

MICRO-GEOPOLITICAL SEMIOTICS OF CENTRAL ASIA: “CROSSROADS” AND “BRIDGES”

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ABSTRACT

The author analyzes a highly specific geopolitical phenomenon—geopolitical self-identification of the Central Asian countries with the help of geographic images, symbols, and signs used to prove their importance on the international arena and at the regional level in particular. In his analysis the author uses a constructivist approach to the efforts to fit several geographic descriptions into a geopolitical context combined, to a certain extent, with a realistic approach expressed by the term “geopolitical semiotics.”

KEYWORDS: *micro-geopolitics, semiotics, transportization, Central Asia.*

Introduction

In the years of independence the Central Asian republics have enriched their political vocabulary with quite a few new terms, expressions, and figures of speech.

Since 1991, that is, for practically quarter of a century of renewed independence, the Central Asian region has been coping with real and virtual geopolitical challenges.

Many experts in Central Asian developments have acquired the habit of talking about the regional context in geopolitical terms better suited to the Great Powers' rivalry in this part of the world. Suffice it to mention the famous "Balkanization of Central Asia" offered by former U.S. national security advisor and prominent American political scientist Zbigniew Brzezinski.

The modality of the region's geopolitical transformation created a relative novelty: micro-geopolitics of each of the Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan).

Micro-geopolitics is a product of sorts of Great Power geopolitics (macro-geopolitics), none of which has so far outweighed the others in the region as a whole, or in individual countries in particular. Their rivalry, however, has created side-effects, one of them being the perceptual and real geopolitics of the smaller Central Asian states.

Exercises in Semiotics

Today, we have arrived at a constructivist approach that describes geopolitics as "a discursive practice by which intellectuals of statecraft 'spatialize' international politics in such a way as to represent it as a 'world' characterized by particular types of places, peoples and dramas."¹

"To designate a place is not simply to define a location or setting. It is to open up a field of possible taxonomies and trigger a series of narratives, subjects and appropriate foreign policy responses."²

In other words, any political discourse of a space and its "material content" should concentrate on what is important (meaningful) or unimportant (meaningless). At the top political level, this "construction of meanings" looks like an effort to create and promote a system of ideas and world-views.

The spatial-territorial semiotics of the official and expert geopolitical discourse is one of the outcrops of the phenomenon described above; it is an earlier unknown communicative system that uses relatively new politicized signs, words, images, and symbols as tools.

Dmitry Zamyatin from Russia has studied the specific features of geographical spaces and their cognitive reflections in geographic and geopolitical images: "Construction of geographic images is connected with the process of formalization and, at the same time, compression and concentration of certain geographical ideas. A geographical image is the sum-total of bright and concentrated signs, symbols, and key ideas about real spaces (territories, locations, regions, countries, landscapes, etc.). These geographical images may assume different forms depending on the aims, tasks, and conditions of their creation. In most cases, they are the results of two main processes: purposeful construction and purposeful reconstruction, exposure and identification. The correlation between them depends on the position of the creator of geographic images."³

After arming themselves with the expression "New Silk Road," the five Central Asian newly independent states returned to the political parlance, a move better described as a semiotic exercise. Indeed, they wanted to stress their significance as countries with important or even special places on the New Silk Road. It should be said here that the reference to the New Silk Road used to confirm their newly found geopolitical status has pretty much become part and parcel of their national ideologies, a phenomenon clearly seen in Uzbekistan in the heart of the region.

¹ G. Ó Tuathail, J. Agnew, "Geopolitics and Discourse: Practical Geopolitical Reasoning in American Foreign Policy," *Political Geography Quarterly*, No. 11, 1992, pp. 190-204.

² *Ibidem*.

³ D.N. Zamyatin, "Geopolitika: osnovnyye problemy i itogi razvitiya v XX v.," *Polis* (Moscow), No. 6. 2001.

The magic of this combination of words has spread far and wide at the international level—the great powers have learned to look at Central Asia through the prism of the Great Silk Road. The United States, the EU, Japan, China, and India have gone even further: they have elaborated the so-called Doctrines of the Great Silk Road at the national level.

The idea has become the region's business card of sorts; today, the new concepts have been adjusted to contemporary reality: the Great Silk Road of highways and railways; the optical-fiber Great Silk Road, gas- and oil-pipeline Great Silk Road, etc.

