

## INFLUENCE OF THE WORLD CENTERS OF POWER IN CENTRAL ASIA AND TAJIKISTAN: DYNAMICS AND OUTLOOK

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The current geopolitical situation in the Central Asian republics is much more diverse and complicated than it was ten years ago. Today, several countries—geopolitical players—ranging from Russia and the United States to Turkey and Iran are simultaneously exerting their influence on the political and socio-economic development of the region's states. But this influence is far from even, it is mainly di-

vided between the Russian Federation and the U.S. (the West), while China is expected to play a much greater role in the future. On the other hand, the geopolitical situation in the region is extremely unstable. Over the past few years, the role of one or another of the centers of power here now increases, now dwindles away to almost nothing. In other words, Central Asia is still an arena of geopolitical struggle, the dynamics

and outcome of which in the future are still rather difficult to predict.

In this context, two groups of questions arise. The first—to what extent is the geopolitical situation in the region still unstable and how is the influence of the main centers of power distributed within it, that is, are the changes that have occurred in the past two years in the geopolitical situation (particularly with respect to Russia's stronger position in Central Asia) permanent, or is this a temporary phenomenon likely to change again in the future? The second—to what extent and how does the orientation of the region's coun-

tries toward a particular center of power influence the nature of their development? For example, what will a particular country or region gain from being oriented toward Russia or toward the U.S.? And can the Central Asian republics carry out the multi-vector policy they are declaring today, whereby avoiding a biased orientation toward only one nation or center of power?

In this article, we will try to answer, if not all the questions asked, at least the most important of them by analyzing the dynamics and outlook of the influence of the main geopolitical players in the region—Russia and the U.S.

## Period of Geopolitical Uncertainty

In the fall of 2001, when, after the tragic events of 9/11, the American government made a decision to launch a military operation in Afghanistan, a period of geopolitical uncertainty began in Central Asia. At that time, no one knew in advance just how complicated and successful the military action in this country would be. So in order to provide air support for its troops, the U.S. needed to create military air bases in the direct proximity of the Afghani borders, primarily in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan.

But the former Soviet republics were in the zone of Russia's geopolitical influence at that time. Right up until 2001, the United States did not call the existence of this "zone of Russian interests" in question. What is more, since the collapse of the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s, the Russian Federation, as its legal successor, has always been considered the country capable of ensuring stability in the post-Soviet space and preventing uncontrolled squandering of Soviet nuclear potential (which the West was particularly concerned about at that time). The situation changed when George Bush's administration came to power, the leading representatives of which upheld a new geopolitical doctrine which proposed significant changes in the White House's foreign policy. This doctrine was drawn up as early as the beginning of the 1990s by a group of conservatives within George Bush, Sr.'s administration. It envisaged making maximum use of the geopolitical potential arising as a result of the Soviet Union's disintegration. It was based on the assertion that under current conditions, the U.S.'s national interests were more a matter of warning against new threats than of responding to them. In other words, it was a question of strengthening the one-polar world structure which unexpectedly appeared and preventing the appearance of new superpowers like the Soviet empire in the future. But this doctrine was not put into effect, since George Bush, Sr. was defeated by Bill Clinton at the presidential election.

Nevertheless, by 2001, a few of the authors of this doctrine ended up in U.S. President George Bush, Jr.'s closest entourage, one of whom was Paul Wolfowitz, thanks to whose efforts this doctrine formed the basis of U.S. foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> Central Asia's significance was also reconsidered from the viewpoint of this doctrine, since control over the region would permit China or transformed

<sup>1</sup> See: N. Lemann, "The Next World Order," *The New Yorker*, 1 April, 2002, pp. 42-48.

Russia to become new poles of big politics at a faster rate. The events of 9/11, which, in the words of Condoleezza Rice, were “one of those great earthquakes that clarify and sharpen,”<sup>2</sup> propelled this doctrine into action.

