

REGIONAL POLITICS

**GEOPOLITICAL INTERESTS OF RUSSIA,
THE U.S. AND CHINA
IN CENTRAL ASIA**

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After the Soviet Union collapsed all of its former republics became independent states; as a result Central Asia, a closed, enigmatic, and hard-to-reach region of Eurasia, again found a worthy place in the very heart of the continent. This changed Eurasia's geopolitical map and revealed the global geopolitical and strategic weight of Central Asia. A region that during the long Cold War years remained in the background has reclaimed the attention of the world leaders and a key role in their global strategy. Geographically, Central Asia is the core of Eurasia, a link that connects it with the Middle East, and a transit corridor that spreads the influence of the world powers in all directions.

American strategists are convinced that, together with control over the region, the United States will gain control over economically developed Europe and East Asia and, probably, over Africa and other areas. The region is rich in energy fuels: there is the opinion that Kazakhstan's reserves amount to at least 1 to 1.7 trillion barrels of oil (or nearly 2 percent of world's oil reserves).¹ According to other sources, Central Asian reserves are estimated at \$3 trillion. Together with the neighboring coastal Caspian areas, the figures reach astro-

¹ See: K. Tokaefu, "Hasakesitande duiwai zhengce" (K. Tokaev, "Foreign Policy of Kazakhstan"), *Waijiao xueyuan xuebao*, No. 3, 2002, p. 11.

nomical dimensions. The Caspian reserves of natural gas are estimated at 1.4 trillion c m, while the prospected oil reserves amount to 0.7-1 trillion tons. This has earned the Caspian area the name of “second Persian Gulf.” About 60 to 70 percent of oil is con-

centrated on the Caspian shelf next to Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan. This suggests that Central Asia will remain an arena of rivalry among the world and regional powers. Let us discuss the geopolitical strategies of three of them: Russia, the U.S. and China.

Russia's Geopolitical Strategy

In the past Russia has pursued an aggressive policy in Central Asia designed to extend its influence in the region and Russify it.² When this influence reached its peak the Soviet Union fell apart due to its internal contradictions. This happened more than 12 years ago—so far, Russia has been unable to restore its former influence, while the road to its resurrection is a long one.

Today, especially after 9/11, Moscow's geopolitical strategy in Central Asia, as an inalienable part of its foreign strategy, has acquired special importance. It is expected to help Russia revive, therefore Moscow will constantly readjust it to the changing political situation. The very essence of Russia's strategy, however, will remain the same; in the foreign policy context it will include long-term friendship with Afghanistan and Iran; closer to home, it will rely on cooperation with Kazakhstan, control over Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and efforts to win Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan over to its side. This is determined by Russia's geographic position in relation to the regional countries and serves as an objective basis of Moscow's Central Asian strategy.

At the same time, Russia is growing weaker—it can no longer dispatch adequate forces to Central Asia. The Soviet Union's downfall deprived Russia of a large share of its strategic expanse and the larger part of its seaports. Today, Russia is facing even greater dangers created by the fact that although the Warsaw Treaty Organization has disappeared NATO continues to move eastwards. Its international position is worsening with each passing year. First, the Russian Federation lost nearly all of its political influence in every region of the world, with the exception of few CIS countries, even though it joined the G8 (according to the G7 + 1 formula). The Western countries accepted it so as to console it and keep it by their side because of its nuclear potential, which is very troubling to them. Second, Russia's effort to embrace the market economy has not yet produced the desired results: its GDP shrank by half in the last ten years and the standard of living dropped considerably; class differences are becoming more and more obvious, while public discontent is rising. Third, even though Russia does have nuclear weapons its conventional armaments are obsolete, while its army is not strong enough to stand up to the West. Being aware of this, Moscow has to concentrate on the CIS and frequently readjust its Central Asian policies.

In the region itself, all five countries are living through a period of economic and political transformations and the instability caused by them. The transfer to the market economy and the political changes led to unequal development and mass unemployment, and brought many enterprises to the brink of bankruptcy. This could easily develop into internal conflicts. Together with state sovereignty these countries recovered their ethnic identities; today they are building a new economic system. Suppressed in the Soviet Union, nationalism flared up, especially in the multinational republics. Today Russia cannot afford its control over Central Asia, which is a costly project; its current policies there may lure it into a trap similar to that of the Afghan war. In addition, today when Russia finds it hard to cope with its domestic problems, American and Western investments are very tempting for the Central Asian countries.

