

REGIONAL POLITICS

**CHINA, RUSSIA,
AND THE U.S.:
THEIR INTERESTS,
POSTURES, AND INTERRELATIONS
IN CENTRAL ASIA**

Zhao HUASHENG

*Senior research fellow and
director of the Department of Russian and
Central Asian Studies at SIRS
(Shanghai, People's Republic of China)*

Central Asia is a separate geopolitical space, newly defined since the end of the Cold War. The region gains its importance from its abundant raw materials, particularly oil and natural gas, and its unique geographic location. Generally speaking though, the region has been geographically and psychologically isolated from most of the nations across the world, especially the United States and Europe. The events of 9/11 catapulted the region into the world's spotlight. The region quickly became known to the world and has grown in strategic importance. Following the events of 9/11, Central Asia emerged from the shadows of the international arena to the forefront of global attention.

China, Russia, and the U.S. are the main actors in Central Asia. Europe is also interested in Central Asia and, after 9/11 in particular, is deeply concerned about and involved in the region. Europe,

moreover, has demonstrated the potential to become a fourth power in Central Asia. While Turkey and Iran have particular interests and influence in the region, thanks to their historical vantages, they should not be seen as major powers in Central Asia. What is more, India is quietly penetrating the region, but its influence is considerably limited.

The special statuses of China, Russia, and the United States in Central Asia are mainly attributed to their involvement and influence in the region, on the one hand, and to the framework of the special relations the three powers have forged in international relations, on the other. The U.S. military presence in Central Asia has deeply affected the strategic structure in the region. A three-way confrontation looms on the horizon. Dealing with the bilateral and trilateral relations among them has become a strategic issue for China, Russia, and the United States.

China's Interests in Central Asia

Chinese interests in Central Asia are clear and explicit: first, to constrain the separatist forces of "East Turkestan"; second, to keep Central Asia as China's stable strategic rear area; and third, to make Central Asia one of China's diversified sources of energy resources and a regional economic cooperation partner.

Constraining the separatist forces of "East Turkestan". The term "East Turkestan" was first used by the Russians and Europeans in the 18th century to designate the south part of Xinjiang in western China. The contemporary movement of "East Turkestan" in Xinjiang originated in the early 20th century. In 1933 and 1944, two "East Turkestan" republics were established in Xinjiang, but both of them were short-lived. These events were the first round in "East Turkestan's" independence movement. The "East Turkestan" separatists aimed to set up an independent "East Turkestan" state, sometimes engaging in terrorism and violence. The rise of international terrorism seen in the 1990s brought with it an increase in extreme activities by the "East Turkestan" forces. From 1990 to 2001, the "East Turkestan" terrorists launched more than 200 terrorist attacks in Xinjiang, killing 162 and injuring 440 people.¹ "East Turkestan" is a movement whose political goal is to set up an independent "East Turkestan" state to split China. To reach this goal, the "East Turkestan" terrorists have never hesitated to resort to violence and other terrorist means. On 15 December, 2003, China published the first list of identified "East Turkestan" terrorist organizations, namely, the "East Turkestan" Islamic Movement, the "East Turkestan" Liberation Organization, the World Uighur Youth Congress, and the "East Turkestan" Information Center.² These four "East Turkestan" organizations insist on creating an independent "East Turkestan" state using violence and were involved in the series of terrorist attacks that occurred in Xinjiang, China. Therefore, the contemporary "East Turkestan" terrorist forces have epitomized the characteristics of political separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism. Since the Han Dynasty, combating separatism and maintaining national unity have been the persistent mission of the Chinese government with respect to China's northwest. Striking at separatism is a traditional policy, which is deep-rooted in the historical past and has profound significance. It is, in a sense, a continuation of the struggle that China launched to maintain national unity.