Great Silk Road semiotics have spread across the region in the form of the geopolitically justified “bridge,” “road,” “corridor,” and “crossroads” rhetoric. It seems that the revived memories of the Silk Road have inspired self-positioning of the Central Asian countries as a bridge between geographically important areas, a crossroads of important international communication lines.

Here is a typical case of self-perception: “Uzbekistan's geographic location in the center of a huge region where important international East-West and North-South transport arteries meet means that, albeit a landlocked country, it stands a good chance of becoming an indispensable part of the international transportation network. These advantages were well known and well used in the distant past: our ancestors knew nothing about logistics, yet they built caravanserais at the crossroads of the Great Silk Road. Travelers could rest there, leave their cargos for safekeeping, or arrange their delivery to places far removed from the major caravan routes.”⁴

The virtual status of the crossroads of which the Central Asian countries boast (sometimes without adequate reasons) is not an idle invention. In the past, Central Asia was considered a geopolitical bridge that connected the Russian Empire and, later, the Soviet Union with Afghanistan. The British Empire, in turn, expected to reach the Heartland via Central Asia. In 1992, Milam Hauner published a book about the geopolitical rivalry, otherwise known as the Great Game, between Britain and Russia to answer the main question: What is Asia to us? India is seen as “the main factor in the Central Asian question: ‘the drive for warm waters’ and the ‘so-called railway imperialism’.”

“The southern tier assumed a dual function at the beginning of the twentieth century. The first function was a convenient platform ... from which diversionary operations could be launched to threaten British India. The second function was to back up the vulnerable lifeline connecting the two extremities of the Empire.”⁵

Some experts think that Central Asia's contemporary transit function became part of its *modus operandi*. Ross H. Munro, among others, has pointed to the following: “A New Silk Road of modern railroads and highways that would effectively give China a land route far to the West, ultimately to Europe and to an Iranian opening on the Persian Gulf, would have enormous strategic consequences, possibly comparable to the impact that the advent of the Suez and Panama Canals once had.”⁶

On the whole, seen in the macro-geopolitical context, Central Asia invariably looked like a target of geopolitics that served, so to speak, the interests of the Great Powers locked in rivalry. It seems that today, when the Central Asian countries have acquired international subjectivity, this approach can no longer be accepted.

Strange as it may seem, these countries have developed a taste for geopolitical games—sometimes it is hard to say whether the region serves as a bridge or a crossroads for extra-regional countries or for the Central Asian states. It should be said that the regional states are building their “crossroads-

⁴ “Sovremennyye ‘kuptsy’ navernyaka predpochtut hub Navoi,” available at [<http://infoshos.ru/ru/?idn=9720>], 2 April, 2012.

⁵ M. Hauner, *What is Asia to Us? Russia's Asian Heartland Yesterday and Today*, Routledge, London, New York, 1992, pp. 75, 96, 98, 115.

⁶ R.H. Munro, “China, India, and Central Asia,” in: *After Empire. The Emerging Geopolitics of Central Asia*, ed. by J. Snyder, National Defense University Press, Washington, 1995, p. 130.

bridge” identity not only in the context of interregional communications, but also in the intraregional context.

It seems that the special attention being given to this identity is suggested, among other things, by the region’s geographic uniqueness, a favorite subject with practically all the Central Asian countries.

- First, all five Central Asian states are landlocked (on top of this all of Uzbekistan’s neighbors are also landlocked).
- Second, the region borders on three powers: Russia to the north, China to the east, and India to the south, while the Caucasus, to the west, is just a stone’s throw away from Europe.

This means that Central Asia is a crossroads that has been serving as a transportation hub of the North-South and East-West routes since time immemorial, and still does so today.

Assets and Liabilities

Can this affect the course of the political processes in Central Asia? Will the region’s countries manage to capitalize on their geopolitical “bridge” and “crossroad” assets?

Let’s answer the first question. “Central Asia and the Caucasus,” a semiotic formula coined in the 1990s, can serve as an illustration of the region’s existential geopolitical transformation. This was when a scholarly journal of the same name was launched in Sweden and largely stimulated studies of the processes unfolding in the vast zone bordering on Russia.

