

## 9/11 AND THE HEARTLAND DEBATE IN CENTRAL ASIA

Anita SENGUPTA

*D.Sc. (Political Science),  
Fellow at the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies  
(Kolkata, India)*

### The “Romance” of the Heartland

When five independent states emerged in the Central Asian region, in the immediate aftermath of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, what also emerged, more or less simultaneously, was a focus on certain geopolitical concepts and constructs that had become defunct in the immediate past. One such concept that became popular was that of the “new great game,” to define the competition for influence, power, hegemony and profits that would now be played out over the “Heartland.”<sup>1</sup> It was emphasized that while the original “Great Game” had been about territorial control, the new game was primarily about control over the resources of the Heartland and only secondarily about the strategic geopolitical position of the region.<sup>2</sup> This became an integral part of a vast literature and coincided with a revival of interest in and use of geopolitics as a tool for politico-security analysis.

This focus intensified in the post 9/11 scenario when it was argued that control over this region, the crucial “Heartland” of the “World-Island,” would be critical in determining the emerging

<sup>1</sup> There is, however, debate on the viability of the use of the term “new great game.” For more detail, see: M. Edwards, “The New Great Game and the New Great Gamers: Disciples of Kipling and Mackinder,” *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 2003, pp. 83-102.

<sup>2</sup> Energy politics and the competition over oil and gas became the focus of both Russian and American administrations in the Central Asian region. A Russian Security Council Report emphasized that by 2005 Russia’s dependence on CIS energy resources would have increased and that it would be of vital interest to have access to these areas. Similarly, reports under the Clinton administration stressed the need to be active in the region.

balance of influence in the context of a vastly changed world order. The assumption, particularly in the post 9/11 scenario, was that Sir Halford Mackinder's "World-Island" would once again be central to both U.S. and Russian foreign policy. Strategic analysts returned to the theory of the "Heartland" that had envisioned Russian control over the Eurasian landmass as the "pivot of world politics" and the implications of this for other states.<sup>3</sup> However, it would be incorrect to interpret this focus on the Heartland as geographical determinism. Geographical determinism ignores one of Mackinder's major tenets where he had pointed out that "the actual balance of political power at any given time is, of course, the product, on the one hand, of geographical conditions, both economic and strategic, and, on the other hand, of the relative number, virility, equipment, and organization of the competing peoples."<sup>4</sup>

In the post 9/11 scenario this became particularly significant and Mackinder's ideas received a fresh consideration in both the U.S. and Russia as policymakers searched for ways to conceptualize and deal with the heart of the Heartland, Central Asia and the Caspian Sea region. The region assumed a significant part in the interaction between Russia and the United States with the recognition of its role in any "war against terror." As American presence increased and the U.S. military was offered basing rights by some Central Asian states, an entirely new set of geopolitical relations was seen to be emerging where traditional areas of interest had been transformed.

Against this background, this article examines how significant the "Heartland" actually is in Russian and U.S. foreign policy particularly in the post 9/11 scenario. The article attempts to do so through a review of developments in Russian-U.S. relations in the Central Asian region in the aftermath of 9/11.

## Russia and the United States in Central Asia: The "New" Rivalry over the Heartland

"The war on terrorism has brought Washington and Moscow closer and has seen the development of a personal relationship between President Bush and President Putin. Before the 2001 terror attacks on the United States few would have thought that Russia would sit by while America established a military presence in four of the Soviet Union's successor states, given Moscow's earlier reactions to United States criticism of Russian conduct in Chechnia. Yet, Russia seemed to acquiesce to America's movement into Central Asia and even remained quiet when American troops landed on Russia's border in the Caucasus."<sup>5</sup>

The "new" rivalry between Russia and the U.S. is particularly interesting since it was assumed that the cordial atmosphere that had developed in the immediate aftermath of the 11 September events

