

## CENTRAL ASIA: REGIONAL RESPONSE TO A GLOBAL CHALLENGE

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### What is the Global Challenge to Central Asia?

Central Asia should take up the challenge of globalization, hence the question: How should the Central Asian countries respond to it and what constitutes the challenge after all? Globalization means that all sorts of international factors (economic, political, cultural, information exchange, etc.) have come to play an ever-increasing role in the social sphere

of various countries. To a certain extent this can be described as a “global challenge to Central Asia.”

Independence and sovereignty issues are two additional factors of the global challenge—this cannot be doubted or disputed. The new geopolitical Great Game has reached its culmination: indeed, the struggle for independence of the former Soviet republics did not end in 1991. It reached new heights in the early 21st century.

Throughout the period of their technical rather than real independence, the Central Asian countries were living, developing, and building their statehoods under permanent geopolitical stress. They failed to coordinate their foreign policies, thus burying the course toward integration formulated in December 1991 as a response to the Soviet Union’s disintegration.

There is another, no less important, aspect related to the essence of the budding world order and the countries’ attitude to it. The Central Asian countries, like all the other post-Soviet states, were carried away by the fictitious concept of the multi-polar world (an antinomy of the unipolar world theory) softly imposed on them.

The present system of international relations has two most important aspects **identified from the position of world order as a “regionalized and multi-sided world.” Regionalized should be interpreted as the world’s geographic regulation while “multi-sided” (but not multi-polar) describes entity regulation.**

At all times world order has been related to the problem of territorial control and the means and methods of administering it the controlling entities selected. During the Cold War period it was not the regionalization principle that was at play but rather the division into spheres of influence between the two powers. The resultant world order could be described as bipolar.

Today, the spheres of influence are replaced with regions while the entities of world order can no longer be described as poles but rather as various sides *involved*—states and international organizations. This means that the Central Asian countries should abandon the principles of the multi-polar world policies for the sake of regionalized and multi-sided relations.

## Caught between Dependence, Independence, and Mutual Dependence

Regionalization is the right road toward the globalized world in which universal standards, forms, and rules of co-habitation on the planet Earth will gradually emerge and become accepted. Regional “re-division of the world” has nothing in common with imperialist re-division—it should be treated as the response of many countries to the challenges of globalization and a form of adaptation to it. This means that regionalism is the Central Asian countries’ road to independence.

Here is a question: why did the regional organizations (I have in mind the CIS, EurAsEC, and SCO), which operate in practically the same geographic areas, come into being? Could we limit ourselves to bilateral relations without developing regionalized international relations? Indeed, what is the purpose of many other similar structures set up in different corners of the world (the EU, NAFTA, MERCOSUR, ASEAN, ECO, and others)?

International regionalization is a sign that countries within certain zones have entered into special relations; they are mutually dependent to a very great extent; this helps them to develop, flourish, and ensure their safety.

It should be said that regionalization is not limited to places with geographically distinct regions—it also appears in areas with no identifiable regions.

This transforms regionalization from a purely geographic to a sociopolitical phenomenon created by human community rather than nature or a structure. It is a man-made creation. To borrow an expression from Benedict Anderson, it is an imagined community.

For this reason regionalization (the creation of a region of one's own) has become a typical feature of international relations today. This fully applies to the Central Asian region, which is a geographic expanse and a community at one and the same time.

Can any of the Central Asian states cope with the globalization challenge single-handedly? I doubt it: there is still no clear idea about dependence, independence, and mutual dependence in any of these states, which cannot yet select the best conception of world order (the multipolar conception turned out to be false). Hence their inability to identify *their own region*. M. Suiunbaev of Kyrgyzstan has rightly written: "The countries of our region have not yet achieved intellectual sovereignty and are not ready to undertake self-identification."<sup>1</sup>

In fact, cooperation between the Central Asian countries and NATO, the CSTO, SCO, EurAsEC, and OSCE is geopolitically distorted: NATO and OSCE represent Western interests while CSTO and SCO oppose them.

