

REGIONAL CENTERS OF  
POWER AND THEIR POLICY  
IN CENTRAL EURASIA

THE REGIONAL CENTERS OF POWER:  
IS THERE A CONFLICT OF INTERESTS,  
IDEOLOGICAL COOPERATION,  
OR A CONFLICT OF STRATEGIES AMONG THEM  
IN CENTRAL ASIA?

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The geopolitical vacuum of the post-Soviet period in Central Asia soon developed into a security vacuum to be filled, in the latter half of the 1990s, with various regional and sub-regional units set up by countries located outside the region. Many of them claimed regional lead-

ership and monopoly domination in the Eurasian security system.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The following authors have offered their highly interesting assessments of the emerging regional realities: A. Fenenko, "The U.S. Factor and the Crisis of the Trans-Eurasian Area," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 3 (21),

In the wake of 1991, the regional countries, in turn, restored the wide contacts, within the geopolitical and geo-economic context, interrupted by their long isolation, and also revived the natural course of interaction with the adjacent regions. This made them more responsive, to a certain extent, to the influence of their neighbors, members of all sorts of security structures on the Eurasian continent. The region, a closely integrated unit of Soviet times, is now torn apart by centrifugal and centripetal forces, but there is an obvious and natural desire to restore the geopolitical unity of the past on a new basis. The newly independent Central Asian states remain dependent on the old centers of influence (Russia, China, and the Middle East), while moving at the same time toward new geopolitical partners represented by the United States and the European Union.

It should be borne in mind that this process was part of the global developments and, as such, spoke of the post-Soviet Central Asian states' intention to integrate into the global expanse and join the global struggle against transnational security threats. Their foreign policies followed the principles of multilateral cooperation and active reliance on the new allies' potential for the simple reason that, caught in the midstream of the transformations, most of the smaller Eurasian countries with their limited resources were too weak and badly needed outside support. This was one of the most obvious manifestations of the *defensive strategy* of their development in the globalization context, which reduced their role to that of an outsider and part of the obedient retinue of the stronger world powers.

Seen through the prism of interaction among the world and regional powers in Eurasia, the above suggests the following conclusions.

Each of these powers has its own ideas about the means and methods it should apply to ensure Eurasian security based on its own long-term

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2003; M. Laumulin, "Stolknovenie interesov v Tsentral'noy Azii na sovremennom etape," *Materialy mezhdunarodnoy konferentsii "Vzaimootnosheniya mezhdu Rossiei i stranami Tsentral'noy Azii v novom strategicheskom kontekste"* (Almaty, 26 noiabria 2003g.), available at [<http://www.ipr.kz>].

national interests. In our case, they can be adequately described as projects implemented with the use of all sorts of tools.

Russia's *post-Soviet* project is designed to restore its former influence in Central Asia and to use the Central Asian countries as a factor contributing to trimming America's role on the world scene. Russia is obviously building a new model of relations with the local countries that will take their interests and the new reality into account.

Washington's foreign policy is shaped by a set of diverse factors; even American political experts cannot agree about its future and its potential impact on world development.<sup>2</sup>

The American political leadership has undoubtedly formed its ideas about Central Eurasia's strategic future. Washington's *neo-imperial* project is designed to fill in the geopolitical vacuum, while remaining in control by setting up a chain of political regimes along the Russian and Chinese borders that are economically and financially dependent on the United States. Today, the project's more active stage is unfolding before our eyes, the pseudo-democratic Color Revolutions being one of the strategic tools.

China has opted for an *assimilation* project born from a combination of the contemporary worldwide realities and the domestic aims of the political elite of the country with a long historical tradition. China is using the strategy of multilateral and bilateral cooperation in the economic and security spheres. Even though the region is of secondary importance in the context of China's