Central Asia, as a region, is closely associated with the "East Turkestan" forces. Due to the historic, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious factors, the "East Turkestan" forces have countless ties with Central Asia. A lot of ethnic groups live in Xinjiang, China, and Central Asia, including Kazakhs and Uighurs. Ethnic Uighurs in Central Asia are estimated at about 350,000, two-thirds of all the Uighurs living outside China.³ Many Uighurs living in Central Asia came from Xinjiang. Against the background of the Sino-Soviet confrontation, not without encouragement from the Soviet Union, a number of different "East Turkestan" organizations were formed in Central Asia. Thus Central Asia turned out to be the main arena for "East Turkestan" at that time, though most of the Chinese Uighurs in Central Asia are not separatists or terrorists. Some of these organizations were active even before the collapse of the Soviet Union. The independence of the five Central Asian states greatly encouraged the "East Turkestan" activists. A number of them fled from China to Central Asia and made Central Asia one of their bases. In the 1990s, the "East Turkestan" organizations in Central Asia grew quickly.

¹ See: Ministry of Information, State Department of PRC, "'East Turkestan' Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away with Impunity," *People's Daily*, 22 January, 2002.

² See: [<http://www.xinhuanet.com>], 15 December, 2003.

³ The figure varies according to different sources. According to the 1979 official census of the Soviet Union, the total number of ethnic Uyghurs in the U.S.S.R. was 211,000, most of them (148,000) lived in Kazakhstan, (see: "Etnosy v SSSR," Novosti Publishing House, Moscow, 1989, p. 75). Now, according to a Chinese study, there are about 250,000 Uyghurs living in Kazakhstan, 40,500 in Uzbekistan, about 40,000 in Kyrgyzstan, about 6,000 in Turkmenistan, and about 3,000 in Tajikistan (see: *Ethnicity, Religion and Conflicts in Central and South Asia*, Xinjiang People's Publishing House, 2003, p. 302). Kazakhstan's experts mostly estimate the number of Uighurs in Kazakhstan as between 200,000 and 300,000.

There are no precise statistics on the “East Turkestan” organizations in Central Asia. According to different sources, the total number of “East Turkestan” organizations in Central Asia, big or small, varies to a large extent. According to one research study, there are at least 11 “East Turkestan” organizations in Central Asia (in 2002 year). Four of the 11 organizations openly state their desire to create an independent “East Turkestan” state using force.⁴

Central Asia lies on the periphery of the region where international terrorism and religious extremism are concentrated, that is, Kashmir, Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Middle East. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990’s, international terrorism and religious extremism surged in Central Asia and mixed and prospered with Central Asia’s own homegrown terrorism and extremism. The dramatic geopolitical changes in Central Asia, as well as the growing presence of terrorism and extremism in the region, are now affecting the security of northwest China. Many organizations of the “East Turkestan” forces conduct their activities via Central Asia. The “East Turkestan” forces obtain spiritual and financial support, as well as military training, from international terrorist organizations, including those in Central Asia, such as the Taliban, Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and the Turkestan Islamic Party. In addition, Central Asia is a safe haven for the “East Turkestan” forces fleeing China. The region is the most important conduit connecting the “East Turkestan” forces with international terrorism and serves as the main channel through which international terrorism penetrates China. Terrorist forces beyond China’s borders smuggle arms and terrorist paraphernalia into China through Central Asia, and from Central Asia organize and control terrorist activities in Xinjiang and China’s other areas.