Uzbekistan, for example, could have developed better relations with them had they been states rather than organizations.

Interstate relations differ radically from the relations inside organizations: the former are shaped in the context of national interests while the latter assume a supra-national context. In the first case, sovereignty is an absolute category, while in the second, it is relative.

As a member of international organizations Uzbekistan has failed to draw a line between its national and international, supra-national interests. As a member of international organizations it demonstrated obstinacy: the incident with the American base in Khanabad, the absolutely unfounded fears of a "color revolution," its repeated membership in the CST/CSTO and its policy in relation to GUUAM confirm this.

Hence the reversal nature of Central Asian foreign policy (geopolitics), which is explained primarily by the fact that the political elites are power thirsty: their policies have nothing to do with the classical laws of this type of relations.

This suggests the term "regime geopolitics," which manifests itself in attempts to add a geopolitical status to the regimes and, for this reason, as ad hoc reversal policies because of the lost political course.<sup>2</sup>

The so-called geopolitical America-China-Russia triangle proved to be the hardest test for the Central Asian countries. It largely warped the region's geopolitical configuration and political composition.

On the whole, the situation is as follows: Russia is using the mechanisms of the CIS, CSTO, and EurAsEC to pull the region northward; China is pulling it toward the East through the CSO, while the U.S. is exploiting the Greater Central Asian project to tie the region to the south.

In 1991 Uzbekistan came forward with the Turkestan is Our Common House conception and was one of the locomotives of Central Asian integration. This process was cut short in 2006 when the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) was united with EurAsEC under the false pretext

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<sup>1</sup> M. Suiunbaev, "Problemy identichnosti, predelov tselesoobraznosti integratsii i neodnomernosti ee protsessa," in: *Proekty sotrudnichestva i integratsii dlia Tsentralnoi Azii: sravnitelnyi analiz, vozmozhnosti i perspektivy*, ed. by A.A. Kniazev, Bishkek, 2007, p. 46.

<sup>2</sup> I have already discussed the phenomenon of reversal policies in my article "Strategic Friction in Afghanistan and Geopolitical Reversal in Central Asia" that appeared in *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 2 (56), 2009.

that they overlapped one another. In this way, the independence and mutual dependence regime was transformed into the dependence regime.

Nearly a year ago prominent American scholar and expert on Central Asian affairs Frederick Starr commented in an interview to the *Expert-Kazakhstan* journal on the New Great Game conception by saying that Russia alone was contemplating the situation in its context.

“I believe,” said he, “that this temporary situation is caused by the post-colonial syndrome which will finally go away. Neither the West nor America wants to make Central Asia part of their empire. This is absolutely impossible in practical terms and nobody has ever planned this. They want to help the region’s countries and nations live their own lives.”<sup>3</sup>

In the same interview Frederick Starr also said: “Recently, I met in Washington Chinese experts who told me that their country recognized the right of the Central Asian countries to set up regional organizations without interference or direct participation of other states, China included.

“Regrettably, Russia is convinced that this is impossible. It insists that the Central Asian countries have no right to set up their regional organizations without its participation or without China, America, India or Iran.

“Your countries have this right. I am convinced that later Moscow will change its approaches. This means that these countries are not threatened. If you have a self-governing region it will threaten no one. This will serve the cause of common security.”<sup>4</sup> (Emphasis mine.—*F.T.*)

The concepts of independence, national interests, and security have changed—they are believed to belong to the sphere of activities of the political and business elite. R. Saifulin, an expert from Uzbekistan, has pointed out with good reason that these people “have already grown accustomed to the taste of their independence and are not prepared to sacrifice even part of it to integration.”<sup>5</sup>

This suggests that the foreign policies of the Central Asian countries, Uzbekistan in particular, have serious flaws that can be conventionally described as the “side effect of independence:” independence can be likened to an overdose of a low-quality medicine.

