

## THE GREATER CENTRAL ASIA CONCEPT IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY IN THE CENTRAL ASIAN REGION

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### *Introduction*

The main global scientific centers and think-tanks engaged in drawing up paradigms have become extremely interested in the changes that have occurred on the political map of the world after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The collapse of the bipolar world has led to a transformation in how some of its former regions are perceived, which, in turn, has led to new spatial-political conceptions and theories called upon to facilitate in an integral systemic way the foreign political approaches of specific states to the changes going on.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See: A. Ulunian, "Bolshaia Tsentral'naia Aziia," Analytical article prepared for the information agency Ferghana.ru in the form of comments to an article by Frederick Starr called "A Partnership for Central Asia" in *Rus-*

The transformational changes on the political map also took place in the former Soviet Central Asian region, which, for natural economic and geostrategic reasons, has become one of the important sectors of international policy since the beginning of the 1990s.

This article takes a look at the main geo-spatial conceptual models drawn up by the American expert community that apply to the countries of the Middle East, in particular to the Central Asian countries, and also evaluates their pertinence and degree of myth. The article's authors focus particular attention on the Greater Central Asia (GCA) concept.

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## A Search for New Approaches and the Need to Apply Geo-Concepts to the Post-Soviet Expanse

At the beginning of the 1990s, geo-spatial concepts began to play an increasingly important role; they were regarded as a foreign policy tool of certain states regarding the geopolitical phenomena and

processes occurring in post-Soviet reality. According to A. Ulunian, there were several factors that prompted geo-spatial theories to be pursued at the end of the 20th century, the main ones being:

1. The need for specific countries to define their foreign policy vector.
2. The subjective need for certain countries (or groups of countries) to position themselves spatially in the regional or global dimension.
3. The need to synchronize the changes in the global distribution of centers of power and the need to carry out foreign policy in the context of the available political, military-strategic, and economic capabilities of the corresponding states or their unions.<sup>2</sup>

There must be a logical consistency, depending on the changes occurring on the political map of the world at the end of the 20th century, when applying various geo-spatial concepts (or theories).

As we know, the term “theory” implies a set of views and ideas that make it possible to draw certain (largely qualitative) conclusions about any phenomena. And correspondingly, “the international relations (IR) theory entails the development of conceptual frameworks to facilitate the understanding and explanation of events and phenomena in world politics.”<sup>3</sup> According to Cynthia Weber, in international relations theory fulfills the function of a myth “that narrates complicated explanations of how the world is and how it ought to be;” IR myths help ... make a particular view of the worlds *appear* to be true.”<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the transformations that occurred after the Soviet Union’s collapse and the emergence of geo-spatial theories among the academics can easily be explained on the basis of classical definitions.

After the collapse of the bipolar system the U.S.’s informational-psychological activity led to the elaboration of a whole series of theories and conceptions regarding the geopolitical expanses that were “liberated” from external domination. The conclusions and inferences of American politicians became the main criterion for determining the U.S.’s foreign policy, and research institutions engaged in studying the processes going on in the former Soviet countries were opened.

After the end of the Cold War, the U.S. gained immense opportunities for cooperating with the countries that had once belonged to the Soviet bloc, as well as with the new states that emerged in the post-Soviet expanse. There was talk about a new world order, the U.S.’s role and place in it, and how the country could carry out its foreign policy objectives without losing sight of its national interests.

In turn, the Central Asian countries suffered all the hardships of the economic, social, and political crises that occurred after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the “democratic transit” process it entailed. New players with their own national interests appeared in the region: the European Union, the Russian Federation, the U.S., China, Iran, and Turkey.