China’s Central Asian policy is also clear and explicit: to prevent Central Asia from becoming the external base of the “East Turkestan” forces and a conduit between the “East Turkestan” forces and international terrorism. Thus, China’s Central Asian policy requires that the Central Asian governments do not pursue a policy that impairs China’s unity and supports China’s separatism, but instead restrict and prohibit the “East Turkestan” forces from conducting activities on their territory and prevent terrorist and extremist forces from sneaking into China through their territory. Since the security of Central Asia and the security of China’s Xinjiang are closely associated and Central Asia’s instability bears on the security of northwest China, as an extension of its policy, China is willing to join Central Asia and Russia in establishing a regional security mechanism, which can provide regional security with a collective security guard. This is in the security interests not only of Central Asia, but also of China. This is a central function of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Securing Central Asia as China’s stable strategic rear area is part of Beijing’s overall security interests, but is also an important aspect of grand strategy and geopolitics. This differs from the above-mentioned domestic security interests, which involve combating the “East Turkestan” forces. Securing Central Asia as China’s stable strategic rear area means involving Central Asia in China’s overall external strategy and, in doing so, defining Central Asia’s position in China’s foreign strategy, as well as China’s strategic interests in Central Asia. Currently, and for the foreseeable future, China’s primary strategic mission and foreign policy priority lie to its southeast. To be more specific, the most paramount and arduous mission of China’s foreign strategy in the coming decades is to prevent Taiwan from its independence and to respond to the challenges that Taiwan could raise at any time. China’s greatest strategic pressure comes from the U.S.’s possible support of Taiwanese independence and the U.S.’s containment of China’s rise; both are likely to precipitate a Sino-U.S. strategic confrontation. Therefore, China should concentrate its resources on the main strategic front and keep other fronts stable and tranquil.

This priority clearly establishes Central Asia as China’s strategic rear, though it in no way diminishes Central Asia’s importance for China’s overall national security. Central Asia can serve China’s main interests, as long as it remains stable and part of China’s strategic rear area. For Central Asia to emerge as an area of primary strategic concern would mean a significant threat to regional stability and China’s national security.

⁴ See: Ma Dazheng, *National Interests—Highest Priority*, Xinjiang People’s Publishing House, 2002, p. 193.

Securing Central Asia as China's stable strategic rear area depends on three conditions. First, on resolving the disputed border issues between China and Central Asia and maintaining peace and security in the border areas. Both tasks have been entirely fulfilled, save a few remaining negotiations over uninhabited and inconsequential border areas. Second, on the Central Asian nations adopting a good-will foreign policy toward China and China maintaining fairly good bilateral relations with the Central Asian nations. Third, on Central Asia not falling under the control of any major power or group of major powers, especially those that have complicated geopolitical and strategic relations with China. It can be inferred that, as another basic principle and target of China's Central Asian policy, China must maintain amicable relations with the Central Asian nations and prevent these nations from being controlled by any major power or group of major powers.

Central Asia is persuaded to become one of China's diversified energy sources and regional economic cooperation partners. It is a key strategic task of the Chinese government to guarantee the energy supplies demanded by China's sustainable economic development and to diversify a stable energy supply. China's energy import has been increasing rapidly in recent years. Between 1997 and 2002, China's oil import amounted to 35.47 million tonnes: 27.32 million tonnes, 36.61 million tonnes, 70.26 million tonnes, 60.25 million tonnes, and 69.40 million tonnes per year, respectively. China's energy import doubled in five years. In 2003, China's energy import reached 90 million tonnes. China is bound to depend heavily on the international market. About 50% of China's energy import is from the Middle East and over 22% from Africa.⁵

In an effort to diversify energy supplies, China developed energy links with Russia and Central Asia. The first large-scale energy cooperation project between China and Russia for importing oil via the pipeline that runs from the Siberian city of Angarsk to Daqing on China's northeast has yet to reach final agreement. If the project can be implemented in due time, China could import 30 million tonnes of oil every year, beginning in 2010, about 20% of China's total oil import, presumably 150 million tonnes per year. Energy cooperation between China and Central Asia, mainly between China and Kazakhstan, the main oil producer in Central Asia, is presumed to be another effort aimed at diversifying China's energy supplies. In 1997, China and Kazakhstan signed an agreement to build a 3,000-kilometer oil pipeline from Atyrau in west Kazakhstan to Alashankou in Xinjiang. This project was to be completed and put into operation in 2005, but it has been delayed due to an insufficiently guaranteed oil supply, which could make the pipeline economically unprofitable. According to Chinese experts, a minimum oil supply of 20 million tonnes per year is required for economic feasibility. In 2003, this project received a new lease on life when President Hu Jintao of China, during his visit to Kazakhstan in June 2003, signed an agreement to promote building the Atasu-Alashankou pipeline. This pipeline, once built, will be connected to the Kenkiyak-Atyrau pipeline, which is already in operation. This pipeline is very likely to be built in the next few years. Meanwhile, Kazakhstan's oil production has been growing rapidly and the problem of oil supply will no longer be a serious obstacle.⁶ If this project is realized, China could import at least 15-20 million tonnes of oil from Kazakhstan every year. That means Kazakhstan will cover more than 10% of China's oil import, if China's yearly oil import totals about 150 million tonnes. As Russia and Central Asia become China's stable energy supply bases, China will have a long-term and stable energy supply and considerably reduce the risks created by the volatile international situation. Both Russia and Central Asia are geographically close to China. Maximum safety of the pipelines will be guaranteed, because they avoid the necessity of using long sea-lanes and risky sea passages and straits, which could easily fall under the powers of other states. But this has not yet been achieved. The volume of energy China imports from Central Asia has not reached the level of strategic significance. In 2002, China imported about only one million tonnes of oil from Kazakhstan