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<sup>2</sup> See: *The Future of American Foreign Policy*, Second Edition, ed. by Eugene R. Wittkopf, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1994, 350 pp.; J.L. Washburn, "United Nations Relations with the United States: The U.N. Must Look Out for Itself," in: *The Politics of Global Governance. International Organizations in an Interdependent World*, ed. by Paul F. Diehl, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Colorado, 2001, pp. 467-483; Ch.A. Chupchan, *The End of the American Era: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Geopolitics of the Twenty-First Century*, Knopf, New York, 2002; H.N. Ray, *At Home Abroad: Identity and Power in American Foreign Policy*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 2002; *Unilateralism and U.S. Foreign Policy. International Perspectives*, ed. by David M. Malone, Yuen Foong Khong, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Colorado, 2003, 480 pp.; R.J. Art, *A Grand Strategy of America*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 2003.

worldwide policy (a potential U.S.-China confrontation in Southeast Asia is coming to the fore), its growing impact in Central Asia is assessed as a fact to be reckoned with.

The EU *integration* project designed to set up similarly integrated units in Central Asia deserves special attention. Slowly but surely it is overcoming the accumulated centrifugal inertia of recent years by urging the local states to pool their efforts to arrive at commonly acceptable alternatives. European policy is playing a stabilizing role across the CIS, which is testified in particular by the new EU strategy in Central Asia adopted in 2007 for the period up to 2014, which envisages cooperation in all fields.

Each of the projects is expected to ensure the security of those Eurasian countries that support it and of the states incorporated in the

project's sphere of influence. Life has amply demonstrated that the smaller Eurasian countries' security concerns are pushed aside when extra-regional players emerge on the stage with their own interests. The position of the regional centers of influence as extra-regional players resolved to actively affect the situation deserves special scrutiny.

It should be said in this connection that the Chinese and Japanese strategies in Central Asia evoke special interest. In the early 1990s and the first half of the decade, it was the Turkish-Iranian rivalry and the potential impact of these countries on Central Asia's future that riveted the attention of experts and analysts. Today the expert community has found it much more interesting to compare the cooperation models offered by China and Japan and their potential.

## Chinese Strategy in Central Asia: Present and Future

China intends to create a "good-neighborly belt" in Central Asia using multilateral (within the SCO) and bilateral cooperation based on direct contacts with the local states to deal with the global problems of international terrorism and extremism, which are seen in China as the worst of the threats. Indeed, the country is encircled by an "instability arc" formed by the Central Asian states, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India in the northwest, the west, and southwest, which could potentially destabilize the situation. China's adjacent areas—the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region and Tibet striving for independence—are least developed and may easily become the scene of turbulent protest movements and confrontation. China is sparing no effort to reduce the risk of new conflicts in the already unstable area.<sup>3</sup>

In Central Asia, Chinese diplomacy has succeeded in establishing smooth and expanding economic cooperation in essentially every sector; this was especially obvious in previous years.

In recent years, the Chinese side laid several projects on the table designed to encourage closer economic cooperation with the Central Asian countries, including a free trade zone and regional infrastructure within the SCO to promote the sustainable growth of mutual trade in goods and services and lower and gradually remove non-tariff barriers. There are large-scale projects in energy, transport, telecommunications, agriculture, and the light and textile industries. So far, the local states are of two minds about the Chinese suggestions: there is the danger of mass access of Chinese goods to the local markets, which might push aside local products. There is the fear that, if implemented, the projects might increase legal and especially illegal labor migration from China, which will lead to a burgeoning of the already growing Chinese diaspora in the SCO countries.

<sup>3</sup> See: B. Rashidov, "Kitai i Tsentral'naia Azia," 31 January, 2007, available at [www.Ferghana.Ru].

At the same time, there is the opinion that to increase its economic cooperation with the Central Asian countries, China is drawing them into its national projects, new transportation routes being one of them.<sup>4</sup>

By 2010, Beijing plans to complete the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway. According to ChinaPRO, the decision adopted on 9 May, 2007 by the Committee for Development and Reforms of the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region confirmed that China meant business. It intends to complete the railway stretches between China and Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan during its 11th five-year plan (2006-2010). All the countries involved will undoubtedly profit from it; the railway will contribute to the economic development of the entire region and will boost its economic cooperation with Southern Asia and Europe.