All the same, American diplomats initially showed respect for Russia’s “zone of influence.” For example, in 2001, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell first turned to the Russian leadership for permission to “use several military air bases for carrying out military operations against the Taliban movement.”<sup>3</sup> Official Moscow denied this request. Then Washington sent a corresponding request directly to the local regimes. Tajikistan did not rush to respond, while Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan consented almost immediately.<sup>4</sup> In this way, the “red line,” which unofficially marks the zone of Russia’s influence since as early as Yeltsin’s time, was crossed for the first time.

This fact shows the extent to which Russia’s position had weakened in the region by this time. This was because it could no longer ensure the primary needs of the local regimes both in terms of large-scale economic investments and in terms of security, especially in the face of the threat looming from the Taliban movement in the south.

In this light, the Americans looked to be a preferable option, they were more decisive and had the means for resolving many problems of the Central Asian republics. What is more, at first, the United States made the local regimes generous offers and was indulgent with its promises. For example, numerous reports appeared in the press about the large infusions of funds to be pumped into the Uzbek economy (there was talk about almost 8 billion dollars over the span of several years). As a result, U.S. military bases appeared in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan (the Khana-bad base), and Tajikistan consented to NATO air contingents using its territory for maintaining the military operation in Afghanistan. The military presence of the U.S. and the North Atlantic Alliance on the territory of these former Soviet republics meant significant changes in the geopolitical situation in the region. Thus, new geopolitical players—Western bloc countries, the United States in particular—appeared in the post-Soviet space. Russia’s geopolitical monopoly in Central Asia was given a jolt. The arrival of the Americans in the region made it possible for the local regimes to carry out a more flexible, multi-vector foreign policy aimed not only at the Russian Federation and other CIS states (and the Commonwealth as a whole), but also at the West and countries of the Islamic world.

It was precisely this latter circumstance that introduced uncertainty into the geopolitical situation in Central Asia—most of its regimes were faced with a new alternative, that is, the possibility of reorienting their foreign policy, shifting it from a traditionally unilateral (pro-Russian) into a more multi-vector and pro-Western channel. There was frequent talk in the Russian mass media of that time about Russia being gradually ousted from the region and even losing all its interests there in the future. Official Moscow’s concern grew in particular after the series of so-called Color Revolutions which spread through several post-Soviet republics in 2004-2005—first the Rose Revolution in Georgia, then the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, and in February 2005, President Askar Akaev was overthrown in Kyrgyzstan. The Russian political establishment and the country’s public as a whole evaluated the color revolution phenomenon in very unequivocal terms—it was an attempt by anti-Russian forces to change the geopolitical situation in the post-Soviet space. A prominent Russian politician noted that the events in Ukraine were only the first stage in a large-scale operation launched by the united West to change the local regimes by organizing revolutions.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from: N. Lemann, *op. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> See: A. Alexandrov, “Amerikantsy obzhivaiut Tsentral’nuu Aziuu,” in: *Bulletin Russia and the Muslim World*, No. 6 (120), RAS, Moscow, 2002, pp. 102-112.

<sup>4</sup> See: *Ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> See: M. Meyer, “Domino Theory,” *Newsweek*, 11 January, 2005, Foreign mass media [<http://www.CentrAsia.org/newsA.php4?st=1105606620>].

## Russia's Return

The period of geopolitical uncertainty lasted for about four years and ended in Russia significantly strengthening its position in the region, which the mass media even called its return to or new breakthrough in Central Asia. The turning point in the alignment of forces in the region came at the end of 2004 when Russia, in the form of two of its largest companies—Russian Aluminum (RusAL) and RAO UES—assumed the obligation of investing almost two billion dollars in Tajikistan and almost 1 billion in Kyrgyzstan in the next few years. When the treaty was signed in Dushanbe in October 2004, Russian President Vladimir Putin said: “I don’t think that anyone has invested this amount of money in the past 12-13 years or even spoken about their intention of investing this amount of money in Tajikistan.”<sup>6</sup>

Along with the economic component, which is of great significance for official Dushanbe, the Russian-Tajik agreements also encompassed several military-strategic issues which expressed many of Moscow’s interests. An agreement was reached on creating a Russian military base in Tajikistan, as well as transferring the Nurek electronic-optical station to Russian ownership. This facility is of special importance for the Russian army, since it makes it possible to keep track of missile launches essentially everywhere on the globe.