⁵ See: Tian Chunrong, "Analyses on China's Oil Import and Export in 2002 Year," *International Petroleum Economics*, No. 3, 2003, p. 26.

⁶ Between 1998 and 2002, the annual oil production in Kazakhstan amounted to 25.9 million tonnes, 30.1 million tonnes, 35.3 million tonnes, 39.6 million tonnes, 47.2 million tonnes, respectively (see: *Country Profile Kazakhstan*, The Economic Intelligence Unity, U.K., 2003, p. 46).

by rail. For the time being, China has access to only two oil fields in Central Asia, namely the Ak-tiubinsk and Uzen oil fields, which are rather small.

Regional economic cooperation is important to China's economic interests. Northwest China, particularly Xinjiang, is China's major beneficiary in Central Asian regional economic cooperation. Among the five northwest provinces of China, Xinjiang is the largest. Ten of the 16 ports in Xinjiang, authorized by the central government, are linked to Central Asia. There are also another 11 land ports, authorized by the local government. Economic cooperation with Central Asia plays a very significant role in Xinjiang's economic development. Trade with the Central Asian countries accounts for over 60% of Xinjiang's foreign trade volume. Between 1991 and 2000, the total trade volume between Xinjiang and the Central Asian countries has been calculated at about seven billion dollars, with a 45-percent-per-year increase, and it continues to grow. In the first ten months of 2003, the volume of trade in Xinjiang reached 3.5 billion dollars, about two billion of which came from trade with Kazakhstan, and was almost twice as high as that of the previous year. To promote economic development of China's West, including the northwest, the Chinese central government launched the "Go West" campaign. In so doing, the Chinese government is encouraging closer cooperation between the West and the East of China, on the one hand, and between China's West and the rest of the world, on the other. It is stimulating economic relations between China's northwest and Central Asia. In the long run, China is interested in turning Central Asia into a free trade zone within the framework of the SCO. Of course, there is still a very long way to go.

In summary, China's policy orientation toward Central Asia is based on China's main interests in Central Asia: 1) to combat terrorism, separatism, and extremism; 2) to maintain stability in the region; 3) to foster economic prosperity in the region; 4) to ensure that the Central Asian nations are amicable toward China; 5) to ensure that the Central Asian nations will not fall under the control of any major power; 6) to ensure that no military bloc directed against China is formed; and 7) to ensure that Central Asia's energy resources are open to China.

