

RUSSIA IN CENTRAL ASIA: GEOPOLITICAL MODELS OF STRATEGY AND FOREIGN POLICY

Masat SARSEKEEV

*Ph.D. (Political Science), Assistant Professor,
Chair of Social Disciplines,
Almaty University of Energy and Communications
(Almaty, Republic of Kazakhstan)*

ABSTRACT

The author discusses individual aspects of Russia's strategy in post-Soviet Central Asia and the extent to which the means and methods of geopolitical modeling can be used for analyzing the current and future political situation. He uses certain approaches and methods to identify

the geopolitical models Russia applies in the region, studies the functional interactions among large powers and the regional states, and analyzes various scenarios of the region's development determined by geopolitical conditions and the balance of power inside the region.

KEYWORDS: *geopolitics, geopolitical modeling, regional relations, consistency of political processes, Central Asia.*

Introduction

Foreign policy is an inalienable part of the strategy of any state, through which it realizes its national interests in the world. Its international activity is determined by the principles, aims, and priorities that shape the state's strategy for the mid-term and even longer perspective. The actors of international relations act according to certain algorithms, the modules of which are determined, on the one hand, by the desire to secure the state's national interests and create conditions in which its fundamental principles of continued existence are protected, and on the other, by the actual balance of political power and resource potential. Combined, these parameters create a simplified scheme/model of the state's foreign policy activities.

In the past, the model was interpreted as an object which, under certain conditions, can replace the original and reproduce its basic descriptions, as well as be graphic, visual, easy to grasp, and operate with, etc. Today, the concept of model has become all-inclusive applied to real and imagined models, while the idea of an abstract model is applied to any type of knowledge and any type of ideas about the world.¹

¹ See: G.M. Tsibulskiy, *Modelirovanie*, Textbook, KG TU, Krasnoyarsk, 1994, pp. 5-6; E.N. Ozhiganov, *Modelirovanie i analiz politicheskikh protsessov*, RUDN, Moscow, 2009, 189 pp.

It should be said that reproduction of decision-making and foreign policy within the selected intellectual-imagery schemes allows any country to build its strategy on the international stage. The use of theoretical and applied constructs helps it organize their realization in the long-term perspective. The functional limits that keep a country within the field of its foreign policy possibilities are objective; they are determined by its geopolitical conditions, domestic resources, as well as international situation and global processes. The resource potential, conditions, and dominant trends of international relations can be described as the determinants of the possible foreign policy strategy of all countries, including Russia, which has interests of its own in Central Asia.

Methods and methodologies have their limits when applied to geopolitical models. "Political borders and geopolitical situations are the target of studies relating to the problem of non-classical ideas of geographical knowledge and the creation of geographic and political-geographic images. The problem is fairly complicated because it requires new scholarly instruments of a theoretical-methodological nature and new methods, while the position of an observer requires special attention. He should create the background or the field of studies in which the studied objects are found in various combinations."²

However, these limits do not limit the cognitive (theoretical) and practical prospects of modeling.

The foreign policy vector of any state depends on its ability to rationally substantiate and clearly formulate its national interests, as well as realize its strategic aims and tasks on the basis of its resource potential. Early in the 1990s, Russia was shaken by a systemic crisis that practically destroyed its economy and politics and inevitably affected its ability to implement its geopolitical strategy. This means that the disintegration of the Soviet Union was not simply a regime change or a change in its political system. It affected the strategic configuration and political future of all new independent states, which emerged in the post-Soviet space and were forced to look for niches of their own on the international arena, and revealed their geopolitical assets, on which they rely today.

The Russian Federation, the Soviet Union's legal successor, proved unable to fulfill its geopolitical functions. To successfully fulfill the geopolitical mission it has assumed, Russia should correctly assess the international balance of power and the structure and hierarchy of internal and external challenges, as well as consistently implement its political, economic, and military-strategic aims.

In its foreign policy concept, Russia pays particular attention to the post-Soviet space bound together by common history, culture, and spiritual heritage. This means that Russia's geographic location is largely responsible for its priority attention to the Near Abroad and Central Asian geopolitics in particular. This is also explained by the large-scale transformation of the international relations system that took place in the 1990s. A new structure of threats and challenges appeared that require symmetrical answers and adequate responses in order to diminish the possibility of global or regional instability.

Its huge natural resources, particularly strategically important hydrocarbons, have made Central Asia one of the geopolitical axes of world politics. For many years now, it has remained a seat of global instability and source of powerful destabilization impulses that might undermine the international relations system.