A series of similar agreements was also entered with Kyrgyzstan, where Russia, in exchange for its promised economic and financial injections into the country’s energy complex, received permission to set up a military air base in Kant.

But the series of agreements with Uzbekistan entered during the second half of 2005 can be considered Russia’s biggest success. Its main result was essentially complete geopolitical reorientation of this 25-million-strong republic toward Russia. Just recently, official Tashkent was a major headache for Russian diplomacy: its significant supplies of energy resources made it possible for it to carry out an independent foreign policy which often openly challenged Russia’s interests. Uzbekistan was frequently called the West’s and U.S.’s anchor state, particularly right after the 2001 events, and the main potential conveyor of American interests in the region. It was the only Central Asian state, along with Ukraine and Georgia, to join GUUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Moldova). Russia always related to this structure, as to a pro-Western organization, with a large dose of caution. But in 2005, Uzbekistan made a show of withdrawing from GUUAM, by preliminarily denouncing all the former agreements it signed during its membership in this organization. On 14 November, 2005, Russian and Uzbek Presidents Vladimir Putin and Islam Karimov signed a union agreement between the two countries, which they characterized as “unprecedented.” It envisages, in particular, mutual assistance in the event of aggression against one of the sides. In this respect, Islam Karimov said: “I believe that certain sides will have to draw conclusions based on other realities. In general, by threatening us, they are threatening Russia.”<sup>7</sup> The treaty also envisages the possibility of opening military bases on each other’s territory. Since it is difficult even to imagine an Uzbek military base being set up somewhere in the Russian Federation in the future, the matter probably concerns additional opportunities for Russian servicemen. In particular, with respect to the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the air base in Khanabad, it is possible that a Russian military base will be deployed there in the relatively near future.

In this way, by the second half of the 2005, Russia significantly strengthened its foothold in Central Asia. Most countries of the region are members of international associations and treaties where Russia plays a leading role. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan are members of the SCO

<sup>6</sup> V. Mukhin, “Podvodnye kamni na puti rossiisko-tadzhikskogo sblizheniia,” *Ferhana.ru*, 22 October, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> P. Bologov, “Dvuglavyi oriol v tiubeteike” [<http://lenta.ru/articles/2005/11/15/uzbek/>].

and EurAsEC (Uzbekistan joined this structure in the fall of 2005). What is more, the first three countries mentioned belong to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). And now Islam Karimov is talking about Central Asia as “a region in which no one can call Russia’s presence into question.”<sup>8</sup> Uzbekistan has essentially now become an anchor state of Russian interests in Central Asia. At the same time, the governments of other countries of the region are openly expressing their pro-Russian sentiments today. For example, at the last SCO summit on 5 July, 2005 in Astana, the Organization’s member states asked the U.S. to set the deadlines for withdrawing its bases from the Central Asian states.

## New Geopolitical Situation—Main Reasons

In our opinion, there are several reasons for such rapid and major changes in the geopolitical situation in the region.

The main one was the color revolution phenomenon. As in 2001, the most important issues for the local regimes are related to security (both at the regional level and within each country). But whereas several years ago, the local ruling elites believed that the main danger for them came from without, primarily from the Islamic Taliban movement and the potential increase in international extremism, now the situation has changed. The Afghan threat has retreated into the background. And the Color Revolutions which swept several post-Soviet republics showed the local elites that the main threat to their future peaceful prosperity now comes not from Afghanistan, but from the West. In the region’s states, as in Russia, people believe that the Color Revolutions were inspired by the West and the U.S. in order to bring pro-Western political forces to power, the local opposition “specially prepared and nurtured on Western grants.” So today, the leaders of the countries of the Central Asian region are vying with each other to criticize the West and the Color Revolutions: “If we take a closer look at these ‘flower revolutions,’ we see that the people who have come to power are trying to redistribute the economy again, re-privatize, and grab a large chunk of the pie for themselves,” said Nursultan Nazarbaev at the above-mentioned SCO summit.