The countries directly involved in the project are pursuing their own interests: Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are interested in its economic advantages, which may improve the domestic political situation. China is seeking wider cooperation with its neighbors to promote its own business interests. The project will allow Beijing to acquire first-hand knowledge about the domestic political situation in Kyrgyzstan, a fairly open country, and Uzbekistan, of which little is known, and to adjust its cooperation tactics to the local elites. The railway will improve the transportation structure in XUAR and the country's west as a whole and introduce positive changes in the vast area. The railway will provide China with a transportation corridor that will connect Eastern and Southeastern Asia with Central and Western Asia and with Southern Europe. China will obviously profit more than the others from this project.<sup>5</sup>

Oil and gas pipelines are especially important for China, one of the largest energy-fuel importers. Today, it comes third after America and Japan in terms of energy consumption. In ten years time, however, it will probably outstrip Japan in this respect. According to Chinese experts, by 2020 China will consume between 380 and 400 million tons of oil (some 170-180 million tons will be locally produced).

The so-called four cooperation platforms program between Urumqi (the administrative center of XUAR) and the Central Asian republics initiated by China is an important lever for ensuring China's greater involvement in the region.<sup>6</sup>

- First it is planned to set up a platform of multi-channel trade: Urumqi, which has already set up communications with eight neighbors, created two zones of state importance: one of them is designed to process exported products, and there are also five checkpoints of the second category and about 200 commodity markets. Thirty-two of them can boast of an annual trade of over 100 million yuans; and 10 report a figure of over 1 billion. In 2006, Urumqi was responsible for over 50 percent of the XUAR's total foreign trade flow.
- Second, it is planned to create a highly efficient exchange platform. The correlation between agriculture, industry, and services in Urumqi can be described as 1.5 : 37.0 : 61.5. The commodity circulation and services sphere is responsible for over 60 percent of the GDP; at the same time, the city can boast of much better logistic patterns and a basis for highly efficient commodity exchange.
- Third, China plans to create a platform needed to move production from the east and to expand mutually advantageous cooperation in Central Asia. Urumqi has at least 10 basic indus-

<sup>4</sup> See: O. Sidorov, "Kitai v XXI veke nachinaet postepenno vovlekat v svoi natsional'nye proekty respubliki Tsentral'noy Asii," 17 July, 2007, available at [<http://gazeta.kz/>].

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>6</sup> See: "Urumchi planiruet sozdat 'chetyre platformy,' orientirovannye na Tsentral'nuiu Aziu," available at [<http://easttime.ru/analitic/3/8/305.html>].

trial branches: petrochemistry, metallurgy, the textile industry, machine-building, high technologies, the construction materials industry, pharmaceuticals, the production of foodstuffs, furniture, and clothing.

- Fourth, there will be a platform for a trade and economic cooperation forum in Central Asia.

The above suggests that China is steadily expanding its economic and political presence in Central Asia: in the mid-term perspective it stands a good chance of becoming the main foreign partner of all the Central Asian states.

## Japanese Strategy in Central Asia: “Transformation of Central Asia into a Corridor of Peace and Stability”

Since 1992, Japan has been studying Central Asia, a previously unknown region, and slowly but surely pushing its way into it. While gradually readjusting itself to the new conditions, its foreign policy passed through several stages and pursued various aims coordinated with the domestic policy of all the regional states and the international situation as a whole. It should be said that Japan has been and remains a prominent member of the Western community and that, while pursuing its own aims, it also represents American interests. This means that its regional initiatives are inseparable from the interests of the United States. More than that: for over 50 years now the two countries remain bound by close relations based on the Security Agreement and intertwined economic systems.

- **1992-1996:** this was the time when Japan, the United States, and the EU began their material assistance to the former Soviet republics in the hope of promoting democratic, economic, and other reforms. Subsidies, loans, and grants under Japan’s Development Assistance Program were the country’s contribution to the common cause of stabilization of the post-Soviet expanse. The Japanese money poured into the Central Asian countries was spent on:
  - reorienting the former Soviet republics toward the West, very much in line with Japan’s allied relations with the United States;
  - creating Japan’s positive image in the Central Asian republics and the world as a whole, in line with its intention to play a greater role in world politics and to become, at some later date, a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council.
- **1996-2001:** during the first half of this stage Japan stepped up its involvement in Central Asia in accordance with the Eurasian Diplomacy of Prime Minister Hashimoto (1997) and the Program of Action within the Silk Road Diplomacy of Prime Minister Obuchi (1998). Brimming with bombastic slogans about confidence-building and mutually advantageous and long-term cooperation and a more practical idea of developing the region’s transportation infrastructure to move Central Asian rich energy resources to the world markets, the initiatives pursued important and fairly obvious aims.