This formula means, on the one hand, that Central Asia and the Caucasus have acquired political significance, in particular, as a bridge between Europe and Asia, leaving Russia in the cold (this has been noticed by many authors). On the other, it is evidence of the growing subjectivity of the five Central Asian and three South Caucasian states (Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia) on the international arena.

The GUUAM alliance (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Moldova) was formed because the Central Asian countries treated it and the Caucasus as a “window on Europe.” Europe, in turn, looked at Central Asia and the Caucasus as a “window on Asia,” an exercise in semiotics of sorts.

The TRACECA project in 1998 and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline in 2005 added weight to the “crossroad-bridge” definition of Central Asia and the Caucasus.

TRACECA, initiated by the European Union as a Europe-Asia transportation corridor, consisted of the Black Sea ports (Poti and Batumi), the railways of Georgia and Azerbaijan, the ferry between Baku and Turkmenbashi across the Caspian, the railways of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and China, and the Chinese Pacific ports. It was expected to widen the markets of Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus and connect them with the EU.

There was a political dimension as well: transportation between Central Asia and Europe should be diversified to leave Russia outside the new corridor.

The project includes 6,900 km of newly built railways—the transportation corridor across Russia is 10,800 km, making TRACECA’s appeal obvious.⁷

The project of a railway between Andijan (Uzbekistan), Osh (Kyrgyzstan), and Erkeshtam (China) designed in 1997 is an example of transportation functionalism: it essentially creates a straight

⁷ See: R. Ibrahimov, *EU External Policy towards the South Caucasus: How Far is It from Realization?* SAM, Baku, 2013, p. 96.

line between China and Amsterdam that is 8,000 km shorter than the route across the Suez Canal and 15,000 km shorter than the one around the Cape of Good Hope.

Some experts think that the new railway will be beneficial to no less than 30 states, although Kazakhstan, the transit territory between the CIS and China, will not be among the lucky ones. This explains its insistence on upgrading the borderline railway station Druzhba-Alashankou and building a new railway between Yining (Gulja) in China and Almaty.⁸

Today, the Central Asian hub is fairly busy: merchants, carriers, and travelers rub shoulders with NATO, American, German, and Russian military, trans-border drug dealers, etc. The region has become an important stretch of the so-called Northern Distribution Network (NDN) used to move ISAF troops and military equipment from Afghanistan. This has added weight to the region's strategic importance and made it a bridge that connects the largest and so far "incompatible" parts of the vast continent.

This suggests a question: Will the Central Asian states remain important for NATO after 2014? Much will depend on whether they find a new mode of operation between the Euro-Asia and Euro-Atlantic zones.

The region's transit function has created a problem that demands a vitally important choice between the Euro-Asian and Euro-Atlantic actors and trends; so far the region is living amid strategic indefiniteness.⁹ In the context of macro-geopolitics (a new name for the old Great Game), these trends strongly affect the "pendulous" foreign policies of the local states and, first and foremost, regional stability.

This adds new significance to the second of the questions formulated above: Will the region's countries manage to capitalize on their geopolitical "bridge" and "crossroad" assets? At first, Central Asia looked like a region without dividing lines and a major transit, trade, and civilizational crossing on the Asian continent. Today, it has found itself in the new and possibly too demanding role of a geopolitical bridge between two mega-zones: Euro-Atlantic and Euro-Asia. Imposed on the specific national-state identities of the Central Asian countries and their different interests, this role is reflected in geopolitical semiotics.

Each state has its assets and liabilities, as well as the related rhetoric and regional policies of extraregional and intraregional dimensions.

The extra-regional vectors include, in particular, the Tejen-Serakhs-Mashhad railway added in May 1996 to the railway web covering the vast space between Turkey, Iran, and Central Asia. Today, the Iranian stretch is 170 km long, while the Turkmen route is 130 km. The Serakhs stretch completed the trans-Asian main railway and shortened the time needed to reach the Persian Gulf from Shanghai. This might cut down the time and cost of freight transportation from China or Japan to Iran and further on to Europe by 25-30%.¹⁰

The Turkmen-Kazakh stretch of the railway between Kazakhstan and Iran via Turkmenistan was commissioned on 11 May, 2013. As part of the international North-South transport corridor, it will offer better and cheaper deliveries from Europe to Central and Southern Asia and the Middle East. Connected with the East-West transportation network (the transcontinental route China-Central Asia-the Caucasus-Europe across the Caspian), the North-South corridor will acquire even more significance.¹¹

⁸ See: "Zheleznaia doroga iz Kitaia na Blizhniy Vostok vokrug Rossii," available at [<http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/176990>].