## Central Asia-Pessimists vs. Central Asia-Optimists

The history of European integration included Euro-pessimists and Euro-optimists; the recent history of Central Asia has its share of both, however pessimists prevail.

Alexey Malashenko of Russia offered the most “systemic” definition of their contradictions: “Nobody has even doubted that Central Asia should be integrated. It is an axiom—on the verbal level. In practice the solution is steadily postponed and now looks hardly feasible.”<sup>6</sup>

To confirm these thoughts, the Russian expert offers arguments that to my mind are fairly contradictory and, therefore, not quite convincing, although fairly popular.

- The first argument: the region’s still vague definition. Dr. Malashenko reminds us all that in Soviet times the region had a longer name—“Central Asia and Kazakhstan.” The “and” con-

<sup>3</sup> *Expert-Kazakhstan*, No. 4, 1 September, 2008 (see also: F. Starr, “Mnogovektornost—edinstvenno vozmozhny put dlia vsekhn stran Tsentralnoi Azii,” available at [www.centrasia.org], 2 September, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> R. Saifulin, “Tsentralnoaziatskaia integratsiia: slozhnyi put ot deklaratsii k realiiam,” in: *Proekty sotrudnichestva i integratsii dlia Tsentralnoi Azii: sravnitelnyi analiz, vozmozhnosti i perspektivy*, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> A. Malashenko, “Tupiki integratsii v Tsentralnoi Azii,” in: *Proekty sotrudnichestva i integratsii dlia Tsentralnoi Azii: sravnitelnyi analiz, vozmozhnosti i perspektivy*, p. 16.

junction pointed out that the region was indivisible; its Soviet name, however, was obviously absurd: it never divided the region and failed to describe it as an entity.

- The second argument: the region is not homogenous; its population is divided into nomads and urban dwellers. For 100 years the nomads of the past (the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz) have been living in their own states (union republics and independent states) with developed industries. Kazakhstan, for example, has supported its leadership with a modern and even Westernized way of life.

Meanwhile the so-called urban nations (Uzbeks and Tajiks) were also nomads; this means that the distinction between the nomadic and settled peoples is a delusion.

- The third argument: the region is allegedly falling apart. Dr. Malashenko has written: "An analysis of regional developments has long become impossible without taking into account the Afghan elements and hence the events in Pakistan, etc. Everything going on in the 'far abroad' is much more important for Tajikistan, for example, than the squabbles in the ruling elite of Kazakhstan."

This does not hold water.

- First, the events in Pakistan and Afghanistan should be taken into account when we analyze the security issues of the European countries as well, but this should not cast doubt on the positive effects of their integration and does not speak of the region's disintegration.
- Second, the events in Afghanistan, and in the rest of the world, are the global challenges to be countered through regionalization.
- Third, the political developments in Uzbekistan are much more important for Tajikistan than everything that is going on in the far abroad.

- The fourth argument: the old border and water distribution problem. At first glance it disunited the region's countries and breeds mutual mistrust, yet the current disunity might create new mutual territorial claims and water-related conflicts. Those who speak about the Central Asian problems imply Russia's inevitable mediation.

We tempted to ask the great power whether it will perpetuate the current situation in the region for the sake of its continued mediation?

Joint administration of the region, that is, full-fledged integration, is the only answer to the territorial, water, and other problems. It has always been possible to carry out such a policy and today we can register very tangible results.

- The fifth argument: the Central Asian countries cannot close ranks to stand opposed to the security threats.

Alexey Malashenko has written: "Central Asian society is unlikely to close ranks for the sake of its joint opposition to the common external threat, coming, for example, from the reviving Taliban of Afghanistan. We should always bear in mind that Turkmenistan has been quite friendly with them."

For some reason the author of the above tends to ignore the concerted efforts of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan which set up a headquarters in 2004 to coordinate their security structures in opposing the IDU fighters who crossed the border from Afghanistan. The joint military operation was a success.