By the mid-1990s, having gathered enough information for analysis and spurred on by Central Asia’s (and the Caspian’s) vast resources, Tokyo moved toward active economic measures. To suc-

ceed, it formulated clear conceptions that detailed Japan's Central Asian policy, took into account the adjacent countries, and outlined active measures of cooperation in the key spheres.

The conceptions were based on the fact that Central Asian's geographic isolation would not allow it to fully tap its resource potential and to offer mutually advantageous cooperation to other countries unless it acquired state-of-the-art and well-integrated transportation routes, which some time in the future could become part of the Silk Road for Central Asian energy resources. This spurred on Japan's involvement in the region and encouraged it to pour more money into the key economic sectors. On top of this, Japan's involvement moved Central Asia into the world community's attention range.

In the latter half of the same period Japan remained an active participant in the energy projects implemented within the Eurasian initiatives; it was also involved in close economic cooperation in the region's fairly unstable southern margins. Japan's policy is long-term; it is pursuing its interests in Central Asia in the expectation of changes for the better (particularly in the security sphere), when it will become possible to implement all its projects.

As soon as Japan formulated its Eurasian initiatives, it became obvious that inadequate Central Asian security is the main obstacle to the grandiose plans to turn it into a bridge between the East and the West. The instability in Afghanistan casts doubts on one of the key projects of energy fuel transportation. Japan, unable to improve the local context, had to concentrate on developing bilateral relations with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, two key Central Asian states.

Its political priorities in the region and corresponding financial assistance were in line with the obvious need to rely on the Central Asian leading states because of their favorable geographic location, resource potential, and foreign policy orientation.

Aware of Kazakhstan's resources and its leading position in Central Asia, Japan selected it as its strategic partner; close relations and regular consultations on pivotal international issues were of special importance, since Kazakhstan was one of the main (in fact, the only one as long as instability in Afghanistan continued) route by which energy resources could be moved to the APR.

In the wake of the 9/11 events and in view of the resultant American military presence in the region, Japan established a strategic partnership with Uzbekistan, which played one of the key roles in supporting the military operation in Afghanistan. Since 1996, Uzbekistan became the recipient of Japan's greatest financial assistance in the region and a target of Japanese investments.

These conclusions are only one side of Japanese policy in Central Asia—it was America's military presence in the region that made it possible to look at Tokyo's involvement from a different point of view. It turned out that Japan and America were working together in Central Asia without, however, being too obvious about it.

Japan used different approaches to deal with identical issues in the Central Asian republics (human rights, democratic and economic reforms, and economic liberalization) in tune with its regional priorities. The "dual standards in Central Asia" practice and the direct connection between economic assistance and the foreign policy orientations of the recipients reveal that Japan's policy was tied to America's policy in the same region.

Many of the initiatives have nothing to do with the specific aims and tasks Japan was pursuing in Central Asia and were nothing more than mere declarations. Tokyo's intention to promote democratization and liberalization of the Central Asian economies (two most frequently used terms) was of no importance and never affected its bilateral relations with the resource-rich countries.

This was particularly true of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Japan's close strategic and economic partners. Their quasi-democratic regimes were never aware of any pressure from Tokyo when it came



to the human rights issue and persecutions for political and religious reasons. This was also true of Turkmenistan's authoritarian regime, which never prevented Japan from being involved in joint projects in the gas export and other spheres.

In fact, Japan's large-scale economic involvement in the land-locked and unstable region and in numerous local projects testifies that its political aims are different from the stated ones. For several years Japan was engaged in latent political activities, the aims of which came to light only when America fortified its military presence in the region. It became obvious that Tokyo remained convinced that regional security, without which no sustained deliveries of energy resources to the world market would be possible, hinged on America's military presence in Central Asia.