---

<sup>3</sup> The concept of a critical Eurasian Heartland and containment of the power occupying the Heartland had become evident in the writings of a number of commentators even prior to the events of 9/11. Among them Zbigniew Brzezinski referred to Central Asia, the "Eurasian Balkans," as geopolitically significant for reasons of energy, sociopolitical instability and potential power domination. Brzezinski argued that America's primary interest would be to help ensure that no single power comes to control this geopolitical space since preponderance over the entire Eurasian continent serves as the central basis for global primacy. Brzezinski thus made Eurasia the focus of U.S. foreign policy in his writings consistently warning of the advantages that the Heartland power had over the West (Zb. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard. American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperative*, Basic Books, New York, 1997; idem, *Game Plan: A Geostrategic Framework for the Conduct of the U.S.-Soviet Contest*, The Atlantic Monthly Press, Boston, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> H.J. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. XXIII, No. 4, April 1904, pp. 437.

<sup>5</sup> S.E. Cornell, "America in Eurasia: One Year After," *Current History*, October 2002, pp. 330-336.

would herald a new era in Russian-U.S. relations particularly as far as policy toward Central Asia was concerned. 9/11 was seen to “spark a Russian pivot” to which the West was seen to have responded very positively. President Vladimir Putin was noted as the first foreign head of state to have called President Bush and then followed it up with a whole string of actions that amounted to a wholesale reorientation of Russian foreign policy.

This was significant since from about the second half of President Yeltsin’s term, particularly after the U.S. attacks against Yugoslavia, relations between Russia and the United States had been in a state of sustained crisis. Serious differences between the two countries on a number of major issues far exceeded the common ground between them. Although the Bush administration had made some adjustments to its Russian policy from the middle of 2001, owing mainly to growing criticism at home and abroad of its tough stance toward Russia and of the EP-3 aircraft incident between the United States and China in April 2001, there had been no substantial improvement in Russian-U.S. relations. In order to improve relations with the United States, Russia also made concessions on other important issues. For instance, it tacitly consented to the unilateral withdrawal of the United States from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty signed in 1972 and abandoned the limit which it had set on the NATO’s eastward expansion. Russia also closed, of its own accord, its military bases in Cuba and Vietnam.

However, there remains contradictory evidence to such linear development of Russian-U.S. relations. It has been observed that when President Bush had called President Putin on the weekend of 22 September, 2001, and asked if the Russian President would use his influence with the Central Asian states to help the U.S. obtain basing rights, President Putin had replied: “I am prepared to tell the heads of government of the Central Asian states that we have good relations with and that we have no objections to a U.S. role in Central Asia as long as it has the objective of fighting the war on terror and is *temporary and not permanent* (italics mine.—A.S.). If it is that then we have no objection and that is what I will tell people.”<sup>6</sup>

It is not surprising therefore that a year later there was a reversal of trends with reports of a growing disillusionment in Russia about the strategic partnership agreements concluded with the U.S. and other western allies over the past year. In fact, there were adverse reactions to the presence of the NATO forces in Central Asia, which was seen as “the penetration of a strategic region that undermines the security not only of Russia but also of China.”<sup>7</sup> While those close to the Russian army were most vocal about expressing their displeasure it was also reflected in the Russian press with the *Nezavisimaia gazeta* referring to the presence of American troops in Afghanistan as a backward step for Russian influence in the region.<sup>8</sup> In response to this the Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov insisted on a clear operational deadline for the American troops in the region arguing that they would have to leave once their objective of defeating terror had been achieved.

In addition, the two countries have significant differences regarding the definition of terrorism and a number of other issues. The issue of Iraq is a prime example where U.S. claims of Iraqi violation of a ban on the development of weapons of mass destruction has been negated by Russia with President Putin pointing out that Russia does not have any intelligence proving that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. Russia is also at odds with the United States over its relations with Iran and is dissatisfied with the attitude of the U.S. government toward Georgia. Furthermore, Russia still has

---

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from: B. Woodward, *Bush At War*, Pocket Books, London, Sydney, New York, Tokyo, Singapore, Toronto, 2002, p. 118.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted from: “Russia: Communist Leader Says ‘NATO Forces’ in Central Asia a Threat,” *RFE/RL Report*, 9 February, 2002: available at [www.rferl.org].