² See: Wang Jingo, “Dui Zhongya shehui ‘eluosihua’ gainiande lilun tantao” (On the Problem of Russification of Central Asian Society), *Dongou Zhongya yanjiu*, No. 5, 2002, p. 64.

American Strategic Expansion

Attracted by its key strategic situation and rich fuel resources the United States looks at Central Asia as an inalienable part of its global strategy. Under Soviet power, the region was “a courtyard” of the Soviet Union to which America had no access. The Soviet Union’s disintegration gave Washington a key to the region’s political, military, and economic doors. Today, America is working toward turning Central Asia into a base of its strategic resources and a center from where it can keep the reins on Russia; it is gradually including the region in its global strategy. The U.S. geopolitical strategy in Eurasia aims at maintaining an American presence in Central Asia and protecting the U.S.’s growing economic interests there, in Europe, and the Far East. The United States is penetrating Central Asia in three directions.

First, politically the process is aggravating the relations between Russia and the region’s countries. The United States is forcing the local states to embrace Western values and democratic ideology in an effort to make them part of the Western system. Second, America is gradually building up its military presence in Central Asia; it is extending its influence and role in ensuring the region’s security; it is out to “help” the local states liberate themselves from their dependence on Russia in the security sphere. Third, Washington is using its economic might in the form of financial aid and direct investments to gain control over the largest enterprises in the key industries; it is especially active in the sphere of mining and transportation of natural resources.

After 9/11 American troops entered Central Asia, thus making it one of the main fronts of the global war on terror. The United States has successfully employed the slogan of antiterrorist struggle to penetrate the region; today it is gaining control over its hydrocarbon resources and Caspian oil; it is moving aside the oil export projects that America does not need and keeping Russia on the sidelines of the process. As a result, the Central Asian states are gradually moving away from Russia.

America’s successful penetration into Central Asia has eclipsed NATO’s eastward movement by far: Washington realized to a much greater extent what the North Atlantic Alliance wanted or planned to achieve. Strategically this means that in the future Russia will feel pressure from two sides and that Russia’s and China’s leading roles in the region will be ignored.³

China’s Strategic Interests: Their Basis and Development

Since the times of the Great Silk Road China has been maintaining close political, economic and cultural contacts with the region. Some people in the West expected Chinese influence to fill the post-Soviet vacuum in Central Asia. They were wrong.⁴ For a long time Beijing refused to be as actively involved in the regional developments as was expected. China displayed caution by watching the changes and taking time to formulate its own long-term Central Asian strategy. This should not be taken to mean that Beijing underestimated the region’s geopolitical importance and the value of its energy resources: the situation was too vague to interfere. On 15 June, 2001 the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was set up—this proved an important landmark in China’s policies, which meant that after a long period of deliberations and careful preparations Beijing acquired its Central Asian strategy. Since then, China has been using the SCO to be actively involved in all regional issues, to develop its relations with the

³ See: “Zhanlue shijiao: Mei zhu jun Zhongya chunji Eluosi” (Point of View: American Military Bases in Central Asia Threaten Russia’s Interests), *Lianhe zaobao* (Singapore), 8 February, 2002.

⁴ See: K.Sh. Khafizova, “Mezhdunarodnye sily v Tsentral’noy Azii i globalizatsia. Mezhdunarodnaia nauchno-prakticheskaja konferentsia, posviashchennaia Godu Rossii v Kazakhstane,” in: *Kazakhstansko-rossiiskoe vzaimodeystvie v XXI veke i vyzovy globalizatsii*, Kazakhstan Publishers, Astana, 2004, p. 90.

local countries, to contribute to their stability and prosperity, and to look after its own strategic interests concentrated on developing local resources. By 1993 China had become an oil importer: its domestic production meets only 70 percent of domestic consumption. The Institute for International Energy Studies forecasted that by 2004 China will consume 330 thousand barrels of oil a day. China's developing economy will need more and more oil—the country will become even more oil-dependent, thus moving Beijing's energy strategy to the top of the list of priorities. Industrial resources are the worst headache in China and its most important security problem. Today, the country's energy sphere depends on the Middle East: 62 percent of imported oil comes from this region. The war in Iraq that started on 20 March, 2003 dealt a heavy blow to China's foreign trade and investments and slowed down its economic growth.