China's Posture in Central Asia

China's entry into Central Asia occurred naturally as the region became an independent geopolitical space. Since the beginning of Central Asian independence, China has exerted considerable influence over the region. First, China is geographically close to Central Asia and shares common borders of over 3,000 km with three of the Central Asian nations, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. China is also close to another two Central Asian nations, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Geographically, China is a country that shares common borders with most of the Central Asian states and is the closest territorially to them. Secondly, settling border issues was an important area of work between China and Central Asia. Sino-Soviet border negotiations were underway when Central Asia gained its independence. Most of the western Sino-Soviet borders became Sino-Central Asian borders after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Three Central Asian nations decided to side with Russia and continue border negotiations with China. The third reason is that the Chinese minorities have countless ties with the Central Asian nations with respect to ethnicity, religion, culture, history, and customs, which can only lead to special relations between China and Central Asia. Fourthly, China and Central Asia shared more than a two-thousand-year-long history of interrelations, which came to a halt only one-and-a-half centuries ago. However, deep-rooted historical relations were only frozen, never lost. The region's independence brought these dormant historical relations to the surface again. Historic memory closes the gap between China and Central Asia. The above reasons make it possible for China to become an influential major power in the region as soon as Central Asia emerges onto the world arena. Among all the influential potentials China possesses in Central Asia, the most distinct advantages are its geographical proximity, growing economy, convenient transportation network, its use of Central Asia as a pos-

sible alternative energy route with stable consumption of the region's energy resources, and its image as an equal and friendly partner. Compared with the other great powers in Central Asia, China is weaker in military influence and does not have the ability to offer the same amount of economic aid as the U.S. In addition, China's cultural and political model is less attractive to the Central Asian elite, particularly to the young generation.

The Central Asia economy was relatively backward in the Soviet era. With the fall of the Soviet Union and the disintegration of the unified economic ties, the former Soviet Union states fell into an economic recession without exception. Given this situation, Chinese goods, cheap and practical, poured into Central Asia and became the source of staple consumer goods for local citizens with a very low purchasing power. Border trade gradually developed and Chinese goods had a large market share in Central Asia. International trade is an important channel and an important representation of China's re-entry into Central Asia. As Mr. Ashimbaev, director of the Kazakhstan Presidential Institute of Strategic Studies, puts it, "trade of commodities is the key base on which China places its foot in Central Asia."⁷

In the mid-1990s, with the Taliban in power in Afghanistan, Central Asian security worsened and the threat of terrorism, separatism, and extremism grew in the region, which posed a common threat, though in different forms, to China, Central Asia, and Russia. In order to continue their cooperation and deal with the common threat after completing their border negotiations, China, Russia, and three Central Asian nations (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) formed the Shanghai Five in 1996. The Shanghai Five is an important mechanism for protecting the security of each nation, as well as an important way for China to participate in Central Asian security affairs. In 2001, the Shanghai Five was transformed into a more permanent regional cooperation organization, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The founding of the SCO is China's strategic pass into Central Asia, and also a breakthrough in China's Central Asian diplomacy. The founding of the SCO provides China with a security protection mechanism, an established channel for China to participate in Central Asian affairs, and a platform for China to cooperate with Central Asia comprehensively. The founding of the SCO further indicates that China and Russia have reached strategic compromises and achieved a strategic balance in Central Asia, and that they have recognized each other's interests in Central Asia and are making progress in strategic cooperation. In the Western media, however, the SCO has been described as China and Russia's attempt to prevent the U.S. and NATO from entering the Central Asian region. In summary, the founding of the SCO makes it possible for China to maintain a posture in Central Asia with strong dynamics and potential.

An important change occurred on the security and geopolitical scene in Central Asia following the post-9/11 U.S. troop deployment and fall of the Taliban. Russia and the U.S. cooperated in Central Asia beyond all expectations, the Central Asian nations leaned toward the U.S. politically, and the U.S.'s influence over Central Asia grew remarkably. This change has substantially affected China's posture in the region. Commentators believe that the events of 9/11 compromised the role of the SCO in its protection of Central Asian security and stemmed China's growing influence in Central Asia, which had an unfavorable effect on China's posture in Central Asia. As Eugene B. Rumer puts it, "A regional power broker prior to 11 September, China now finds itself marginalized, displaced, and virtually alone, pondering the unenviable (for Beijing) option of playing second fiddle to the United States and a host of its newfound best friends. No matter how much China gains from the U.S. military campaign—and there can be little doubt that it has been a beneficiary of the campaign against Taliban and the ensuing blow to the operations of its own Uighur militants—U.S. preponderance in Central Asia must be a serious setback to a government that aspires to the role of an Asian superpower."⁸

It is true that the geopolitical changes in Central Asia in the wake of 9/11 came as a surprise to China. Notwithstanding, its impact on China and China's self-assessment of its situation are not as strong and

⁷ *Collection of Papers on the Central Asian Situation and Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, Shanghai Institute for International Studies, Shanghai, 2003, p. 235.