<sup>8</sup> See: *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 9 October, 2001. Quoted in Shahram Akbarzadeh, “Keeping Central Asia Stable,” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 4, 2004, pp. 689-705.

differences with the United States regarding implementation of the treaty on the reduction of strategic offensive weapons, the U.S. missile defense program and other issues.

Such differences focused Russian attention on security arrangements within the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States). Iskander Khisamov, a regional analyst clearly states this in the journal *Ekspert* when he writes: "There is no country or even a group of countries or an international institution that can or would want to give Russia some guarantees that its security, territorial integrity or at least its economic interests will be respected. Thus, no matter how weak or disintegrated the Commonwealth of Independent States might be, it remains Russia's main strategic priority."<sup>9</sup>

In keeping with this there have been moves by Russia to reassert her influence over the post-Soviet space on the basis of the Collective Security Treaty. It has been noted that using antiterrorism as a catch phrase Russia is pushing to create a full-fledged regional military bloc.<sup>10</sup>

Russia and five other CIS countries, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, during a summit held on 28 April, 2003 formalized a security alliance that could help boost Moscow's presence in Central Asia by creating the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) which will attempt to provide a more efficient response to strategic problems confronting member states, specifically terrorism and narcotics trafficking.<sup>11</sup> The CSTO is an outgrowth of the 1992 Collective Security Treaty, which sought to promote greater strategic cooperation among the signatories. The Organization is now committed to creating permanent institutions responsible for budget management and strategic military planning. The bulk of the organization's attention and resources will be initially concentrated in Central Asia with rapid deployment force to be stationed at the Russian military facility at Kant, in northern Kyrgyzstan.

Russian policymakers believe that the CSTO has the potential to help Moscow reestablish its high strategic profile in what traditionally has been its sphere of influence. According to a report in the Russian daily *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, some CSTO summit participants pressed Kyrgyz officials to curtail basing rights given to the U.S. forces in their Manas airbase, also in northern Kyrgyzstan. President Putin downplayed the notion that Russia seeks to utilize the CSTO to reduce U.S. influence in the region, saying that the organization would strive to contain the flow of drugs coming out of Afghanistan and counter the threat posed by radical Islamic organizations in Central Asia.<sup>12</sup> Some political analysts believe that the impetus for the formal creation of the CSTO is concern over the U.S. tendency under the Bush administration to take a unilateralist approach to strategic issues as recently underscored by the American campaign against Iraq.

President Putin has also sought to resurrect Russia's diminished influence in post-Cold War global politics. In addition to signing a nuclear arms treaty with Washington and setting up a new joint council with NATO, he has courted American adversaries, including China, North Korea and Iraq, and extended economic ties to what the U.S. refers as the "axis-of-evil," Iraq, Iran and North Korea. As already noted, Russia has also stationed troops and warplanes in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>13</sup>

It has been observed that these recent Russian foreign policy moves may undermine the alliance between Moscow and Washington.<sup>14</sup> The \$40 billion economic agreement with Iraq, sale

---

<sup>9</sup> Quoted from: I. Torbakov, "Russia Moves to Reassert Influence in Central Asia, Caucasus," *Eurasia Insight*, 18 December, 2002: available at [<http://www.eurasianet.org>].

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>11</sup> See: I. Alibekov, S. Blagov, "New Security Organization Could Help Expand Russia's Reach in Central Asia," *Eurasia Insight*, 6 May, 2003: available at [<http://www.eurasianet.org>].

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>13</sup> See: G. Feifer, "2002 in Review: Putin's Foreign Policy Not Seen as Harming Relations with the West," *RFE/RL Report*, 16 December, 2002: available at [[www.rferl.org](http://www.rferl.org)].

<sup>14</sup> See: A. Cohen, "Uncertainty Still Defines Russia's Role in Central Eurasia," *Eurasia Insight*, 19 September, 2002: available at [<http://www.eurasianet.org>].

of five nuclear reactors to Iran and public demonstration of warm feelings toward Kim Jung Il have all been noted with apprehension in the U.S. Balancing these relationships with Russia's desire for a reliable partner in the Caucasus and Central Asia may prove to be difficult. Southern Caucasus also remains an area of friction between state interests and different ethnic groups and military factions. Russia insists that its war in Chechnia is an extension of the "war on terrorism." The Chechen issue, however, remains a potential area of disagreement between Russia and the U.S. Also Russia's inability to bring the conflict to a close has an effect on attitudes toward Russia in Central Asia.