To avoid similar negative developments in the future, China should pay attention to Central Asia, Russia, the Caspian, and other regions. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have agreed to lay an oil pipeline to China; and the PRC extended a loan of \$69.7m to Uzbekistan to modernize drilling equipment in places of joint oil production. China's resource strategy in Central Asia and Russia is aimed at avoiding the negative results of oil disasters in the Middle East. Since Central Asia comes third after the Middle East and Siberia in terms of oil reserves, the SCO is doomed to an important role in world politics.

In 2001, China and Kazakhstan signed an agreement on good-neighborly relations and bilateral cooperation in the military and antiterrorist spheres, which allowed the sides to cut down armaments along the mutual border and increase mutual confidence; both countries are exerting greater efforts in the joint antiterrorist struggle.

The policy of "overall development of the western districts" now unfolding in China is an important part of China's economic integration with the Central Asian states. If continued, the present oil extraction rates in Russia may deplete its oil reserves by 2040—this adds importance to Central Asian energy resources when it comes to ensuring China's development in the 21st century.

China and the local states are facing a number of problems intimately related to the future: they should decide how they can strengthen cooperation within the SCO; how they can improve its trade and economic contacts; and how to use the resources together in order to combat terrorism and other threats, etc.

Post 9/11 Evolution of the U.S.-Russia-China Triangle

New Relations

American troops came to Central Asia after the terrorist attacks of 11 September, 2001 under the slogan of the antiterrorist struggle. At the same time, Russia was secretly promoting its own interests. On the one hand, it extended considerable assistance to the Northern Alliance, representatives of which could occupy posts in Afghanistan's interim cabinet after the war. We should bear in mind that Moscow returned to Afghanistan not without Washington's help. On the other, by coordinating the struggle against the Afghan terrorists and liquidating threats to Central Asian stability with the help of the United States, Russia cut off foreign assistance to the illegitimate forces in Chechnia. Today, Russia is using the antiterrorist struggle to finally resolve the Chechen question, which is still causing concern in the West. The relations between Moscow and Washington improved not because Russia had grown stronger, but thanks to the Kremlin's correct diplomacy.

The relations between China and Russia also improved. After the Russian-American summit, the leaders of China, Russia, and four Central Asian states adopted the SCO Charter at the SCO summit held in 2002 in St. Petersburg. They agreed that the organization was neither a military bloc, nor a closed al-

liance. This provided the new regional structure, which lived through a period of turmoil after 9/11, with legal and political foundations for its cooperation with other international structures; it can admit new members and it acquired other useful aspects.

Despite certain differences in the triangle countries' bilateral relations, a certain breakthrough was made in this sphere in the wake of the terrorist attacks in the United States. Chinese-American relations became more active at the top level: after 9/11 President Bush visited China twice, while the newly elected Chinese leader Hu Jintao visited the United States. This means that both leaders cherish their bilateral contacts and hope to establish constructive relations. International incidents, of which the 9/11 attacks were one, are forcing nations to seek a balance between further expansion and the existing structures and to cushion contradictions between the further development of relationships and national interests.

At the same time, the events of 11 September added a new edge to the rivalry among China, Russia, and America for influence in Central Asia; they changed, to a great extent, the balance of forces among them. The United States gained access to Central Asia, invaded Iraq, withdrew from the ABM Treaty, and continues to ignore China's and Russia's opinions. The latter, however, have chosen to disregard this for the sake of common future interests; they are doing their best to display flexibility when dealing with the superpower and reach a consensus on issues of common interest.

The Central Asian Countries and the Triangle's Development

Before 11 September Central Asia presented no threat to the United States as a nuclear or a conflict-ridden zone. After 11 September the situation changed radically. Had the United States not emerged from the Cold War as the only superpower, had globalization not given it its present might and unique position, had post-Soviet Russia's might not declined dramatically and forced it to seek Western economic aid, the agreement between the U.S. and Russia over Central Asia would have probably been different from what it is now. In other words, Moscow would have never reconciled itself to the U.S. military presence there.