This is the region where the interests of the global actors of world politics—the U.S. and Russia—meet and where China's presence is growing increasingly obvious. It should be said that de-

² D.N. Zamiatin, "Modelirovanie geopoliticheskikh situatsiy. Na primere Tsentral'noy Azii vo vtoroy polovine XIX veka," *Polis*, No. 3, 1998, pp. 133-146.

spite more or less identical aims, their interests are very different both in the short- and long-term perspective.

Russia is involved in regional developments to a much greater extent than the other great powers. What is more, some of its regions (the Volga area, the Urals, and Western Siberia) are very vulnerable to outside impacts. This is one of the specifics of Russia's geopolitical space.

Ethnic and confessional diversity, considerable defense and energy potential, and the absence of clear natural geographic borders make the region especially vulnerable to external geopolitical impacts or possible seats of separatism.

It should be said that, in geopolitical terms, Central Asia can be described as an extension of Russia's homogenous space, which has preserved common infrastructural, technological, and partly institutional parameters. At the same time, its component parts have already acquired different geopolitical vectors and sociocultural identities. This explains why a continued Russian presence in the region (which has lived through certain transformations) is of immense geopolitical importance. In an effort to ensure its security, Russia is working toward a more efficient foreign policy strategy. This long-term objective requires a certain algorithm of decision-making and implementation of political steps, or models of geopolitical strategy designed to ensure the most important of its national interests.

First Model: A Geopolitical Arbiter, or Systemic Domination

The geopolitical structure, a product of several decades of development, is heterogeneous—it includes the post-Soviet republics and also their neighbors; this makes it a territorial unit, the fragments of which are better described as segments of various types rather than components of a single sub-continental space. Therefore, the presence of an external force (at least for the time being) is desired or even required to stabilize the region and help its countries survive and develop.

In the post-Soviet period, Russia has lost a lot of the Soviet influence while the region, deprived of its geopolitical "skeleton," which protected it against negative external impacts, slid into an abyss of systemic imbalance. The old structural, institutional, and regulatory elements proved to be fairly vulnerable; the region badly needed external support in the form of economic assistance, investments, transportation corridors, and military-technical aid.

The United States, which at that time had the highest potential and greatest desire to move deep into the Asian continent, tried to fill in the resultant geopolitical vacuum. Later, China started doing the same; it used financial mechanisms and encouraged the steadily increasing export of Central Asian natural riches to spread its influence far and wide in the region. Russia, which was gradually recognizing its new geopolitical role in the changing world, increased its attention to Central Asia.

There is any number of factors and conditions conducive to the emergence of seats of tension in Central Asia; in the worst scenario they might spread across the sub-region, as well as beyond it. This explains why the Central Asian states (the post-Soviet states in particular) need a guarantor, a state able to maintain political and economic stability at the regional and local levels. This state should possess material, technical, financial, economic, and military-political resources adequate to its role of regional center of attraction; at the same time, it should have considerable national interests there.

Today, Russia and the United States (and China in the not-too-distant future) can be described as axis states best suited to the role of systemic dominator.³ The periphery countries are highly vulnerable, which means that they need stronger integration with the axis states to be able to develop their political and economic systems. There are old and more recent disagreements among them that weigh heavily on the far from simple relations between them and might, therefore, provoke another round of regional conflicts.

This means that the region needs an “axis power” to function as the region’s trade, economic, political, and strategic core, as well as a geopolitical arbiter in conflict situations and disagreements, a role which requires adequate material, cultural, and spiritual resources.

Russia is the obvious choice—it shares its past with the region; there are common borders and, in the past, there was a common infrastructure.

Second Model: Regional “Support Structure,” or Strategic Partnership

Today, Central Asia is best described as one of the busiest crossroads of world politics. The international agenda invariably includes a certain number of Central Asian issues because the region has become the focus of many burning problems of world politics: international terrorism and extremism, drug trafficking, the struggle for access to energy sources, etc. To resolve them all, the interested states should pool forces. Today, however, the global and regional players are promoting their political interests to the extent their status and available resources allow.

Each of them is following its own foreign policy algorithm geared toward the balance of geo-strategic forces in the region. This is what the geopolitical model of regional “support structure” is about. To be erected, it requires an active foreign policy that relies, first and foremost, on the strategic partner as an agent of geopolitical influence in the region. This partnership is rooted in mutually advantageous and long-term interests based on similar economies and more or less close political assessments of the regional problems and their solution.

I have written above that Russia stands the best chance in the region. It should create a regional support structure, in which all countries, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in particular, should be involved.

Uzbekistan, in the region’s center, borders on unstable territories and, at the same time, maintains fairly strong ties with the rest of the world. It can be described as a conflict-prone area. Russia will find it hard to build a model of long-term strategic partnership with this country—their paths of political and economic development are very different.