While Russia's role in central Eurasia remains ambiguous, political analyst Ahmed Rashid notes that a number of factors are now actually leading Russia to regain her influence over the region, not the least of which is the U.S. administration's inability to come up with a coherent aid program for the region. Rashid notes that another significant reason is the fact that in the post 11 September period the Central Asian elite is very seriously divided. In Turkmenistan the former Foreign Minister Boris Shikhmuradov has moved to Moscow and set up an opposition group along with a number of other leading Turkmen political figures. In Kazakhstan the current leader of the opposition is the former Prime Minister, Akezhan Kazhegeldin. In Kyrgyzstan, similarly, many members of the former elite are in jail and now form the opposition. Because a large part of this dissident elite is now in Moscow, Rashid notes that this will allow Russia huge leverage in Central Asia.<sup>15</sup>

It is in this connection that Alexei Malashenko, Professor at the Moscow Institute of International Relations, points out that Russian efforts to set up a permanent Russian base in Kyrgyzstan may be significant. Kyrgyzstan is now faced with a political crisis where President Askar Akaev has accused opposition protesters of trying to destabilize the country and has indicated that he has no intentions of responding to calls for his resignation. Malashenko has noted that the Russian military presence in the country will serve, first and foremost, to maintain the rule of President Akaev, who is considered to be pro Moscow. Malashenko notes: "The kind of developments that took place in Kyrgyzstan in October and November (2002), in my point of view, exactly point out that the current Kyrgyz political elite is very much interested in cooperation with Moscow. At least cooperation with Moscow, including military cooperation, gives some confidence to Akaev's regime, while the American presence, in my opinion, in no way influences its stability or its future."<sup>16</sup>

In the aftermath of 9/11 Kyrgyzstan had indicated complete support for the "war against terrorism." The 11 September terrorist attacks were, in Kyrgyz President Askar Akaev's words, a turning point for the international perceptions of political and security developments in the region. President Akaev immediately expressed his condolences to the American people and his full support for the U.S. action against international terrorism and extremism. He also offered Kyrgyz airspace for the American action in Afghanistan. The United States government in turn indicated that it valued Kyrgyzstan's support and that it would extend economic and military assistance to the Republic. In December 2001, the U.S. established a permanent military base near Bishkek airport.

The establishment of a U.S. base in Kyrgyzstan was in many ways an unprecedented step since it demonstrated, among other things, a radical reorientation of security arrangements from Russia to the U.S. Some political groups and the Russian military were highly critical of the U.S. base and this meant that Kyrgyzstan had to search for a delicate balance between the interests of the two major powers. This prompted one analyst to note: "After 11 September, 2001, Bishkek's foreign policymakers had to find a balance between the long-standing security arrangements with

<sup>15</sup> Quoted from: N. Krastev, "Central Asia: 'Taliban' Author Says Russia to Regain Influence in Unstable Region," *RFE/RL Report*, 22 March, 2002: available at [www.rferl.org].

<sup>16</sup> Quoted from: Z. Eshanova, "Central Asia: Diplomatic Visits Highlight U.S.-Russian Competition," *RFE/RL Report*, 3 December, 2002: available at [www.rferl.org].

