

# DEVELOPMENT OF THE GEOPOLITICAL SITUATION IN CENTRAL ASIA THROUGH THE PRISM OF UKRAINIAN NATIONAL INTERESTS

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**A**t the end of the 20th century, Central Asia became the main intersection of the political processes going on in the world and the arena for a latent confrontation between the largest states. The main strategic rivals—the U.S., Russia, and China—are interested in forming their own

security structure and are striving to take personal control over the region's raw materials and energy resources, as well as over the transcontinental communication lines that link Europe with Asia.

As a result of the antiterrorist campaign in Afghanistan, Central Asia has become a zone of Washington's permanent global interests. On 13 December, 2001, Elizabeth Jones, Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, said in her testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's Subcommittee on Central Asia and the Caucasus: "After this conflict is over, we will not abandon Central Asia. We are committed to providing the resources, the high-level attention, and the multinational coordination to support reform opportunities. We want to stand by the Central Asian countries in their struggle to reform their societies in the same way they have stood by us in the war on terrorism."<sup>1</sup> In other words, the antiterrorist campaign gave the U.S. a legitimate opportunity to implement its long-term foreign policy strategy. Having incorporated the states of Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus into its zone of "vitally important interests," Washington began implementing Zbigniew Brzezinski's geostrategic conception. And its goal is "to help ensure that no single power comes to

<sup>1</sup> [<http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2001/11299.htm>].

control this geopolitical space and that the global community has unhindered financial and economic access to it."<sup>2</sup>

Since the United States is actively building its new regional strategy and security system, Russia and China have been forced to step up the formation of their own geopolitical space in the region by reviewing the national defense systems here. In this way, American geostrategy in the region is creating a new configuration of interrelations in the U.S.-RF-PRC format, which will inevitably lead to more intense competition and to new contradictions based on the changing geopolitical and geo-economic priorities regarding expansion of the global markets.

The Ukrainian president's visit to Central Asia in 2003 showed that Kiev is interested in developing constructive relations with its republics. And although Ukraine possesses enough potential to expand interstate cooperation in different areas, it does not have the opportunity on its own, given its insufficient economic and military resources, to have a significant influence on the geopolitical situation in this region, which Kiev should keep in mind if it wishes to strengthen contacts with the countries here.

<sup>2</sup> Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard. American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, Basic Books, New York, 1997, p. 148.

## Geopolitical Situation in the Region: An Outline

Historical, political, economic, and humanitarian factors make it possible to look at Central Asia as a single geopolitical space. At present, processes are going on here that are also characteristic of other parts of the world, such as regional integration, democratization of domestic and foreign policy, and transnational cooperation. Security threats are having an immense impact on the situation. They include religious extremism, national separatism, the illicit circulation of drugs and arms, illegal migration, and other manifestations of international organized crime. And whereas the Central Asian states used to consider Russia the only power capable of withstanding radical Islam, after the U.S. rapidly eliminated the Taliban movement in Afghanistan, they see the military presence of the U.S. and other states of the antiterrorist coalition in their republics as the guarantee of stability in the region rather than relying on Moscow's "power" structures. What is more, the presence of a limited American contingent is seen as a way to increase real financial assignments, raise the investment attractiveness of the national economies, and confirm the legitimacy of the existing political regimes. It is a well-known fact that the latter do not meet West European standards. And although spreading "democratization" in the world is still a foreign policy strategy priority for the U.S., Washington will have to cooperate with these regimes in order to reach its geopolitical goals.

The United States is developing military-political ties most intensely with Uzbekistan. Their bilateral relations have reached the level of a strategic alliance. In particular, the U.S. has become the republic's main partner in reforming its army, and Tashkent, in turn, is a champion of Washington's

geostrategic interests, including of its military presence in the region. Uzbekistan is attractive to the U.S. because of its geopolitical parameters. It borders on all the Central Asian states and on Afghanistan (which is very important from the military viewpoint), and is a country in the region where Moscow's political influence is the weakest. What is more, if the Uzbek authorities prohibit the passage of Russian military units or the flight of military freight airplanes across its territory, this will undermine the geostrategic position of the Russian military group deployed in Tajikistan. The likelihood of events developing along the lines of this scenario is apparently one of the reasons that not only relations between Moscow and Dushanbe are being strengthened, but also Russian-Kyrgyz military-political cooperation is being boosted.

Kazakhstan has also been actively developing relations with western states recently, including in the military sphere. For example, the U.S. Department of Defense announced the implementation of a project called "Bioattack Early Warning and Preparedness," which envisages opening scientific centers in the republic that will be engaged in monitoring the situation regarding the possible spread of dangerous bacteria in the region. What is more, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly is planning to create a regional center here for fighting terrorism, where employees of the Central Asian special services will be trained, as well as to render Kazakhstan assistance in building up its overall defensibility, including outfitting the state border and modernizing the system of military communication means and air defense forces.