⁹ See: F. Tolipov, "Central Asia between the Euro-Atlantic and Euro-Asia: Security Services Market in the Region," *International Research. Society. Politics. Economics* (Astana), No. 3-4, 2013, pp. 58-67.

¹⁰ See: "Velikiy shelkovy put mozhet proyti i cherez Rossiiu," available at [<http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/132421>].

¹¹ See: "Mezhdunarodny transportny koridor 'Sever-Yug' dast Turkmenistanu novye perspektivy," available at [<http://www.railways.kz/ru/node/4615>].

An agreement on a new international transit corridor between Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Oman, and Qatar was signed in April 2011 to connect the Central Asian states with the Middle East.

The multimodal transport-and-logistics Navoi hub deserves special mention as one of the dimensions of the extra-regional vector. The project, which is being implemented jointly with the Korean Air Cargo Company, serves as the air, automobile and railway terminal for export, import, and transit of cargos and passengers.

Today, Korean Air Cargo performs 12 flights per week by Boeing-747 aircraft along the Incheon (Korea)-Navoi (Uzbekistan)-Milan (Italy), Incheon-Navoi-Brussels and Shanghai-Navoi-Milan routes. The Uzbekistan Airways Company, which uses A300 aircraft, performs 11 flights a week along the Navoi-Delhi, Navoi-Mumbai, Navoi-Bangkok and Navoi-Frankfurt routes, as well as chartered flights Navoi-Dakka and Navoi-Frankfurt. There are plans to open flights to Istanbul, Almaty, Dubai, Moscow, and Tel Aviv.¹² The freight terminal can process up to 300 tons a day.

The transnational Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan-China gas pipeline, which will diversify gas export geography, is being successfully implemented

In 2013, President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov announced that the third branch of the Uzbekistan-China pipeline will be built. This makes Uzbekistan, a country in the heart of Central Asia with the most diversified transport and service infrastructures, the best candidate for the title of interregional and continental crossroads.

The crossroads and bridges rhetoric and politics have a geopolitically charged intraregional dimension. The region's important transit function and its significance, as seen by the great powers, have created a feeling of self-importance in each of the region's countries and made them very confident about their geopolitical potential.

Certain countries have been marginally successful in tapping their "unique" bridge/crossroads opportunities; this has fanned tension in intraregional relations and threatens the region's further fragmentation. Tajikistan, for example, despite its far from advantageous geographic location high up in the mountains, is actively involved in international transportation corridors going to China, Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan. In this way, Uzbekistan (which from time to time imposes transport blockades on Tajikistan) is being pushed aside.

China is one of the most active participants in all the transportation projects being implemented in Tajikistan, which, very much like its Central Asian neighbors, accompanies its efforts with semi-otic novelties. For example, there is a project called Shokhrokhi Abreshim-Shokhrokhi Vakhdad expected to connect all the mountain regions among themselves and around the capital with an outlet in the Kulma Pass to the Karakorum highway on the Chinese border. President of Tajikistan Emomali Rakhmon described Gorny Badakhshan as "the Golden Gates of Tajikistan," which intensifies the bridge/crossroads rhetoric. The Qulma-Khorog-Qulob-Dushanbe-Khujand-Chanok highway, raised to the rank of "grand strategy," is designed to help Tajikistan "get out of the present transport-communicational deadlock" (!).¹³

Today, Uzbekistan is the only and, therefore, most important and real bridge connecting Tajikistan with the outside world. This has given Tashkent strategic advantages and supplied it with tools for putting pressure on Dushanbe, which is doing nothing for the relations between the two countries.¹⁴

According to the official statement coming from both countries, regular flights between their capitals (cut short in the 1990s by the rapidly worsening bilateral relations) were to be resumed on 29 March, 2015. This has not happened yet.

¹² [www.mfa.uz].

¹³ A. Mamadazimov, *Velikiy Shelkovy Put*, Sino, Dushanbe, 2014, p. 6.

¹⁴ See: F. Tolipov, "Uzbekistan-Tajikistan: Relations in Limbo", *CACI Analyst*, 16 May, 2012, available at [http://old.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5775].