Russia and the newly established regime of antiterrorist cooperation with the United States which brought a U.S. military presence to the outskirts of Kyrgyzstan's capital. In November 2001, U.S. personnel began hastily building the Republic's first ever American military base, just a few miles away from a Russian sponsored CIS antiterrorist center. Moreover, the visitors were talking about extended cooperation with the independent Kyrgyz defense forces, outraging Russia's generals and political hawks.<sup>17</sup>

However, Kyrgyzstan is not the only Central Asian state that will be host to both Russian and American forces. In December 2002 Tajik President Emomali Rakhmonov met the U.S. President George Bush. One of the main issues under discussion is supposed to have been the creation of a permanent U.S. military base in Tajikistan. However, the U.S. position in Tajikistan has faced challenges with talks about the establishment of a permanent Russian military base in Tajikistan and the opening of the Khorog-Kashgar road link between Tajikistan and China.<sup>18</sup> Tajik political experts have noted that U.S. policy in Tajikistan and particularly U.S. policy to engage in discussions with the Tajik opposition has had a significant part in this.<sup>19</sup> Along with the establishment of a permanent base, Russia has also worked out details for the transfer of border security to Tajik troops. Similarly, the opening of the Khorog-Kashgar road link will significantly expand trade between Tajikistan and China and also create jobs in the Badakhshan region of Tajikistan, thus significantly increasing the Chinese presence.

While Malashenko notes that President Putin's visit to Kyrgyzstan and President Rakhmonov's visit to the White House are indicative of a new military reapportionment of Central Asia with the U.S. and Russia as the main players and will eventually result in the stability of the region, others like Alisher Abdimomunov, a deputy in the Kyrgyz Legislative Assembly and head of the Parliamentary Committee of International Relations expressed his reservations about the presence of competing powers in the state who may well be chasing different geopolitical interests.<sup>20</sup>

Another recent development is the reemergence of the GUUAM with active American support.<sup>21</sup> The GUUAM, which is a group consisting of Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Moldova, saw a revival in a meeting held on 3-4 July, 2003 in Yalta. It has been pointed out that much of the support needed to promote GUUAM is coming from the United States.<sup>22</sup> In addition to lending diplomatic encouragement, the U.S. government is also reportedly providing economic assistance to foster GUUAM development. Officials in Moscow have remained silent about recent GUUAM developments. However, the Russian media have left little doubt that Moscow views GUUAM's prospects as limited. A commentary in the *Nezavisimaia gazeta* pointed out that only two heads of state, those from Georgia and the host Ukraine, attended the summit. A primary source of tension between GUUAM and Russia is competing trade interests. GUUAM states have supported a trans-Caucasian transportation corridor known as TRACECA, which would link the countries in the Caspian Basin and the Black Sea regions, effectively bypassing Russia. At the same time, Moscow is seeking to promote the so-

<sup>17</sup> R. Abazov, "Kyrgyzstan's Dilemmas," *Analysis of Current Events*, Vol. 14, No. 2, May 2002.

<sup>18</sup> On 26 February, 2004, *Nezavisimaia gazeta* suggested that Moscow is hoping to secure a permanent Russian military base in Tajikistan (see: Z. Abdullayev, "Tajikistan, Russia Probe Military Partnership," *Eurasia Insight*, 15 March, 2004: available at [<http://www.eurasianet.org>]).

<sup>19</sup> See: K. Arman, "U.S. Geopolitical Position Takes Hit in Tajikistan," *Eurasia Insight*, 13 July, 2004: available at [<http://www.eurasianet.org>].

<sup>20</sup> Quoted from: Z. Eshanova, op. cit.

<sup>21</sup> Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova formed a group called the GUAM in 1996 and when Uzbekistan joined in 1999 it came to be known as GUUAM. It was formed as a political, economic and strategic alliance among the member states with the objective of enhancing regional economic cooperation through the development of a Europe-Caucasus-Asia transport corridor. It has also become a forum for discussing various levels of existing security problems and promoting conflict resolution. For more detail, see the GUUAM official website available at [[www.guam.org](http://www.guam.org)].