We can also point to the Agreement on Joint Actions to Fight Terrorism, Political and Religious Extremism, Transnational Organized Crime and Other Threats to the Sides' Security and Stability the presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan signed in April 2000.

The Central Asia-pessimists often contradict themselves without noticing it. They insist that the region's integration can be realized only as part of larger structures dominated by a great power; it is often said that Nazarbaev and Karimov mistrust each other and compete for regional domination.

If this is true will their countries' membership in the EurAsEC, CIS, or any other post-Soviet structure put an end to this rivalry? Indeed, if integration within any structure is possible why is it considered impossible in a narrower, Central Asian, context?

In other words, if there are insurmountable barriers to regional integration why are they expected to disappear within EurAsEC or the CIS while being prominent within the Central Asian region? It looks as if the hopes are being pinned on great power regulation.

Those who support SCO integration (the Central Asia-optimists) insist on this structure's numerous advantages: the geographic scope (from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from the Arctic to the Indian oceans); the members' combined GDP (\$2500 billion); population size (2.8 billion, or 45 percent of the world market); military might (supported by two nuclear powers); and natural riches (half of the world's oil and gas reserves).

These macro-statistics camouflage the micro-statistics and the Central Asian economic reality. These figures have nothing to do with territorial unity and open state borders (which can be said about the European Union); common foreign and defense policies, etc.

Behind these figures are the organization's conceptual deficiency and compositional incompleteness, as well as its inadequate ambitions.

The so-called Tajik Question is highly important for the pessimism vs. optimism discussions of Central Asian integration. I have in mind the way Tajikistan and the Tajiks treat the issue of regional integration within the Central Asian structure. Analysts stress the fact that the Tajiks who speak Persian will hardly be willing to integrate with the Turkic-speaking countries.

So far, this thesis has not been confirmed—what is more, it cannot be verified. There are several factors that speak of the opposite: Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are mutually dependent to a great extent, which has its positive and negative sides.

Late in June 1999, President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov paid an official visit to Tajikistan where he laid on the table the following theory: the Tajiks and Uzbeks are one and the same people speaking different languages. The political effect was impressive, even though the theory had little to do with science. There was a lot of talk about the two countries resuming their friendship and even forming a union. Several days later the deplorable events in Batken drove the two states apart.

Today, relations between them are brimming with mutual suspicions and false stereotypes. Uzbekistan counted on its EurAsEC membership to defuse the tension caused by the Rogun Hydro-power Station project and was not supported, therefore it deemed it advisable to leave the structure in October 2008—this can be called the Uzbek demarche.

In January 2009, when visiting Uzbekistan, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev demonstrated his complete understanding of Tashkent's position by saying that the project should go ahead while the interests of all the sides should be taken into account. The Foreign Ministry of Tajikistan responded with a note to the Russian Federation.

President of Tajikistan Emomali Rakhmon is out to flaunt his independence by working on a political phantom of sorts—an alliance of the Aryan peoples with Iran and Afghanistan among its members. This utopian idea pales against the background of Tajikistan's membership in the SCO and EurAsEC.

Everything that looks like a weighty argument (the threat that the Tajik nation will be engulfed by its Turkic environment being one of them) should be used to prevent the country's integration in any structure.

Tajikistan is obviously being guided by geopolitics and nationalism when looking for a region suitable for integration.

Today the country has reached the stage when it must choose between a national state and a supra-national alliance. The discussion of Kazakhstan academics that was held in September 2007 and published by the *Megapolis* journal illustrated the dilemma in the best possible way.

Nurlan Amrekulov, a prominent political scientist, said: “To survive and preserve themselves, the Turks (the Central Asian Turks.—*F.T.*) will have to look for a road leading to integration among themselves in particular and with Russia as a nuclear power and guarantor of our sovereignty. There is another thing. I spoke to the Kyrgyz and their politicians. They all accept the integration idea, because they have no ambitions. Today they have to survive. In this context the Western categories by which we are still being guided are our worst enemies. **We are all prisoners of the myth about nation.**”

Journalist Seidahmet Kuttykadam offered a different opinion: “In a world ruled by cash survival depends on national identity. We could live without it in the past—today this has become impossible. Today we should work toward strong national and state consolidation.”