The country, which aspired to improve its international prestige through globalization of foreign policy, had to readjust certain key principles of its international activities. In the 21st century, cooperation between Japan and the United States acquired a worldwide nature. The instability in Afghanistan, China's increasing regional influence, and other objective circumstances stimulated U.S.-Japan cooperation in Central Asia to draw it into their sphere of influence through economic and political initiatives.

The post-9/11 developments—the counterterrorist operation in Afghanistan, the American military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and the removal of the Taliban regime—opened a new page in Japan's pressure in Central Asia and revealed the true meaning of many of its earlier initiatives and the interconnection between the previous 12-year-long history of its presence in the region and America's resolve to realize its strategic presence in Central Asia. On the whole, Tokyo's policy can be described as an element of the financial insurance of America's future presence in Central Asia.

Japan's present policy also brings to mind its cooperation with the United States during the Cold War period (which ensured Japan's security and helped America contain the Soviet Union in the Far East and the APR); this meant that the old realities were reborn in new geopolitical conditions.

The events in Afghanistan, China's greater role in the APR and Central Asia, and the revision of the Japanese-American Security Treaty (1996) and the U.S.-Japan security cooperation guidelines, as well as Tokyo's Eurasian and Central Asian initiative, were interconnected.

We should particularly bear in mind that China serves as the link between the APR and Central Asia, which explains Japan's and the United States' concern with China's growing military and economic potential. The fact that certain provisions of the Security Treaty and the U.S.-Japan security cooperation guidelines were revised testified that the allies were resolved to contain China in the APR and Southeast Asia.

China's greater role in Central Asia could not but cause concern in the United States and Japan, which were resolved to trim its influence in the region. This explains the new aspects of Eurasian diplomacy and the Silk Road Diplomacy Program designed to deal with specific issues outside the economic sphere. These initiatives opened up a period of active funding of the transportation projects in Central Asia (particularly in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan); later these republics became the main toehold of America's military presence in the region, thus providing the United States with an excellent opportunity to fully tap its potential.

Tokyo's financial aid to Uzbekistan pursued the aim of keeping the latter's regime afloat and of buying its loyalty to the United States. America needed it to address its military tasks in Afghanistan. Kyrgyzstan, which also received financial support, was indispensable not only because of the 2001-2003 military operation, but also because of China's future containment, its closest neighbor.

Despite Japan's desire to play a greater role on the international scene, it is still following in America's footsteps. In Central Asia, Japan has already played its usual role (the Gulf War of 1991) of the main source of funds for America's strategic maneuvers.

In 2006, Japan's Foreign Minister Taro Aso, when speaking at a meeting of the national press club, publicized a new Central Asian initiative that outlined Tokyo's key objectives in the region.

His contribution fell into two distinctive parts:

First, he outlined his country's general approach to Central Asia as a foreign policy target; then he moved on to reveal Tokyo's new approaches to the system of regional relations and described his own revised approaches to Central Asia.

He pointed out that in the 21st century Central Asia would play an important role as a region rich in natural resources and as an important link in the global security system. Seen from Japan, global security is all-important for a country that needs to import natural resources from Central Asia.

There is the opinion that until secure and sustained deliveries of energy resources from Central Asia to any of the suitable ports on the Gulf or the Indian Ocean become possible, the money poured by Japan and other countries into the export-oriented oil-and-gas sphere in land-locked Central Asia and the Caspian area is wasted. Those who offered these arguments took into account the Middle East, which still dominates the world market, while Caspian oil merely tips the balance, and not to the benefit of certain states. These arguments hold water in the short- and mid-term perspective.

In view of the rapid economic growth and the concomitant increase of oil consumption in the long-term perspective, the Caspian energy reserves will be hailed on the world market. This much is clear. What remains to be seen is who will control the transportation routes of Caspian energy resources and who will pay for the technologically complicated and therefore hugely expensive oil and gas pipelines? The Central Asian countries, no matter how vast their hydrocarbon reserves, can neither pay for the entire length of the pipelines, nor ensure their security.

For this reason, the local states have to cooperate with countries that have adequate resources. Japan, together with the United States, Russia, and China, is one such country, which also has allied relations with the United States into the bargain.