A turning point for Uzbekistan was the events in Andijan in May 2005, when protest outbursts and demonstrations of the local population were suppressed by government troops. The West considered such use of force inappropriate and sharply criticized the domestic policy of the Uzbek authorities. But for Islam Karimov, this only served as grounds for reorienting his foreign policy toward Russia, which he had apparently already been planning to do anyway.

Under the threat of a Color Revolution, Russia looked much more preferable for the local regimes, particularly for Uzbekistan. Indeed, official Moscow ignores violations of human rights in the region’s countries and does not ask a lot of questions as soon as the local elites carry out a pro-Russian foreign policy. In this respect, the countries of Western democracy proved much more demanding, hinging economic and political assistance on the need for relative adherence to freedom of speech, human rights, and so on. Countries like Uzbekistan found the observance of these demands unacceptable, since it ultimately created opportunities for developing and strengthening political opposition to the ruling regime, so turning to Moscow was quite a logical and largely compulsory step for Tashkent.

Second, there were economic reasons for such rapid changes, primarily the ever-growing need of the region’s countries for large-scale investments. Most of the local elites mainly counted on investments in the macro economy, which in the West are again contingent on the observance of human rights. On the other hand, the investment climate is still unfavorable in all the Central Asian republics

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<sup>8</sup> P. Bologov, “Amerikantsev prosiat potesnitsia” [<http://lenta.ru/articles/2005/07/06/shos/>].

(the best example today is only Kazakhstan), and this applies in particular to the development of small and medium business. Western countries and international organizations are making some of their investments precisely in the micro economy, which the local elites are not particularly interested in. So it stands to reason that the hope that Western companies and organizations would make large investments in the region was not exactly justified.

Against this background, the investment projects proposed by Russia were extremely intriguing for Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. They are particularly advantageous for Tajikistan: in 2003, the republic's GDP amounted to only \$1.5 billion, so the \$2 billion in investments promised by the Russian leadership is a huge amount. According to estimates, the Tajik budget should increase almost three-fold over the next few years thanks to bilateral macroeconomic projects.

Third, there were political reasons for the changes generated primarily by the shift in the U.S.'s position. Today, we are seeing rather significant changes in the U.S.'s plans regarding the degree of its further involvement in the region. Apparently, the American leadership was indeed hatching plans initially to completely oust Russia from Central Asia, or at least to take its place in the region. But now Washington does not have the resources for serious involvement. Under the current conditions, the American leadership is having to deal with two of its main threats—the prolonged military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the financial expenses related to them, primarily the double deficit (of the federal budget and the payment balance). If the George Bush administration cannot deal with them, the entire structure ensuring the United States the role of the only superpower in a one-polar world will tumble. Today, almost 80% of the American army is engaged in Iraq alone, absorbing more than half of the U.S. military budget. Additional spending on Iraq, Afghanistan, and other purposes related to the war on terrorism constitutes approximately \$85 billion a year. Under these conditions, the White House has been playing a less active role in the Central Asian region recently. Apparently, in the future, the U.S. will be limited to creating a network of small and relatively inexpensive bases in Central Asia, which if absolutely necessary can be expanded into a larger military presence. This approach significantly restricts the U.S.'s ability to influence the situation in the region, which greatly assists Russia's return to its previous position in it.

## Prospects

In Tajikistan (as in most of the region's countries), the enthusiasm of the local elites regarding the new rapprochement with Russia is fully shared by society, most of the republic's political parties (including the opposition), and broad strata of the population.

Nevertheless, if we look closer at the situation, several questions arise for which it is still difficult to find answers.