Nevertheless, it was the U.S. analytical community that began playing a dominating role in developing a systemic approach to the further development of the Central Asian region in the post-Soviet period. The Greater Central Asia concept, the basic postulates of which were proposed by well-known American analyst Frederick Starr in 2005, particularly fits the bill in terms of providing a new vision of this region.<sup>5</sup> This concept regards Central Asia as a relatively large zone (much larger than the five post-Soviet republics and Afghanistan) with rather undefined borders and Afghanistan as its nucleus.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>3</sup> “Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung. Lexikon,” available at [[http://www.bpb.de/popup/popup\\_lemmata.html?guid=GEIQ39](http://www.bpb.de/popup/popup_lemmata.html?guid=GEIQ39)] (see also: “What is IR theory?” available at [<http://www.irtheory.com/>]).

<sup>4</sup> C. Weber, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Routledge Chapman & Hall, 2005, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> See: S.F. Starr, “A ‘Greater Central Asia Partnership’ for Afghanistan and Its Neighbors,” *Silk Road Paper*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program—A Joint Transatlantic Research and Policy Center, Johns Hopkins University, Washington, D.C., March 2005.

However, we should keep in mind that it was not Washington, but Moscow and Beijing, its rivals, that first put this concept into practical use. In 1996, Russia and China orchestrated the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This organization included almost all of the countries the GCA concept envisaged developing. According to Gulshan Sachdeva, the ideas put forward by Washington have a lot in common with the goals pursued by the SCO forum.<sup>6</sup>

9/11 and the events in its wake augmented the role of the Central Asian countries during the antiterrorist operation in Afghanistan, and the aggravated rivalry over access to the region's energy resources had a serious impact on U.S. policy.

One of the first signs of change in the current situation was publication in August 2002 of an extensive analytical article by Stephen Blank, an American specialist in Asian geopolitical studies, entitled "Reconstructing Inner Asia."<sup>7</sup> The author focused particular attention on long-range transport projects for developing the CA region and its contiguous territories, mentioning that such projects could help to overcome the region's geographic isolation, which is one of the reasons for the socio-economic backwardness and inefficiency of the current political regimes.

Later, in February 2004, a report was published by Jacquelyn Davis and Michael Sweeney, employees of the American Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, entitled "Central Asia in U.S. Strategy and Operational Planning: Where Do We Go from Here?"<sup>8</sup> The American analysts put forward a concept, the main idea of which boiled down to the U.S. upholding two strategic considerations when re-examining its approach toward CA.

First, the U.S. should make a distinction between the geographic concepts "Central Asia" and "the Caucasus," otherwise it would be impossible to gain a clear impression of how these two world regions are linked to their natural neighbors and, particularly, to the Middle East, as well as to South and East Asia. The Caucasus should be regarded as the "end" of Europe, including the Black Sea Region, and not be considered an appendage of Asia or a littoral part of the Caspian.

Second, the U.S. should not regard the Caspian oil-producing region as the main strategic target. Despite the importance of the Caspian's hydrocarbon resources, America will continue to be energy-dependent on the Persian Gulf (the main producer of oil and gas).<sup>9</sup>

## The GCA Concept: Main Prescriptions for U.S. Regional Policy

The events of 2005 dramatically changed the CA countries' perception and implementation of Western concepts designed to gain an understanding of the region's geopolitical role. The example of Kyrgyzstan, which lived through two waves of so-called Color Revolutions, caused other countries of the region to treat Washington's foreign policy dogmas with a certain amount of apprehension.

In turn, Moscow, in order to prevent Color Revolutions, tried as best it could to create a so-called Security Council within the CIS. But this idea was rejected by Ukraine, which, in turn, could not help but concern the leaders of the CA countries.

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<sup>6</sup> See: G. Sachdeva, "India's Attitude towards China's Growing Influence in Central Asia," in: *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 2006, p. 33.

<sup>7</sup> See: S. Blank, *Reconstructing Inner Asia*, Conflict Studies Research Centre, London, August 2002.

<sup>8</sup> See: J.K. Davis, M.J. Sweeney, *Central Asia in U.S. Strategy and Operational Planning: Where Do We Go from Here?* The Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, February 2004.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

So despite the cautious attitude toward the U.S.'s strategic steps, the CA countries began regarding the GCA geo-concept as a qualitatively new policy.