Before 11 September, 2001, the U.S. showed an interest in Central Asia only in terms of the energy resource supplies found in the region and the possibility of transporting them to the world markets, as a result of which the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline project appeared. At this time, Washington limited itself to diplomatic interaction and economic "stimulation." But the hostilities in Afghanistan shifted the accent in U.S. geopolitical strategy, and the question of assimilating the region's energy resources was pushed into the background, while general security problems came to the foreground. The shift in emphasis in American regional geopolitics led to an increase in Washington's interest in the Central Asian countries that do not have significant supplies of oil and gas, that is, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Whereas Tashkent has been conducting a policy of separation from Moscow for quite some time by relying on Washington's limited support, the significant military-strategic gap forming between Moscow and its southern neighbors, Bishkek and Dushanbe, could have a serious effect on the formation of a regional security system.

What is more, the U.S.'s military-technical presence in Central Asia is encouraging the development of military-political and military-technical cooperation between the region's countries and the North Atlantic Alliance, which in August 2003 assumed control of the peacekeeping contingent of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan. Taking into account the above, the conclusion can be drawn that the U.S. and NATO are viewing Central Asia as their military-political frontline in Eurasia, which is becoming the advanced post for the fight against international terrorism and drug trafficking. This is leading to the fact that the main factor of Russia's presence in the region, military, is noticeably declining in significance for the countries here. Taking into account the current situation, the RF undertook several military-political organizational measures. For example, the Collective Security Treaty (CST) was transformed into the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and Moscow deployed an air base in Kant (Kyrgyzstan) and is planning to create rapid reaction forces consisting of 6,000 soldiers in this republic. But Russia, the economic growth rates of which are still slow, will be unable to create a strong power in Central Asia symmetrical to the military presence of the Western countries.

Taking into account the speed with which the American military bases were created in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (without perceptible objections from Russia and without consultations among the member states of the CST), the conclusion can be drawn that NATO and the U.S. consider the CSTO a weak structure incapable in the near or mid future of actively opposing the spread of their influence in the region. Nevertheless, Western countries understand that without Russia they cannot yet effectively control the situation in Central Asia. And today NATO is not trying to force a situation whereby the CSTO would objectively have to step forward as the West's rival, and strive to cooperate with it as an organization capable of complementing the Alliance's activity and helping to ensure general security. The leaders of both structures spoke in favor of cooperation, in particular, Secretary General of CSTO Nikolai Bordiuzha said, "We are interested in cooperating with NATO. As of today, only the CSTO and NATO are

special organizations which place the priority on security questions.”<sup>3</sup> It is very likely that NATO and the CSTO will implement joint projects, which will put up serious resistance to the regional threats. But close ties between these defense organizations will obviously put China on the alert, which will evaluate such cooperation as a threat to its leading position in the region, since it will lower the threshold of the PRC’s national security. As a result, Beijing may undertake countermeasures to prevent these bilateral contacts, which will likely lead to an arms race in Central Asia.

One of the ways to resolve this problem is to establish cooperation in the fight against regional threats in a trilateral format: NATO-CSTO-SCO (the Shanghai Cooperation Organization), which will essentially mean interaction among the U.S., Russia, and China.

As we already noted, the West’s geopolitical interest is aroused by the oil and gas resources of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, as well as by the problems of transporting them to the world markets. According to optimistic forecasts, beginning in 2015, Kazakhstan will be able to produce 120-150 million tons of oil a year. In order to realize its national interests regarding diversification of its import of energy resources, the U.S. is striving to create conditions in the region for the safe (transparent and primarily under American control) assimilation of the Caspian and Central Asian deposits, as well as for building pipelines that bypass Russia and Iran. In this case, the geopolitical goals of the United States coincide with the interests of Turkey and Pakistan.

As for Moscow, it traditionally has a strong foothold in the region’s oil and gas industry and is actively consolidating it. For example, almost all of Kazakhstan’s oil and most of Turkmenistan’s gas are pumped along Russian pipelines, which naturally in no way coincides with America’s geostrategic interests. The U.S. is exerting significant political and economic efforts to involve Kazakhstan in the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and in the Odessa-Brody-Plock route. If these projects are implemented, Russia’s oil transit monopoly in Central Asia will be banished. What is more, at present, projects for regional gas pipelines are being discussed, in which Turkmenistan is the key player. But the opposing interests of the participants are delaying their implementation. Incidentally, Moscow was able to lay the foundation for forming an Eurasian gas alliance, in which, along with Russia, three of the main blue fuel manufacturers in Central Asia are members (Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan), as well as Kyrgyzstan. For example, Russia’s Gazprom Company signed long-term contracts with Astana, Bishkek, and Ashghabad.

In turn, China is also looking at the region as a vitally important source of energy resources. According to experts, by 2010, Beijing will need to import 120 million tons of oil a year (in 2002, this index was 60 million tons), which will force the PRC to step up its activity in redistributing the energy resources of the Central Asian countries, particularly in Kazakhstan. Both countries are already reaping perceptible economic dividends from their cooperation at the Aktiubinsk oil field, and a grandiose project for building an oil pipeline from western Kazakhstan to the western regions of China is being considered. Developing relations in the oil and gas industry with Turkmenistan holds just as high a priority for the PRC. In order to technically equip this industry, Beijing granted Ashghabad several privileged credits.