<sup>22</sup> See: T. Kuzio, S. Blagov, "GUUAM Makes a Comeback Bid with U.S. Support," *Eurasia Insight*, 7 July, 2003: available at [<http://www.eurasianet.org>].

called North-South transportation corridor. Moscow has been promoting the Eurasian Economic Community as an alternative to GUUAM.<sup>23</sup> What will deduct from the significance of the GUUAM is the fact that Uzbekistan has decided to opt out of it though it clarified that this was a temporary measure and that Uzbekistan could rejoin the grouping at a later date.<sup>24</sup>

Observers believe that with Central Asian security conditions becoming more complex, the countries in the region are eager to engage in cooperation with all regional powers, including China and Russia, and the United States. Kazakhstan, in particular, is eager to pursue a “multivector policy” as Maulen Ashimbaev, Director of the Kazakh Institute of Strategic Studies pointed out in an interview with the *Express K* newspaper.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, in the aftermath of the late March 2004 militant attacks in Tashkent and Bukhara, Uzbek President Karimov once again stressed the need to strengthen bilateral cooperation with Russia. Commenting on this the Uzbek Foreign Minister Sadiq Safayev pointed out that “...after deep analysis and considering prospects for bilateral relations both sides agreed that it was important that Uzbekistan and Russia sign a strategic partnership agreement in the near future.”<sup>26</sup>

However, even within this framework of a “new rivalry” other issues require attention. The U.S. and Russia have now embarked on an energy partnership with announcements about imports from Russia for the U.S. Strategic Petroleum Reserves. At a commercial summit meeting in Houston, Texas, in October 2002, industry leaders and officials came together to further the energy dialog declared by President George W. Bush and President Vladimir Putin at their Moscow Summit in May 2002.<sup>27</sup> While this will help to build the U.S. emergency stockpile it is also expected to help keep Russian output of crude oil high at times of sagging world demands. These are issues that could well become crucial in determining the contours of the relationship and its subsequent impact on Central Asia. Russia’s resumption of its role as a leading oil producer in the late 1990s coincided with the political and strategic changes that followed 9/11. Developments since then have deepened the United State’s sense of vulnerability to imported oil supplies particularly from Saudi Arabia. Within this context an energy partnership slowly developed between the U.S. and Russia. This emerging cooperation was based on American oil companies providing badly needed financial resources to Russia’s energy industry and in return Moscow presented itself as a stable oil supplier to the United States.<sup>28</sup>

Energy security remains a significant part of the U.S. policy toward Russia and the Central Asian region. Here, it has been observed that a truce has also been declared in the “battle of the pipelines.” John Erickson notes that there is a form of “geostrategic-geo-economic trade off” between Russia and the United States in the making. In return for the agreed admission of the American military into Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, albeit viewed in some military circles as a security threat to Russia, Moscow anticipates acceptance of Russia as a secure conduit for oil and gas pipeline from the Caspian.<sup>29</sup>

However, it is unrealistic to expect that Moscow can replace Riyadh as the principal supplier of oil in the near future. The Russian oil industry is still restrained by economic, political and geograph-

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>24</sup> Uzbekistan withdrew from the Organization in 2005.—*Editor’s Note*.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted from: I. Alibekov, S. Blagov, op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted from: I. Torbakov, “Uzbekistan Set to Diversify its Security Options in the Wake of Recent Militant Attacks,” *Eurasia Insight*, 19 April, 2004: available at [<http://www.eurasianet.org>].

<sup>27</sup> See: M. Lelyveld, “U.S./Russia: Officials Hail Energy Partnership,” *RFE/RL Report*, 4 October, 2002: available at [[www.rferl.org](http://www.rferl.org)].

<sup>28</sup> For more details of how this was attempted and the role of the oil companies, see: G. Bahgat, “The New Geopolitics of Oil: The United States, Saudi Arabia and Russia,” *Orbis*, Vol. 47, No 3, Summer 2003, pp. 447-461.

<sup>29</sup> See: J. Erickson, “Eurasian Manoeuvres,” in: *Oil, Transition and Security in Central Asia*, ed. by S.N. Cummings, Routledge-Curzon, London and New York, 2003, pp. 255-262.

ical obstacles. These include hesitant reform, lack of foreign investment, inadequate transportation infrastructure and a relative shortage of proven reserves compared to the Middle East. Russia's future level of oil production will be defined by the ability of oil companies to discover and develop oil deposits in the Arctic region, eastern Siberia and Sakhalin Islands. At the moment oil production from deposits is exceeding its rate of discovery of new reserves by a significant margin. The depletion of existing oilfields raises fears that Russia's current oil boom might be followed by a sharp decline in the foreseeable future. Also shipping to the U.S. is costly because of the great distance between the two countries and the lack of Russian deep water ports. The war on Iraq further intensified the U.S. efforts to reduce dependence on Middle East oil and secure supplies from other regions. However, the sheer quantity of Persian Gulf reserves ensures that Riyadh will continue to have a significant impact on the world's petroleum supplies and prices. This in turn will reflect on future developments in the region and future Russian-U.S. interaction in the Central Asian region.