The main idea of Frederick Starr's concept is geopolitical penetration into CA by creating a new integration union with the participation of other South Asian countries, as well as Afghanistan.

"The United States' strategic objectives in greater Central Asia are several: It must advance the war on terrorism, building U.S.-linked security infrastructures. It must enable Afghanistan and its neighbors to protect themselves against radical Islamist groups and drug traffickers. It must work to strengthen the region's economies and relevant government institutions to the point where the region can serve as an economic and political bridge between the Middle East and southern and eastern Asia. It must work to develop vigorous regional trade and adequate transport. It must foster participatory political systems that can serve as models for other countries with Muslim populations. All these ends are best advanced on a regional basis."<sup>10</sup>

The concept was initially based on the idea of poor development of regional cooperation among the Central Asian states, however imposing the U.S.'s own national interests is making interaction among them even more difficult. Moreover, according to the experts, at the beginning of the new century, the U.S. state administration structure did not meet the demands of the times. Washington's administrative bodies frequently encountered difficulties caused by the uneven distribution of powers in different institutions.

Frederick Starr addresses the problem of re-institutionalization of the U.S. state departments in the context of the foreign policy tasks Washington is encountering in the CA region; distribution of the zones of geographic responsibility within some U.S. state institutions is preventing the emergence of a GCA zone with Afghanistan as its nucleus.

For example, the U.S. Defense and State Departments see the five former Soviet CA republics and the Russian Federation as part of Eurasia, while, according to them, Afghanistan belongs to South Asia. This distribution makes it essentially impossible to take into account the states' interests, nor does it make it possible to determine the most beneficial cooperation between the CA countries and their regional neighbors.

Despite the achievements Afghanistan had made by 2005 (adoption of a constitution in 2004, election of a president, and establishment of a centralized government that became the first genuine representative legislative structure in three decades), little has changed in the country.

Expert on Afghanistan and crisis situations L. Korolkov wrote the following on this account in 2005: "In the Tribal Areas, the situation is controlled not so much by the government as by the same Taliban who at one time, after the resounding success of the antiterrorist campaign in Afghanistan, arrived on the scene as "recovered" Pashtoon tribes; this is a quagmire in which any, even the most powerful, state could find itself bogged down."<sup>11</sup> He also noted that the antiterrorist Operation Enduring Freedom had not achieved its objective.

This shows that the situation is only getting worse, and the new American leadership understands this. Another 30,000 servicemen have swelled the ranks of the country's military contingent.

So drawing up geo-spatial theories and their further implementation can be viewed as the U.S.'s impetuous penetration into strategically important regions such as Central and South Asia, as well as Afghanistan.

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<sup>10</sup> S.F. Starr, "A Partnership for Central Asia," *Foreign Affairs*, July-August 2005, available at [[http://www.cfr.org/publication/8937/partnership\\_for\\_central\\_asia.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/8937/partnership_for_central_asia.html)].

<sup>11</sup> V. Volkov, "Afghanistan—igra v perevetryshi," 2 November, 2005, available at [<http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,1763730,00.html>].

## Russia's and China's Stance on the GCA Concept

The cautious reaction of Russia and China to the new geopolitical concept proposed by Washington is very interesting. Moscow and Beijing are concerned about the situation in Afghanistan and Central Asia, on the one hand, while they are skeptical about the U.S.'s long-term presence and "obligations" in the region, on the other.<sup>12</sup>

The Central Asian states are pursuing a multivectoral policy that entails balancing relations with the main global and regional players. This is being achieved by participating in integration unions (the SCO, EurAsEC, and the CTSO) and Western investment projects.

However, Frederick Starr believes that Russia and China can become involved in the discussion of the GCA concept; "the Greater Central Asia Partnership for Cooperation and Development (GCAP) would pose no threat to Russia's or China's legitimate activities in the region." He also claims that Washington is willing to listen to any constructive opinions and proposals these two countries may have.