The discussion is significant: in the past, Kazakh and Kyrgyz political scientists tended to identify the region’s people as “nomads or settled peoples”—a mythical principle. Today, they are discussing a much more serious (yet unreal) “national state-integrated region” dilemma.

M. Suiunbaev has pointed out: “Sovereignty inflated nationalism and encouraged national myths (it created ‘micro-civilizations’). National ideologies of the Central Asian states act as disintegrating factors. Integration and the openness it implies might cause clashes of ‘micro-civilizations’ and myth destruction. This explains why the regimes which largely rely on these myths for their conservation are tending toward even greater closeness despite the resultant economic losses, which interferes with integration.”<sup>7</sup>

On the whole, an analysis of various opinions about the Central Asian regional integration suggests that the pessimistic approach is caused by the position of the political and business elites which want to preserve the status quo for their continued self-reproduction.

The optimist approach is fed by the position of the Central Asian nations, their expectations and hopes.

## EurAsEC as a Region Alien to Central Asia

I have written a lot about the SCO’s problems; here I intend to dwell on certain conceptual problems of the EurAsEC in order to come back, via this, to the article’s central issue: a region within Central Asia.

When the Soviet Union disintegrated, it left behind the so-called post-Soviet expanse. This term is much more than a description of the territory occupied by the former Soviet republics—it describes all the geopolitical transformations going on there.

Today, the macro-region demonstrates a wide-scale geopolitical experiment described as “varied-speed integration.” EurAsEC is playing the main role; it fully supports Russia’s policy in relation to the former Soviet republics—the new independent states (NIS).

On 18 June, 2004, speaking at a EurAsEC summit, President of Russia Vladimir Putin called on the audience not to forget Russia’s role in ensuring Eurasian security. “I know,” said the Russian president, “that we can live according to the principle ‘the coachman knows the way,’ but a glance at the map will show you that Russia is situated in the very heart of Eurasia. I think there is nearly unani-

<sup>7</sup> M. Suiunbaev, op. cit.

mous agreement that hardly any problem in Eurasia and on the global scale can be successfully addressed without Russia and beyond the role it plays in the world.”<sup>8</sup>

This created the impression that he had a new, mini-Soviet Union, in mind.

Certain politicians and experts (probably impressed by Europe’s results) were driven away by the idea of varied-speed integration.

For Russia this is an opportune slogan under which it can “gather the lands together”—the traditional method of empire-building. The very existence of the EurAsEC means that the NIS are inseparable from the RF; there is no democratic principle of unity within the CIS either.

Experiments in varied-speed integration might be acceptable were it not for the Commonwealth; stage-by-stage *reintegration* could have been explained if undertaken from scratch.

For over a century various integration structures existed, the latest being the Soviet Union; today, it is called the CIS.

The Soviet Union can be described as a political alliance that existed for a long time and then disintegrated. It was officially announced that it had disappeared as a state and as a geopolitical reality.

The geopolitically deficient EurAsEC cannot claim the role of a geopolitical reality: it covers part of Central Asia (an independent region with its traditional regional integration), on the one hand, and includes Belarus and Russia, a separate territory, on the other.

For this reason, the post-Soviet expanse can accept either a Soviet-patterned alliance or be geopolitically divided into independent parts.

I have already written that EurAsEC stands no chance of becoming one of these parts.

I should say that it is staffed with those NIS that look toward Russia: it comes as no surprise that Armenia, Russia’s permanent satellite, is involved as an observer. Uzbekistan, which joined the structure in 2006, left it in 2008.

Its existence cannot be justified and scientifically explained according to the principle of economic determinism.