After 9/11 the local states established much closer ties with America and other Western countries. It should be noted that Kazakhstan, Kirghizia and Uzbekistan became involved in NATO's Partnership for Peace program in 1994 (Tajikistan then also wanted to join). Uzbekistan carried out several military exercises with the United States. As soon as the military operation in Afghanistan began, Tashkent and Washington published a joint statement to the effect that they would be building new relations with the aim of further strengthening regional security and stability. In the latter half of 2003, Russia opened its military base in Kyrgyzstan near the town of Kant, thus making the republic the only country in the world with military bases of former political and military rivals on its territory.

Much will depend on how long the United States remains in the region: from the very beginning Washington announced that it intended to remove its troops from Afghanistan as soon as the war was over. Today, the United States speaks vaguely about the exact dates of the end of the war and the withdrawal of its troops. There is no doubt that the continued American presence in Central Asia greatly affects the structure of forces and the strategic balance and that all countries have become drawn into another round of rivalry and cooperation, therefore we urgently need a mechanism of continued dialog to preserve Central Asian security and avoid clashes among the great powers.

China did not stand by passively and watch as this dialog took off after 9/11 in the wake of the active antiterrorist movement that swept the world, but became actively involved in the process. Beijing clearly stated its attitude toward the post-war Afghan government and insisted that it should represent the interests of all sides, should be accepted by them, and should seek friendly relations with all countries.

The Position and Functions of the SCO in the Triangle

The SCO is intended to develop China's cooperation with the Central Asian countries in political, economic, security, scientific, technological, and other spheres. The ties between the Central Asian countries and the United States are prompting China to be more actively involved in communication with them, explain its position to them, listen to what they have to say, and look for solutions to crises. The SCO is the most convenient and legal channel of such communication and a reliable instrument of coordination in Central Asia. There is a great deal of outside interest in this organization: Pakistan and Mongolia have already expressed their desire to join, while India is seeking an observer status.

It would not be wise for Russia and America to brush China aside in pursuit of their own leading roles in Central Asia. In fact these powers cannot agree on many things, one of the examples being Moscow's stand on the American and British operation in Iraq. The war on Iraq is having a negative effect on Central Asian security, therefore the new international mechanisms—the SCO and the Collective Security Treaty of several of the CIS countries—should contribute to averting latent threats. Today, antiterrorist cooperation has brought Russia, America, and China together, which corresponds to the SCO's aims, therefore China should build its Central Asian strategy on the SCO; it should consolidate its positions, and improve its mechanism to get rid of its functional shortcomings in order to make it the regional leader. We have already mentioned that its Charter was signed in 2002 at the Petersburg summit; the same summit decided to set up an antiterrorist center in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan. In this way the SCO leaders demonstrated that they were determined to fight terrorism along with other international forces. We can say that the SCO was born at the Petersburg summit.⁵

Prospects of the Big Triangle's Central Asian Strategy

Will cooperation and mutually advantageous equality serve as the basis of the relations among the great powers in the new conditions, or will they develop into a confrontation? This is one of the most important questions of the post-Cold War world. The countries of the triangle do share certain approaches to certain problems, yet this does not guarantee cooperation and harmonized relationships in Central Asia if they do not display good will and restraint.

The United States, the only post-Cold War superpower, will seek stronger influence in the region, while China and Russia will not move aside either. Let us hope that their long rivalry will assume a peaceful, rather than bellicose, nature, which is very much needed for continued stability in Central Asia and elsewhere. The prospects for the Central Asian strategies of Russia, China, and the United States suggest three options.