Thus, "Washington can help Russia and China appreciate the benefits that the GCAP would offer each of them. Development would alleviate the extreme poverty that feeds extremist movements, and it would stem the tide of illegal immigrants to Russia. Strengthened border regimes would help reduce separatist activity in Xinjiang. The improvement of transportation infrastructure would give western Siberia and the Urals new export routes to Asia, and China's Xinjiang region would gain a window onto the south."<sup>13</sup>

On the whole, Russia's and China's cautious attitude toward implementing the GCA project is at times expressed in its extremely critical assessments.

According to expert A. Knyazev, the main gist of the American geostrategy for the Central Asian region was formulated by Zbigniew Brzezinski, who said that, "The priority must be to manage the rise of other regional powers in ways that do not threaten America's global primacy." Knyazev went on to assert that one of the ways to manage this situation was to create "manageable conflicts." The GCA project should also be viewed from this perspective.<sup>14</sup>

According to Tajik expert G. Maitdinova, the U.S. needs the GCA geo-concept for managing all the economic and political processes going on in the region without having to worry about resistance from Russia and China. Today's new geopolitical structure of CA might help to fortify the U.S.'s dominating role at the regional and global levels.<sup>15</sup>

It should be noted that the attitude of the academic communities inside CA to the GCA project is extremely ambivalent. On the one hand, the analysts are interested in the development of geo-economic processes, while on the other, they are calling on the heads of their governments to treat Washington's geopolitical projects with caution.

In particular, G. Maitdinova notes that "most of the CA analytical community regards the GCA geo-concept as America's approach to realizing its own national interests without taking account of the objective fact that the region's states are entities currently in need of serious modernization, and

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<sup>12</sup> See: N. Godehardt, M. Hanif, R. Sakaeda, "Sicherheitspolitische Herausforderungen der Regierung Obama in Asien," *GIGA* (German Institute of Global and Area Studies), No. 1, 2004, S. 5.

<sup>13</sup> S.F. Starr, "A Partnership for Central Asia."

<sup>14</sup> A. Knyazev, "'Bolshaia Tsentral'naia Azia—eto vpolne ochevidnyy geopoliticheskiy marazm,'" D. Kislov interviews A. Knyazev," 5 July, 2007, available at [www.ferghana.ru].

<sup>15</sup> See: G.M. Maitdinova, "Geopolitika Tsentral'noi Azii. Mezhdunarodnoe sotrudnichestvo v Tsentral'noi Evrazii po obespecheniiu regional'noi bezopasnosti: protivodeistvie novym ugrozam, mekhanizmy, vektory vzaimodeistviia," *The Information-Analytical Portal "Geopolitika—geopolitika posmoderna,"* 10 March, 2010, available at [http://www.geopolitika.ru/Articles/911/].

not geopolitical targets. The SCO Participating States and observers are already trying to solve the economic and political tasks set by Washington. The GCA project, which is dictated by the U.S.'s geopolitical interests, has still not found support among the CA states that are sufficiently effectively integrated into the SCO and EurAsEC."<sup>16</sup>

Frederick Starr proposes making economic interaction with the CA countries a top priority. Despite the weak contacts that existed in this sphere at the end of the 1990s, Washington has understood that not one geopolitical concept can be successful without economic backup.

According to the statement U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Fried made in 2005 at hearings before the House of Representatives on the economic situation in CA (within the framework of the GCA project), Washington would like to see the region's countries as competitive participants in the energy dialog with the South Asian countries, which, in turn, is a necessary attribute of strategic proximity within the framework of the concept offered.<sup>17</sup>

The U.S. believes that export of Kyrgyz and Tajik electricity to neighboring countries, Afghanistan, and on to Pakistan could serve as an example of intensified economic partnership in the energy industry.

The U.S. Agency for International Development has drawn up a plan for establishing (in the next five years) a unified electricity market for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. A project is also being prepared that aims to form a unified energy system in Central and Southern Asia (from Kazakhstan to India). And another project is being promoted, CASA 1000,<sup>18</sup> which was instituted by the World Bank, but which Washington supports in every way.