⁸ E.B. Rumer, "SShA i Tsentral'naia Azia posle 11 sentiabria," *Strategic Forum*, No. 195, December 2002, p. 3.

pessimistic as perceived by some foreign analysts. The main reason for the discrepancy lies in the fact that these foreign analysts are highlighting the competition and rivalry between China and the U.S. and observing Sino-U.S. relations through the lens of geopolitics, while China, though aware of the geopolitical factors, does not regard Sino-U.S. relations as natural competition and confrontation, nor does China automatically regard an encounter between China and the U.S. in any region as equivalent to a Sino-U.S. confrontation. Sino-Russian relations have not changed since the improvement of Russo-U.S. relations. China's relations with the Central Asian nations have not been ostensibly undermined. The SCO sustained its development and grew, rather than becoming paralyzed, as some analysts anticipated. Thus, China's strategic standing in Central Asia has not been devastatingly undermined, only challenged, by the post-9/11 geopolitical changes in Central Asia.

Russia's Interests in Central Asia

Russia's interests in Central Asia are very complicated. Russia has countless nexuses with Central Asia in terms of history, culture, humanity, and psychology. Furthermore, Russia is still in the process of adjusting its relations with Central Asia after the latter ceded from the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Overall, their relations are still in a state of flux.

History matters in identifying Russia's interests in Central Asia. Russia's interests in Central Asia depend not only on material benefit, but also on nostalgic feelings and psychology. In other words, Russia's interests in Central Asia are in part real, and in part emotional and psychological, which is surreal and virtual, and even unrealistic.

Russia's core interests in Central Asia are to maintain its special relations with Central Asia with respect to politics, economics, security, culture, history, and language. While Russia's policies in Central Asia do reflect real interests, they are also based on the historical legacy of Russian-Central Asian relations. This legacy continues to color Russia's perception of reality and of Central Asia. Great changes have occurred in Central Asia, and Russia has been slow to react to these developments. These changes, which include politics, economics, culture, social life, and geopolitics, will eventually lead to a redefinition of Russia's concept of Central Asia and to an eventual change in Russia's overall interests in Central Asia.

Among Russia's realistic interests in Central Asia, security interests are the most vital, especially while Russia is still adjusting to its post-Cold War position. Russia's security interests in Central Asia are multifaceted. The first includes the struggle against international terrorism and religious extremism, and the second is fighting the HIV/AIDS epidemic, while the Russian government also considers drug trafficking a threat to Russia's national security.

The third dimension of Russia's interests in Central Asia is regional stability. Central Asia is near Russia, and the five newly independent CIS nations are Russia's neighbors or part of its "near abroad." The regimes in the Central Asia countries are weak, their economies are limping, and their societies are severely fragmented, which provide fertile soil for terrorism and extremism and are elements of regional instability. Any instability in Central Asia will have immediate repercussions in Russia, which will incur undesirable political and economic costs for Russia, given the fact that Russia is actively present in Central Asia and has special relations with and commitments to the region.

Russia's security interests in Central Asia are to ensure Central Asia as Russia's backyard and prevent it from being controlled by other major powers and posing a strategic threat to Russia. After 9/11, Russia allowed the U.S. to deploy its troops in Central Asia to attack the Taliban in Afghanistan, which helped to eliminate or alleviate the security threat inflicted by international terrorism on Russia and was thus in Russia's security interests. Actually Russia could have done nothing to stop the U.S.'s military entry, given the international atmosphere at the time and Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan's invita-

tion. Although the U.S. set up military bases in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan after 9/11, Russia does not want to see a long-term U.S. military presence in Central Asia.⁹

Economic interests are Russia's important interests in Central Asia, both in economic and political terms. In spite of the weakening economic relations between Central Asia and Russia during the last decade, the Central Asian nations still maintain close economic relations with Russia and are one of the most likely regions in the CIS to integrate with Russia economically. This is in Russia's interest, and the region's transportation infrastructure currently makes Russia the best avenue of export for Central Asia goods.