Kazakhstan is a different matter—it has a long borderline with Russia, considerable financial resources, and no common borders with unstable states. Both states have similar vectors of political and economic development, which means that Russia should select Kazakhstan as its strategic partner in the region.

This model, however, has several other dimensions. Russia’s strategy of building a regional support structure in Central Asia can be applied to the security and energy spheres. The region’s rich

³ See: *Geopolitics of Central Asia in the Post-Cold War Era: A Systemic Analysis*, ed. by E. Efeşil, Haarlem, Netherlands, 2002, p. 489.

fuel resources can affect the geopolitical balance of power in the world.⁴ Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are gas-rich countries; Kazakhstan's gas resources are a bit smaller, yet substantial enough to be taken into account.

Russia's natural gas deposits are the largest in the world; gas exports to the industrially developed countries constitute the basic item of its foreign trade balance. At the same time, the relations between fuel suppliers and fuel consumers have never been limited to trade and the economy, but extend to geopolitics.

Today, the countries of Europe export about 40 percent of the gas they use from Russia. Concerned about their dependence on the only source of fuel, they are seeking diversification of sources to reduce, to some extent, possible economic and political risks. This easily explains continued lobbying of alternative gas transportation routes; in fact some of the European states encouraged by the United States are already discussing other possibilities.

This means that Russia is vitally interested in a coordinated Central Asian energy policy. It can use it as a fairly efficient mechanism of geopolitical influence in the world's major political and economic areas. The regional support structure model in the security sphere presupposes active development of strategic partnership between Russia and the region's countries on certain issues to protect their interests against external threats mainly on the CIS southern borders. I have in mind the situation in Afghanistan and also all sorts of political forces of global and regional dimensions, the activities of which are fraught with the danger of spreading the conflict area far and wide.

The Russian model presupposes stronger and mutually advantageous cooperation among the strategic agents of geopolitical influence present in the region. This will make the region more secure, a condition very much needed for their joint opposition to the current threats—drug trafficking, religious extremism, terrorism, etc.

Third Model: Geopolitical Secession

The outlines of the political space of contemporary Central Asia became clear in the late 19th century. They were determined by the rivalry between Russia, the U.K. and partly China for the spheres of influence in the region. Later, the region acquired administrative borders—the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region of China and the Central Asian Union republics in the south-east of the Soviet Union; this, however, had little effect on the previous structure of this geopolitical space.

With the end of the Cold War, the Central Asian geopolitical architecture changed a lot—the Soviet Union disintegrated, while its Union republics became independent states. The United States was, for a while, absent from the region. This explains why the territory within the responsibility zone of two great powers became a geopolitical vacuum filled at random by all sorts of regional and local players. The geopolitical space underwent reformatting accompanied by rising tension inside and outside the region. Latent contradictions were revived together with seats of potential tension, which invigorated violence and extremism first at the local and later at the global scale.

The reduced Russian and American presence in the region is explained by the end of their confrontation and by several factors of domestic policy. Under the pressure of the new people brought to

⁴ See: C. Guilhem, J. Leininger, R. Xenidis, "L'UE, la Russie et la carte énergétique," *Le Monde*, 15 December, 2011, available at [http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2011/12/15/l-ue-la-russie-et-la-carte-energetique_1618259_3232.html].

power by the changed political order in Russia, the country changed its foreign policy strategy and orientation.

It should be said that the warped political course toward integration with the West that “new” Russia pursued in the 1990s caused its geopolitical entropy; it became “dissolved” in the mega-environment fraught with the country’s exclusion from the geopolitical content and its death as an entity of international relations in its own right.

Russia’s strategy of passive geopolitical involvement was one of the factors that strengthened extremism in Central Asia and considerably worsened Russia’s geopolitical situation. If the Soviet Union, which hastened to pull its troops out of Afghanistan, had continued to extend political, economic, and military-technical support to its leaders, the geopolitical balance of power in the region might have been very different.

Russia cannot and should not practice geopolitical isolation and should avoid direct expansionism: the position of an outside observer Moscow practiced in the 1990s did nothing for its prospects.

As a continental power, Russia cannot remain indifferent to what is happening on its borders. Attempts at Central Asia’s political secession will shorten Russia’s external security belt to create the risk of a wider instability zone dangerously close to its state borders. Russia’s geopolitical isolation can be accepted only as a temporary measure.

To remain a great power Russia must remain visible in Central Asia, whereby the form and conditions of its presence should be established ad hoc rather than in strategic terms.