Post Beslan, there was reemergence of the debates on the limits of Russian and U.S. power in the Caucasus and Central Asian region. It was argued that since chances of the establishment of either Russia or the U.S. as the dominant power were slim, it would best serve the purpose of both to increase cooperation in the two regions. The threat of renewed conflict in South Ossetia and the recent cases of radical violence in Uzbekistan have helped sharpen this viewpoint.<sup>30</sup> The debate in Russia, however, is still sharply divided between those who are opposed to confrontation with the U.S., given the fact that Russia does not have the ability to prevent the redeployment of U.S. troops to these regions and in any case now share a common concern about the containment of radicalism, and others who continue to believe that Russia can roll back U.S. influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia.<sup>31</sup>

### *Conclusion: Is Central Asia Truly the Heartland?*

"The formation of the international coalition to wage war on terrorism transformed what has been long standing 'Eurasian maneuvers,' competition for political and economic influence, jostling for privileged positions to exploit huge regional energy resources... The sanctity of the 'Heartland' was not only invaded—some of the invaders were actually invited in... The post-11 September rapprochement between Russia and the U.S. provided a virtual guarantee of non-interference in Russian affairs and an acknowledgement of Russian primacy in Central Asia. Washington publicly affirmed that it had no intention of 'squeezing Russia out of Central Asia.'"<sup>32</sup>

Rather than the development of a new round of geopolitical rivalry over the heartland in the immediate aftermath of the entry of U.S. forces in the region, the dynamics of major powers' strategic interaction in the Central Asian region has moved toward collaboration. An assessment of their behavior demonstrates a remarkable degree of shared strategic interests that has sustained their collaboration in the region. This does not imply that Russian and American decision makers do not wish to increase their influence over the region. Russian officials are eager to stop further decline of their influence. Russia wishes to limit the U.S. role in the region and advocates a multipolar strategy. For

---

<sup>30</sup> In the end of March 2004 there were suicidal attacks against the militia in Tashkent. This was followed by a series of bomb blasts in Bukhara. Following these incidents Uzbekistan and Russia negotiated an Uzbek-Russian strategic cooperation pact.

<sup>31</sup> For more details of the debate, see: I. Torbakov, "Policy Makers in Moscow Debate the Limits of Russian Power in the Caucasus, Central Asia," *Eurasia Insight*, 2 September, 2004: available at [<http://www.eurasianet.org>].

<sup>32</sup> J. Erickson, op. cit., p. 261.



their part, American policymakers have expressed a preference for “stability” and “development” that can only be served by their continued and enhanced presence.

Moreover the most pressing security problems for both the U.S. and Russia are not in Central Asia and are not ones that can only be achieved at the expense of the other. On the contrary, they require collaboration from other powers. For Russia, the war in Chechnia remains the most significant and there have been claims that the movement has transnational links with the Taliban and al-Qa’eda. The United States has classified both the Taliban and the al-Qa’eda as terrorist organizations and recognizes them as chief security threats, but at the same time has shifted its priorities to the Persian Gulf.

Contrary to the opinion that there is today a revival of the “Great Game” in the Caucasus and Central Asia, cooperation and multilateralism seem to be the watchwords of diplomacy for Eurasian powers. This brings into question the continuing interpretation of the history of the region in terms of an intense rivalry for control over Mackinder’s so-called “heartland of the world.” In fact, no major geopolitical conflicts now divide the powers and there is a new rapprochement over the region. While, on the one hand, this calls for a reinterpretation of the viability of the great game theories, and the significance of the “heartland,” on the other, it also demands a new look at the emerging multilateralism in the region.

---