1. *Continued balance of interests and status quo.* As the only hegemonist, the United States will take account of the U.N.'s role and decisions and of other international instruments. Washington will discuss with Moscow its most important decisions on global issues and seek Beijing's opinion. In its Central Asian policies the United States will restrain its egotism, it will not ignore the interests of Russia and the local states, it will seek stability and peace in the region and will contribute to creating efficient antiterrorist mechanisms. The present situation is a product of the objective balance of international forces in Central Asia; its transitory nature is obvious, which explains Moscow's cautious policies there. There is the opinion in Russia that the American military presence threatens China to a much greater extent than Russia; these Russian

⁵ See: Pan Guang, "Zong E guanside lianxing fazhan yu xin shixiade Shanghai hezuo zuzhi" (Favorable Development of the Chinese-Russian Relations and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in the New Conditions), *Shijie jingji yanjiu*, Special issue, 2002, p. 34.

political scientists proceed from optimistic expectations of further rapprochement between the Kremlin and the White House. The place of Central Asia in American-Russian relations, however, depends on China's policy as well. Moscow and Beijing are maintaining good-neighborly relations. During the Russian president's visit to China, the sides signed a document on strategic partnership; and they extended bilateral antiterrorist cooperation within the SCO. We are convinced that stronger ties within this organization are the best possible alternative of developing cooperation between our countries in Central Asia.

2. *Confrontation of the powers and clashes among them.* Russia is aware of the limits of its retreat in the face of the growing threat to its Central Asian interests emanating from the United States. The changed situation in the antiterrorist struggle may dramatically change American-Russian relations and provoke a confrontation. The United States will remain in the region for a long time, despite its recent statements to the contrary, under the pretext of supporting the democratic reforms in the local countries. The American military bases in Central Asia have disrupted Russia's air defenses along the North Caucasus-Siberia front.⁶ American fighter planes stationed at the Kyrgyz air base can reach Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and the larger part of Kazakhstan. It is probably for this reason that Russia acquired a military base in the town of Kant mentioned earlier. Moscow's further moves depend on Washington: having realized that its vital interests are threatened Russia may risk confrontation with the United States and put great pressure on the Central Asian states.

China is fairly successfully developing economic ties with the local countries; and the majority of the Central Asian nations have friendly feelings toward it. Russia does not want any close ties between America and China; cooperation between Moscow and Beijing within the SCO and further improvement of its mechanisms may serve as a counterbalance to American Central Asian policies.

3. *The powers refuse to maintain the balance of forces in the region.* Chaos will follow. Burdened with the problems of reviving its statehood and being aware of NATO's eastward movement, Russia, after weighing up all the "pros" and "cons," will abandon its claims to regional leadership. This will become possible if Russia is confronted with insurmountable difficulties; this may cause a chain reaction and change the geopolitical situation in the region and in Russia. America's confrontational strategy will threaten Russia's continued existence and will cause it to lose control over the territories bordering on Central Asia, including Siberia and the Far East. Even in these extreme circumstances, Moscow will never abandon its Kazakhstan policy, which is one of its priorities. The continued sovereignty of Kazakhstan is Russia's key geopolitical aim. China will gain nothing from Russia's retreat from Central Asia. Effective mechanisms of the SCO are expected to help Moscow preserve its influence in the region.⁷

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In summing up, we can say that the political strategies of the three countries will not cause either clashes or retreats; they will be aimed at preserving the status quo in the region. All the international forces present in Central Asia can use the SCO's cooperation potential. Each of the sides of the Big Triangle is pursuing its own interests where local resources are concerned. The SCO has extended the content of its activities, yet it remains spearheaded against terrorism. China is resolved to liquidate the Eastern Turkistan terrorist group; Russia is trying to retain Chechnia as part of the Russian Federation, while the United States would like to control Afghanistan and the Middle East. Together, while fighting terrorism they

⁶ See: *Panorama*, 2 January, 2002.

⁷ See: Li Lifan, "Zhe Zhong Mei E da sanjiao yu Zhongyade diyuan zhengzhi zhanlue" (The "Big Triangle's" Geopolitical Strategy in Central Asia), *Shijie jingji yanjiu*, No. 4, 2003, p. 25.

can help each other to achieve these aims. In the context of the antiterrorist struggle, the China-Russia-U.S. triangle has acquired all the necessary conditions to obtain the desired results without sudden radical changes in the balance of forces in Central Asia. We all know that their relations will not be free of numerous unpredictable complications and that they will have to travel a long road abounding in confrontations and compromises.