russian emigration from Kazakhstan has not been very significant, mainly the best and the brightest relocated, which created a serious ‘brain drain’. As a result of language policy, some Russian groups demanded a greater degree of local autonomy for areas with compact Russian populations. Some groups, such as Cossacks from Uralsk area even made straightforward separatist demands, either to join Russia

or the eventual 'Siberian republic'. As a result, the 1995 constitution gave Russian the status of 'the social language between the peoples' saying that in government offices and in offices of local administration Russian is officially used equally with Kazak.

China and Central Asia

In the mid-1990s, the U.S. started to shift its foreign policy and security interests toward Asia. In 1998, the Pentagon issued a report, which said that in the next 10 or 15 years no new superpower would appear to challenge the U.S. global dominance. At the same time, analyzing a possibility of such challenge in the foreseeable future, the report said that Asia was a potential source of threat⁷. The reasons for such conclusion were the continent's dynamic growth, vast economic, natural, demographic, intellectual, and military resources. Asia was described as a continent that was capable of producing a global competitor to the U.S. Brzezinski also believes that a country or a group of countries from Asia may come forward in strategic perspective to compete with the U.S. on the global scale. In his book *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, he pointed out that China had all necessary qualities to develop into a superpower.

China's Geopolitical and Geo-economic Interests in Central Asia

Three of the five Central Asian states have common borders with China. China's new neighbours in the Northwest are Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. China has a more than 3000-kilometer frontier with these states. China is interested in political stability and preventing fundamentalism in the region. If fundamentalist influence in Central Asia increases, then problems in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region and even Tibet could grow. Already in 1991, the Central Asian Uighur community boosted its activity and groups calling for independence of Xinjiang emerged⁸. As a result, China had to strengthen its border control and make entry to the autonomous regions stricter.

China's interests in the region also concern cooperation and boosting trade relations with the Central Asian republics. China is the second largest energy consumer in the world. According to the U.S. Department of Energy estimates, Chinese consumption will increase to 10.5 million barrels a day. Depending on the accuracy of the estimates, China might soon become the world's largest energy consumer. In the last two decades, China's overall annual economic growth rate has been at 8-9 percent. If China maintains a growth rate of 6 percent per person, by the year 2030 it would achieve an average of ten thousand dollars per capita income, which is twice the size of the 1998 American economy. In order to reach that point, China would need a guaranteed supply of oil. Due to its proximity to Central Asia and the Caspian Sea region, China can become a serious competitor for profit and influence in the area.

China has a great interest in gaining access to the rich deposits of carbon-dioxide and hydro-resources of the Central Asian region. Beijing is actively taking part in exploring Aktyubinks and Mangyshlak oil deposits and building an oil pipeline Kazakhstan – Xinjiang (the volume of investments could reach US\$4 billion). It also reached an agreement of participation of Chinese energy specialists in building Rogun and Nurek hydroelectric stations in Tajikistan. The question of building a gas pipeline Turkmenistan - China and railroad China - Kyrgyzstan - Uzbekistan through Torugart is also being explored. China believes that increasing economic

cooperation and business dependency of Central Asia on China will help to increase its political presence in the region⁹.

During his visit to Almaty in 1994, President Jiang Zemin expressed his view regarding the need to create a new world order and resist the U.S. global hegemony: «The world is not at all tranquil; hegemonism and power politics are developing by new means. The so-called neo interventionism that is emerging is a new manifestation of hegemonism and power politics. In September 1997, Premier Li Peng signed an estimated \$9.6 billion deal on oil shipments and construction of two pipelines with Kazakhstan. Based on the agreement, the China National Oil Corporation (CNOOC) will build a 3,000-kilometer pipeline from Kazakhstan to China's western border. The second 250-kilometer pipe will be built from Kazakhstan to Turkmenistan border. The CNOOC will also continue the development of the Uzen and Aktyubinsk oil fields in Western Kazakhstan on the east of Caspian Sea with an estimated 1.5 billion barrels in oil reserves. Unocal and Amoco, two major U.S. oil companies, also wanted these two large oilfields. Despite lobbying from Washington, they could not come up with the terms guaranteed by China, who agreed to finance the pipeline. This was a signal to Washington that the U.S. and international oil companies are not the only ones with interests in the region¹⁰. President Jiang Zemin said that China was ready to act as a 'bridge' for railroad traffic and pipelines to the Pacific Ocean.

China and Russia are bound by the Shanghai Organization of Cooperation (SOC). It was established as a result of signing of an agreement on strengthening cooperation in military sphere at the border in 1996 by five countries of the region: China, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. In 1997, the parties signed the agreement on decreasing arms and armed forces at the border. The Shanghai organization is used by China as an arena for agreeing interests of China and Russia in the region and preventing tension between the two powers. It also serves as a tool of influence on the internal and external policies of the Central Asian states, in particular on their position on the problem of Uighur separatism. China wants to make sure that Uighur separatists will not find support neither in Kazakhstan, nor in Kyrgyzstan. The organization also provides for cooperation in spheres of trade, energy, economy, and military. Uzbekistan joined the Shanghai organization turning the Shanghai Five into Shanghai Six in 2001.

Thus, central Asian region consisting of former five republics of Soviet Union became a chess board for all major power. Region being geo-strategically and geo-economically significant naturally attracted attentions of all dominant countries. Russia being old hegemon in the region tried to protect its geopolitical and geostrategic interests in the region. The USA and China vied to occupy the vacuum created after collapse of USSR. The region being important throughout the generations would also be an attractive destination in 21st century for global competitors.

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