Its summits discussed water distribution in Central Asia even though it does not cover the entire region; in fact, these problems cannot be successfully resolved without Turkmenistan—any attempt at this looks like deliberate ignoring of this country.

Speaking at the International Forum “Eurasian Integration: Present Trends and Globalization Challenges” held on 17 June in Astana, EurAsEC Secretary General Grigory Rapota said: “Energy and transport, two main infrastructural elements, can move forward the national economies and integration process within the EurAsEC.”<sup>9</sup> In fact, it is electric power and, especially, transport that should move integration ahead within the CIS because these spheres of cooperation in the Heartland are of a transborder nature.

It is hard to comprehend how the same states that belong to several organizations can set up single customs expanses, free trade zones, economic regions, etc. within different structures. The CACO and SCO have put these questions on their agenda.

What can be said about the EurAsEC as the CACO and SCO’s rival?

It undermines the efforts to realize collective regional security across the post-Soviet expanse.

If it is a full-fledged integration system, we have the right to expect that its members would acquire a collective security system; but this is impossible since this structure is not a region with specific parameters.

Russia and Central Asia should look after their national security independently.

<sup>8</sup> Replika na otkrytii mezhdunarodnogo foruma “Evraziiskaia integratsiia: tendentsii sovremennogo razvitiia i vyzovy globalizatsii,” available at [<http://2004.kremlin.ru/text/appears/2004/06/66021.shtml>].

<sup>9</sup> “Rapota: EvrAzES iavliaetsia deistvuiushchei modeliui budushchego Evraziiskogo Soiuzia gosudarstv,” available at [<http://www.rian.ru/politics/20040618/614677.html>].



The Russian Federation is a strong power, but it should help its independent neighbors to strengthen their security not by attaching them to its territory with the help of the EurAsEC (or a similar structure) but by encouraging their independent regionalization. This process began in 1991.

None of the regional structures created by the former Soviet republics (such as the CACO) threatens Russia; they have been set up for the sake of their members' independence and regional development and are not aimed against the Russian Federation.

EurAsEC Secretary General Rapota is convinced that "the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) is a working model of the future Eurasian Union of States."<sup>10</sup> Such a union would be better created within the CIS, out of *all* the former Soviet republics.

Experiments in varied-speed integration should be discontinued; what is needed is final and independent geopolitical delimitation.

## How Should Central Asia Respond to the Global Challenge?

Developing and strengthening fully-fledged regional integration can be described as the only adequate answer. The local countries have covered part of the road; they have acquired some experience even though many of them have not yet appreciated this. Unfortunately, the process has not been without its drawbacks; the time has come to sum up the results and move on.

The following can be realized in the near future:

- A political alliance should be described as the highest aim of integration;
- A visa-free regime should be introduced among the Central Asian states;
- Foreign policies should be coordinated;
- Border delimitation should be suspended;
- The CACO should be restored;
- Ditto for the Central Asian Battalion;
- Ditto for the Central Asian Parliamentary Assembly;
- A regional referendum on a political Union of Central Asia should be held;
- The old functional structures should be restored and new ones created;
- A free trade zone should be set up;
- Ditto for a customs union;
- Ditto for a single economic expanse.

The present situation in Central Asia is the result of unfavorable subjective and objective circumstances, a combination in which the objective added to the subjective circumstances.

The heads of state and politicians are operating in far from ideal conditions: the situation inside and outside the region is far from simple.

Today, the situation is far from favorable: the great powers are stepping up their geopolitical rivalry (the Great Game) very much in line with the balance of forces principles.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibidem.

Central Asia is at a loss; the democratic process that had begun in Uzbekistan (and other countries) was frozen because of the errors committed by the people at the helm and the inevitable impact of the new world order.

The Central Asian developments are reflected in the domestic and foreign policies of the regions' states; it is part of the global process of world-wide restructuring.

The region needs its own Yalta to identify its post-Cold War status; it should answer the question: will the Central Asian countries develop into democratic states in the full sense of the word?