The road and transit problems, contemplated within the framework of purely national interests, have created a complicated or even tense micro-political situation. Suffice it to say that even the Andijan-Osh-Erkeshtam railway, no matter how attractive and profitable, has raised questions and criticism.

Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are restoring the old “bridges”: the Shymkent-Tashkent highway, 99 km in length, is being actively reconstructed into a trunk highway with dual carriageways; an interchange (road junction) with five flyovers is being contemplated.

The Shymkent-Tashkent highway is part of the international Western Europe-Western China transit corridor; 8,445 km of it will cross China, Kazakhstan, and Russia. The total length of the Kazakhstan stretch is 2,787 km (2,452 of which must be reconstructed): 215 km were commissioned in 2011; 700 km were added in 2012. The reconstruction of these highways is expected to be continued, in which both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are interested.¹⁵ The Kazakhstan stretch will be commissioned in 2015.

The above reveals the interconnection between the micro-geopolitical images and symbols of the “bridge” and “crossroads” types and the efforts of the Central Asian countries to consolidate their regional and international positions in full conformity with the policy of prestige and protection of national interests. This policy, however, should take into account regional interests as well.

The above clarifies the main point: the claims of the smaller Central Asian countries to the role of bridges and crossroads connecting the East and the West, China and Russia, and China and Europe are obviously exaggerated. We should never forget that they must first become bridges for each other and only then assume a continental, interregional connecting (or probably disuniting) mission.

The local countries have already recognized the importance of intraregional consortiums in the hydropower, food, transport, and communication spheres; despite their urgency, corresponding activity is at the lowest point. It seems that the Central Asian neighbors, who have been living together for many centuries, have indefinitely postponed drawing closer to each other.

In Lieu of a Conclusion

There are no traffic lights or road signs at the Central Asian geopolitical crossroads. Traffic regulations are determined by the micro-geopolitical situation and the fact that the Central Asian countries are aware of their place in the world and the region, the nature of their political systems and regimes and, naturally, their historical legacy.

On the other hand, to become instrumental and acquire substantiality the images of bridges and crossroads should correspond to the geo-historical (in retrospect) processes and geo-strategic (in prospect) plans (constructions).

Throughout its history, the region has traveled through the crucible of three epochs of transportization: the Great Silk Road epoch; the colonization and Soviet power epoch; and the current epoch of globalization.

The first epoch left nothing behind but romantic images, while the second and the third have directly affected the geopolitical image of the region and its role in the global system of international relations, conditioned by political and economic diversification and their security status. The second epoch of transportization was mainly longitudinal (this was a Soviet project), while the third acquired a new latitudinal nature.

¹⁵ See: *Kapital*, 5 November, 2013, available at [<http://kapital.kz/gosudarstvo/22958/opredelen-podryadchik-postroitelstvu-trassy-tashkent-shymkent.html>].

From the constructivist point of view, an analysis of these problems has added weight to the sphere of ideas, identities, and axiological choices that have cropped up in the course of discussions. While analyzing the reasons and motives that prompted the Central Asian countries to turn to micro-geopolitical semiotics, we discovered that they have constructed their own identity and the world around them; on the other hand, they use the term *Realpolitik* when building their regional and international strategies.

This has created an interesting methodological situation, in which constructivism and realism are brought together in the above descriptions of the political processes.

The geopolitical semiotics of the crossroads and bridges in Central Asia is a very complicated and specifically interpreted reflection of reality (roads, transportation hubs, territorial scopes, natural resources, etc.) in new (deliberately constructed) geopolitical images and symbols that should not only promote diversification of international communications, but also help to solve the tasks of national-state self-assertion. Not infrequently, these divisions are accompanied by the highly contradictory nature of the states' political and strategic interests.

It seems that given the apparent relevance and strategic logic of the policy of longitudinal and latitudinal expansion of the ways and means of communications stretching from and across the land-locked crossroads of Central Asia, we should accept the fact that the real and virtual bridges between the five countries need to be restored.

After regional integration was described as the highest goal in 1991, the process began and unfolded dynamically until 2005-2006, when it was deliberately cut short.

This and the results of nearly 25 years of post-Soviet development of Central Asia suggest that until the intraregional bridges and small crossroads are restored and become usable, the large communication routes between Europe and Asia are unlikely to be sustainable.