Fourth Model: Geopolitical Regional Balance

Central Asia is a vast region and a patchwork of cultures, traditions, and contradictory interests of many states; at different times throughout history, the region has been a battlefield among local, regional and global forces. Despite the present fairly complicated structure of political contradictions, the relations between the two global heavyweights—Russia and the United States—remain the region’s dominant factor.⁵

In the post-bipolar world, Central Asia continues to function as a transformed but still dual geopolitical model. This structure emerged in the latter half of the 19th century when the geopolitical battle between Russia and the U.K. in Central Asia was called the Great Game.

Resumed in the last twenty-five years of the 20th century, it took the form of rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States for influence in the southern part of Eurasia’s geopolitical “arc.” It was an important part of the Cold War (military and political rivalry between the two blocs for world domination). Today, the Great Game is being revived once more in new geopolitical conditions.

In the past decade, the region has lived through cardinal changes; its geopolitical space has been reformatted—Moscow’s political leeway has been narrowed down to a great extent, religious extremism has moved into an even stronger position, while the former Union republics have become sovereign states. On the one hand, the region has acquired a new development vector, while on the other, the sub-continent has gained a new configuration of power and a new structure. The relatively mono-

⁵ See: *Central Asia at the End of the Transition*, ed. by B. Rumer, Armonk, New York, London, 2005, p. 5.

lith space has been fragmented, with the political processes underway in the region being discrete to a great extent.

Despite the much stronger differentiation of opportunities, the choice of strategic vectors for the local states is very limited. From the geopolitical viewpoint, there are several real alternatives—either development within the sphere of interests of the United States, or closer cooperation with Russia, while a third alternative (intermediate) calls for adopting a maneuvering policy.

Most of the region's states are undeveloped, which means that they need outside support. Cooperation with Washington or Moscow will bring foreign investments, loans, and close military-technical and trade cooperation. This means that both countries can relatively easily penetrate the region and that there are weighty arguments in favor of their long-term presence.

On the other hand, Russia and the U.S., which have very different degrees of influence in the region, deem it necessary to set up military-technical outposts there to ensure their geopolitical victory and consolidate their positions on a global scale. To secure these goals, the countries are using very different methods.

Meanwhile, the global actors operating in Central Asia share certain foreign policy interests in the sphere of security and sustainable development. This means that both Russia and the United States have every opportunity to look for and identify common points and pursue a coordinated policy in the region. These are the basic conditions that may create a balance of geostrategic interests between Russia and the U.S.

This is not a linear process that explains the regularly surfacing asymmetry of bilateral relations on a local and global scale, which increases the danger of conflicts and leads to systemic imbalance in the region.

Imbalance gives one of the states present in the region one-sided strategic advantages and a stronger geopolitical position. Geopolitical asymmetry objectively weakens the entities' ability to strengthen their influence in Central Asia, a very important region for them. Russia might lose some of its influence in Central Asia, as well as geopolitical control over its southern borders. It will become much more vulnerable to the negative impacts of the already existing and potential instability factors.

Conclusion

All sorts of geopolitical approaches and conceptions used by the theory and practice of international relations to analyze the current state and prospects of local, regional and global political relations reveal the cause-and-effect ties between the spatial-territorial descriptions and possible development trends of states.

There is no strict interconnection between the geopolitical constants and the states' foreign policy trends. It is much more appropriate to discuss the geopolitical factors and conditions responsible for possible, not real, scenarios of political development. The present geopolitical trend is shaped by the development vector a country has opted for and is following.

The geopolitical position of any country is polyvariant. Despite the spatial and geographic factors that determine a state's development, each of the states has alternatives in its foreign policy activity. The content of foreign policy relations, which have many different scenarios, crops up as geopolitical models or intellectual-logical constructs. They fully correspond to geopolitical reality with its numerous aspects and development alternatives in the mid- and long-term perspective.

Central Asia is a relatively young geopolitical region which, however, has found a niche of its own in the international relations system. Its geopolitical value is created by several important factors,

including its location at the meeting place of three world civilizations and huge mineral resources. It is also an important region because it is vulnerable to the impact of international terrorism, religious extremism, etc.

This is practically the only place in the world where the diverse interests of the most influential world powers—the U.S., Russia, and rising China—are closely intertwined and cause global rivalry. This explains the areas of geopolitical tension in the region, which faces risks of confrontation.

Today, Russia should build new relations with the Near Abroad. A geopolitical security structure that can protect its outer borders and its regions is directly related to the stability level in the closest territories and friendly relations with the closest neighbors.

The stability of Russia, the largest of the continental states, largely depends on the stability of internal geopolitical points of support found in all the important political, economic, and industrial regions (the Volga area and the Urals included).

Russia's external geopolitical support structures, found in Northern Kazakhstan and Left-bank Ukraine, are no less important.

Central Asia is one of Russia's priorities because its geopolitical situation is strongly affected by what is going on in the region.