The concept envisages several essentially unattainable objectives, suggesting that democratic societies be built in the conditions of the existing authoritarian regimes, and that "Afghanistan and the entire region of which it is the heart [be transformed] into a zone of secure sovereignties sharing viable market economies, secular and relatively open systems of governance, respecting citizens' rights, and maintaining positive relations with the U.S."<sup>19</sup> In actual fact, the main reason the U.S. is strengthening its position in the CA is due to the region's resource potential<sup>20</sup> ("black" and "blue" gold).

By increasing its influence in the CA region, the U.S. is also trying to undermine the position of its main rivals, Russia and China. According to D. Meienreis, this striving is shown by the drawing up of new pipeline projects, for example, Iran-Pakistan-India and Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India.<sup>21</sup>

## *Conclusion*

On the whole, the GCA concept implies transformation of the Eurasian continent, which envisages transforming Central and Southern Asia into a single resource and strategic whole and gradually extricating the region from the sphere of Russia's and China's influence.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>17</sup> See: "Bolshaya Tsentral'naya Azia i Kazakhstan," *Information-Analytical Center for the Study of Sociopolitical Processes in the Post-Soviet Expanse*, available at [<http://www.ia-centr.ru/>].

<sup>18</sup> Building the CASA regional power transmission line with a capacity of 1,000 MW will be the first step in developing a Central Asian and South Asian electricity market, CASAREM. The length of the power transmission line from Tajikistan to Pakistan through Afghanistan alone will be more than 750 km. The approximate cost of the project is estimated at \$770 million. The CASA-1000 project includes the current power transmission line from Kyrgyzstan to Tajikistan and a new high-voltage power transmission line to be built from Tajikistan to Pakistan which will later be hooked up to the South Asian vector and electric power substations in Kabul, Peshawar, and Sangtuda. The World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) have stated their intentions to invest in the project.

<sup>19</sup> S.F. Starr, "A 'Greater Central Asia Partnership' for Afghanistan and Its Neighbors," p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> See: J. Nichol, "Central Asia: Regional Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests," in: *Foreign Affairs*, Defense and Trade Division, 12 November, 2004, pp. 1-3.

<sup>21</sup> See: D. Meienreis, "Obama, Afghanistan und das neue 'Große Spiel,'" 10 January, 2010, available at [<http://marx21.de/content/view/926/32/>].

Implementation of this project is unlikely for several reasons.

- First, the situation in Afghanistan, which forms a link between Central and Southern Asia, is extremely unstable.
- Second, the U.S. has been deprived of its military support base, Khanabad, in Uzbekistan (22 November, 2005) and, it seems, is beginning to lose the fight with Russia over military-political influence in Kyrgyzstan. We are referring here to the Manas base, which is currently a transit center for transporting cargo to the U.S. and NATO armed forces in Afghanistan.
- Third, the differences in the objectives and interests of the Central Asian states themselves is hindering implementation of the GCA project. This is primarily associated with the geopolitical activity the main players (the U.S., Russia, and the PRC) are conducting. Their efforts to gain a stronger foothold in each of the CA countries is prompting the region's countries, in turn, to draw up their own game rules. The CA countries are trying to preserve their fragile regimes while counting on support from the U.S., Russia, and the PRC and also competing among themselves. For example, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are waging a furtive war for leadership, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan cannot resolve the problem of supplying the region with water and energy. It stands to reason that the U.S. will try to play an increasingly active role in resolving and settling these processes, including within the framework of the GCA geo-concept.

On the whole, in the near future, the Central Asian region can expect serious structural changes caused by the new balance of powers in the region after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the emergence of new players who are actively promoting their strategic goals in the region, and the diverse foreign policy approaches and conceptions of the states that have their interests in the CA.

Success by any of these political players will largely depend on the extent to which the concepts they put forward coincide with the present reality in CA and the current interests of the leaders of the region's countries.