Russia's other important interest in Central Asia is controlling the energy outlets. Central Asian nations are rich in energy, but in the past their export routes have been entirely controlled by Russia. Russia takes advantage of its geographic privileges and infrastructure to control the transportation of Central Asian energy export, which not only helps Russia to exert its political influence on Central Asia, but also brings enormous economic benefit to Russia.

Russia has an enduring cultural connection with Central Asia. Central Asia is home to a great many ethnic Russians, which constitutes Russia's special interests in Central Asia. By the time the Soviet Union collapsed, ethnic Russians accounted for about 20% of the total population in Central Asia. Now ethnic Russians in Central Asia are estimated at about six million and account for about 12% of the total population in Central Asia.¹⁰ Protection of Russians' rights and equality in Central Asia has been increasingly regarded as one of Russia's important national interests and policies in Central Asia. Thus, ethnic Russians have become an important lever by which Russia exerts its influence on Central Asia.

Russia's Posture in Central Asia

Russia's standing in Central Asia is different from China's. While China is raising its posture in Central Asia from scratch, Russia is retrogressing continually from the days when Russians were ubiquitous in Central Asia. Russia lost its overall influence on the Central Asian nations, which sought independence and tried their best to throw off Russia's control. As the Russian media reports, "Russia today is politically unstable and economically unattractive. The lifestyle and standard of living of a considerable number of Russians are not attractive to most Central Asians. Russia's culture is not unique. Finally, Russia's armed forces today are not exalted or emulated."¹¹ It was natural that Russia's influence in Central Asia would decline.

It was not until the late 1990s that the decline of Russia's influence in Central Asia went into reverse. Since taking office in 2000, President Putin paid more attention to Russia's strategic and economic input in the CIS, including in Central Asia, and made some tactical adjustments. Russia shifted to a more placatory policy toward Central Asia, with less highhandedness. It replaced pure high pressure with the combination of carrot and stick, thus increasing Central Asia's attraction to Russia. Tactically, Russia assumed a new approach to Central Asia, emphasizing bilateral instead of multilateral approaches.

⁹ The latest demonstration of this position was made by Sergei Ivanov, Russian Defense Minister, at a NATO defense ministers' meeting on 9 October, 2003.

¹⁰ Between 1989 and 1999, ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan decreased from about six million to about four and a half million, but they still account for more than 30% of the total population of Kazakhstan. More than 150,000 ethnic Russians have left Kyrgyzstan, their percentage decreased from 15% to about 10%. In 1989, the number of ethnic Russians in Uzbekistan amounted to 8.3% of the country's total population, now it is about 5%. In Tajikistan, the number of ethnic Russians fell from 8% in 1989 to about 2% (see: *Country Profile Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan*, The Economic Intelligence Unity, U.K., 2003).

¹¹ M. Khogarenok, "Nenuzhnyi soiuz," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 21 January, 2002.

Putin's policy worked. Since 2000, Russia's influence in Central Asia has risen. Bilateral relations have developed between Russia and the Central Asian states. In particular, Russia's relations with Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, lukewarm in the past, have improved remarkably.

In terms of economic cooperation, Russia is recovering its influence in Central Asia. In October 2000, the Eurasian Customs Union, involving Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Belarus, was transformed into the Eurasian Economic Community, a significant advancement in economic integration between Russia and Central Asia.

The Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) has seen substantial progress. In May 2001, the CSTO, comprising Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and some other CIS states, decided to set up the Rapid Reaction Force. On 23 May 2003, the first military airbase of the CSTO, Kant airbase in Kyrgyzstan, went into operation. Russian President Mr. Putin and Kyrgyzstan President Mr. Akaev attended the ceremony. Kant airbase is located near Bishkek, the capital of the country, and it is very close, about 30 kilometers, to Manas airport, where American and alliance's military forces are deployed. About 10-15 Su-25 and Su-27, some military helicopters, transporters, and about 500 troops will be permanently stationed at Kant airbase.¹² This demonstrated that Russia has made new progress in the military sphere in Central Asia, though it is still unclear whether this move is more about politics than about practical security needs.