The regularly extended and readjusted Security Treaty, which in the near future can be transformed into a fully fledged military strategic alliance of the world's two leading economic countries and, if Japan abandons its pacifist Constitution, two leading military powers, have already pushed their allied relations beyond the APR.

This means that any analysis of Tokyo's Central Asian policy should take into account its close allied relations with the United States and the sides' traditional roles, which in the 21st century spread to global dimensions. This brings us to the second part of Tokyo's initiative—Transformation of Central Asia into a Corridor of Peace and Stability.

Japan has identified three directions of its Central Asian policy: the long-term perspective, support of open regional cooperation, and partnership based on universal values. The first two deserve closer examination, while the third is nothing more than a declaration designed to embellish the country's new policies.

All the known initiatives and Japan's foreign policy in general have been geared to long-term interests; its Central Asian policy being no exception in this respect. Throughout the entire known length of its diplomacy, Japan has never limited itself to one-time actions; its policy has been always pragmatic and always pursued long-term aims.

In view of the region's resources, Tokyo associates its long-term expectations with ensuring the safe transit of energy resources across Afghanistan and Pakistan. Foreign Minister Aso pointed out in his address to the national press club that Afghan stability directly influenced Central Asian developments and that his country was still concerned about security in the adjacent countries. The United States is obviously expected to guarantee stability—despite the far from simple situation in Afghan-



istan, it still preserves its military presence there. Nobody knows whether America is managing to ensure the very much-needed security, but in the long-term perspective Tokyo and Washington still have the time and levers to remain in the region at least as long as the Middle East remains the main oil supplier.

Tokyo is resolved to promote open regional cooperation in Central Asia, since it is convinced that the narrow branch specialization inherited from the Soviet Union, as well as the region's land-locked nature, are the two main obstacles on the road to prosperity. Indeed, with the death of the Soviet Union, the local countries were no longer part of the integrated economic system of the past and found themselves very vulnerable. Japan is convinced that regional cooperation alone gives hope.

In view of the above, Japan intends not only to encourage regional cooperation, but also to launch it in certain spheres in the hope that the local states will use its support to tighten their contacts and improve cooperation. Tokyo intends to develop cooperation with the Central Asian republics in the spirit of openness and to concentrate on coordinating its activities with what the other donors to the Development Program and the other transnational financial institutions are doing.

This initiative testifies that Japan is determined to assume a different role in the Central Asian processes. While in the past, it painstakingly formed its positive image of a power willing to help the young independent Central Asian republics for altruistic considerations, while exploiting this aid to enlist their support for its claims as a U.N. Security Council permanent member, today it is inviting the local countries to pool resources for the benefit of everyone under its guidance. However, this may conceal far-reaching intentions.

It might be suggested that the dynamically unfolding cooperation among the local countries within the SCO contradicts American and Japanese strategic designs in this part of the world. Tokyo and Washington are fully aware that if nothing is done to stem the process this organization will soon openly divide the spheres of influence in Eurasia. The Central Asian countries are also aware of this.

It seems that Japan's initiatives in certain spheres of regional cooperation may be regarded, in the long-term perspective, as an alternative to any forms of Central Asian integration that would include Russia and China. More than that, Japan may be even more tempting as (1) a unique example of economic success, technological progress, and prosperity and (2) because of its relative distance from the region, which makes its influence less threatening than China's and, possibly, Russia's.

In the six months that have elapsed since the initiative was formulated, Tokyo has done nothing to move in the desired direction with the exception of several meetings within the "Japan plus Central Asia" dialog that discussed the initiative in greater detail. Today Japan is too much concerned with its domestic issues: it is revising the status of the National Defense Agency, discarding the Cold War heritage, and amending the state's "peaceful" Constitution. The Central Asian countries, in turn, merely hailed Japan's desire to be more actively involved in the region. All of them, however, know that the issue is not as simple as it looks.

Indeed, Tokyo's greater involvement will remain closely connected with America's regional policy. More than that, in the long-term perspective the combination of America's military might and Japan's economic potential (the two countries are working together elsewhere in the world) might develop into a serious factor of influence when it comes to distributing Central Asia's energy resources.