China’s interests in creating market regulations for free access to the oil- and gas-producing regions coincide with the strivings of the U.S. Thus the PRC is the U.S. and Russia’s main rival in the region, particularly in everything that concerns the transportation of Kazakhstan’s oil and the assimilation of its resources.

A problem that the Central Asian countries, the U.S., Russia, and China have in common is combating the cultivation of drug-bearing crops and illicit drug trafficking. In this respect, the main threat to the region’s political and economic stability comes from Afghanistan. Drug trafficking is having the most acute effect on Tajikistan’s national security, since it has the longest border with this drug manufacturer of all the region’s states. The republic is actively fighting drug trafficking and currently occupies fourth place in the world in terms of detaining drug traders. Since the beginning of 2003 alone, approximately three tons of drugs have been intercepted on the Tajik-Afghan border. Combating their manufacture, illegal shipment, and trafficking is an important area of activity for NATO, the CSTO, and the SCO. These organizations stated that the spread of drugs is a threat that must be fought with every means available.

The change in the geopolitical situation is also having an effect on interregional competition. Whereas Uzbekistan was the Central Asian leader in conducting the antiterrorist campaign, Kazakhstan is acquiring

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<sup>3</sup> RIA Novosti, 9 October, 2003 [[http://www.rian.ru/rian/intro.cfm?nws\\_id=446255](http://www.rian.ru/rian/intro.cfm?nws_id=446255)].

increasing significance as the main partner in large-scale economic and humanitarian projects in the eyes of the international community. For example, according to Canadian, French, and Polish experts, Kazakhstan is currently one of the main Central Asian states, with which cooperation should primarily be developed.

The U.N. has offered Kazakhstan the Regional Plan-21 strategy, according to which the republic would assume responsibility for creating conditions aimed at maintaining the sustainable development of the Central Asian countries. In particular, the matter concerns strengthening interstate cooperation to eliminate poverty and revive the deteriorating environment. The Asia-Pacific Forum for Environment and Development has also announced its desire to cooperate with Astana. It is believed that Kazakhstan's participation in the work of this association will help to speed up the development not only of the republic, but of the region as a whole.

## Kiev's Interests and Role in the Region

The geopolitical situation in Central Asia depends on the general state of relations between Russia and the U.S., which, along with strengthening cooperation in the fight against terrorism, is not free of disagreements and remains potentially in a state of conflict. In this situation, the region's countries have the same geostrategic viewpoints as Ukraine, which has stated its intention to develop closer ties with the European and Euro-Atlantic structures. This is the basis for their mutual cooperation.

One of the most promising areas of economic cooperation between Ukraine and the Central Asian states is interaction in the oil and gas industry. For example, Astana's desire to transport its oil via the Ukrainian Odessa-Brody oil pipeline is extremely important for Kiev, which representatives of the Kazakhstani KazMunaiGaz Company have stated more than once. What is more, Kiev is holding negotiations with Ashgabad on long-term deliveries of blue fuel. If this contract is signed, competition will be generated between the gas companies of Ukraine and Russia over the purchase of Turkmen gas. Ukraine's cooperation with the Central Asian countries appears advantageous and extremely promising, since all of its participants will be able to become less dependent on Russia in the transportation of hydrocarbons. Ukraine's participation in the energy projects is also very promising, particularly in building and reconstructing hydroelectric power stations in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. These countries are rich in hydroresources, but poor in raw hydrocarbons, and are looking for ways to decrease their imports by finding alternative energy sources.

The states of Western and Northern Europe are interested in creating reliable modern communication lines between themselves and Asia as a whole, including with the Asia-Pacific Region. As a result of this, the countries of Central Asia are becoming an important part of interregional projects. Ukraine, which considers the creation of transit routes through its territory a priority in the country's economic development, is extremely interested in forming such transregional transportation-communication corridors. Kiev's most immediate interest in this direction is forming a transportation link (Southern Caucasus-Central Asia), since in Moscow's alternative, Ukraine, as well as the republics of the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia, have been given the role of periphery actors. And if the situation develops along the Russian scenario, it will acquire the status of a continental communication monopolist and gain control over the foreign economic policy of the GUUAM countries (Georgia-Ukraine-Uzbekistan-Azerbaijan-Moldova), as well as unlimited opportunity to put pressure on their domestic markets. This makes it strategically important for Ukraine and the other GUUAM members to be aware of the threats to their common economic interests from Russia's striving to monopolize the Eurasian system of transportation-communication corridors that is forming.

In order to raise its activity in Central Asia, Ukraine should take advantage of the potential of GUUAM and the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO). Within the framework of the latter, intensification of the political dialog, formation of an integrated security space, and common efforts to maintain peace and stability in the region are envisaged. In the post-Soviet space the CACO has become the second international organization after GUUAM to form without the participation of Russia. And although they are both still at the stage of searching for and forming efficient mechanisms for implementing joint projects, coordinating their actions, and so on, there are already opportunities to optimize their activity. The prior-

ity questions in these areas are problems of security and coordinating viewpoints on cooperation, in particular in the modernization of the power engineering and transportation industries.