The events of 9/11 undoubtedly dealt a blow to Russia's presence in Central Asia.¹³ The U.S. presence in Central Asia undermined the concept that Russia was the only power entitled to deploy troops and have a military presence in the region. This is a major U.S. encroachment into Russia's sphere of influence and constitutes one of the tremendous changes in Russia's geopolitical posture. In fact, no part of Russia's sphere of influence has been able to deny U.S. troops since. Following the events of 9/11, the Central Asian nations began leaning toward the U.S. to various degrees. Although the U.S. has not made any explicit commitment to Central Asian security, its military presence in Central Asia per se offered a security alternative to the Central Asian nations, which further eclipsed Russia's role in Central Asian security and especially the role of the CSTO.

Notwithstanding Russia's declining strategic presence and influence in Central Asia in the wake of the Soviet disintegration, and the events of 9/11 as well, Russia is still the most deep-rooted power in Central Asia. Russia has been in Central Asia for one-and-a-half centuries and has strong political, economic, military, cultural ties with Central Asia, which cannot be cut off overnight. Most of the Central Asian elites were educated in the Soviet Union, and in Russia in particular. Central Asians speak Russian, listen to Russian broadcasts, watch Russian TV, and are familiar with the members of the Russian elite and celebrities. Many Central Asians have relatives and friends in Russia. Central Asia has close ties with Russia in social life as well. There are no obstacles in language and thinking habits between the elites of Central Asia and Russia.

Russia is still the most important trade partner of the Central Asian nations, though their share in Russia's foreign trade has fallen. Russia is the largest trade partner of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Russian-Uzbekistan and Russian-Kazakhstan trade accounts for 16% and 35% of the latter's foreign trade, respectively. Although the Central Asian nations place great hopes on the West's developed countries, Russia is still the major market for their products. Energy is Central Asia's most important asset, but its outlet is basically controlled by Russia. Turkmenistan's natural gas and Kazakhstan's oil generally need Russia's pipelines for their export notwithstanding. The situation will not change much until the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline is put into operation.

The Central Asians depend greatly on Russia for their security and defense. Tajikistan's border is patrolled by Russian troops. Central Asian officers are trained in Russia. Central Asian armaments are provided mainly by Russia. The Eurasian Economic Community and the CSTO are two levers with which

¹² See: R. Streshnev, "Shehit dlia Tsentral'noi Azii," *Krasnaia zvezda*, 24 October, 2003.

¹³ Some people, like Eugene B. Rumer, assume that Russia is a major beneficiary of the events of 9/11 (see: E.B. Rumer, op. cit.). This is true in terms of eliminating the Taliban's threat to Russia. It is irrelevant to Russia's interest in its strategic presence in Central Asia.

Russia can rally the Central Asian nations. The Eurasian Economic Community is a political and economic lever, and the CSTO is a military and security one. It should not be forgotten that the shock which the post-9/11 and the Central Asian geopolitical changes gave Russia nevertheless boosted Russia's strategic presence in Central Asia. In May 2002, Russia hosted the conference that decided to turn the Collective Security Treaty into the CSTO. Kant airbase in Kyrgyzstan was the first one Russia set up in Central Asia following the fall of the Soviet Union.

The former Soviet Union, including Russia and the Central Asian nations, has sped up its economic integration since February 2003, when the Eurasian Economic Community held its first summit in Moscow. In April 2003, Russia and Turkmenistan signed a 25-year-long agreement on energy cooperation, which indicated great progress in their relations, not only in economic, but also in political terms. Undoubtedly, Russia has resumed the momentum of its political, economic, and security expansion in Central Asia.

(Concluded in the next installment)