First, to what extent can the Russian Federation fulfill its investment obligations? The thing is that investment projects can only be implemented by involving big Russian business in them, that is, the above-mentioned companies, RusAL and RAO UES. All the Kremlin's previous attempts to involve the domestic business elite in its geopolitical plans did not create the necessary response. This only became possible today due to a favorable contingency of events, primarily, the price of aluminum has risen in the world. In September 2004 (by the time the Russian-Tajik treaty was entered), aluminum quotations on the world raw material market were the highest during the past nine years. On the London Metal Exchange, corresponding futures (with delivery of the goods in three months) immediately rose in price by \$42 for one ton, to \$1,850. For comparison's sake, in 2001-2002, when NATO and the U.S. began deploying their bases in Central Asia and Moscow was trying to legalize the stay of the 201st division in Tajikistan, the cost of one ton of aluminum on the world's exchanges

amounted on average to \$1,300. “At that time, the expansion of aluminum production was not profitable for Russian businessmen, and they simply did not support the Kremlin’s military-economic projects—investments in exchange for bases, which, beginning in 1999, official Dushanbe tried to get from Moscow.”<sup>9</sup> Now the annual demand for aluminum has increased by almost 15% in China alone. Against this background, just one power station in Tajikistan (in Rogun) will be able to generate more than 800 million dollars in profit a year.

But the question is whether Russian companies will be able to observe the agreements they entered if the price of aluminum drops again in the future. After all, a drop in quotations to even the 2001 level could make investments in the republic’s aluminum business much less profitable, if not entirely unprofitable. On the other hand, will the Russian leadership be able to hold responsibility in this case for the obligations of its business structures, for example, RusAL? The financial opportunities of both companies are also pertinent here—statements circulated in the Russian press that RAO UES is hoping to receive subsidies from the country’s Stabilization Fund, while RusAL became involved in multi-million court cases with several companies at once, including Ansol, the former supplier of TajAz (Tajik Aluminum Plant).

The next question is related to the special features of the investment policy of both Russian companies. Serious worries are being expressed in the local press about the potential detriment to the country’s economy and ecology. It is noted “that the conditions RusAL intends to work under in Tajikistan do not envisage comprehensive development of production, but are oriented only toward using cheap electric power from the Vakhsh cascade. RusAL is looking at building hydropower stations only through the prism of smelting aluminum, and RAO UES only through the prism of re-selling energy to Tajikistan’s neighbors. This approach is very characteristic of these companies, this is precisely how they work in Russia too.”<sup>10</sup> Will official Dushanbe be able to prevent the republic’s economy (and politics) from becoming overly dependent on mono-profile transnational companies? After all, if it implements its investment projects in Tajikistan, RusAL will have the country’s entire aluminum production process concentrated in its hands—from extraction and delivery of raw material under the toll system to the manufacture of both electric power and aluminum itself, including the sale of its products on the world market. This Russian company will essentially become the main monopolist in the country where even now funds from the sale of aluminum constitute most of the currency revenue into the state budget.

But the main question is related to resolving the urgent problem of providing the population with employment. Today, the republic is in need of at least several hundred thousand new jobs, whereas RusAL in its most optimistic forecasts is promising to provide no more than 10,000, and only over the span of a few years. But the social and demographic circumstances in the country require jobs to be provided for as many people as possible in the shortest time. This problem is particularly urgent in Tajikistan (as well as in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan). If significant strides are not made toward resolving it in the next few years, the accumulated social and economic problems could take on political hues and become explosive.

On the whole, aluminum production and the construction and operation of hydropower plants have never been considered labor-intensive spheres of the economy (like most investment projects in the macroeconomic sphere). Although they have a favorable influence on macroeconomic and budget aspects, such long-term mega projects are of very little assistance to the development of the micro economy and small and medium businesses, on which the level of the population’s employment depends.

Just how long-term the strengthening of Russia’s foothold will be in the region will depend on finding a solution to these problems.

<sup>9</sup> V. Mukhin, op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> D. Verkhoturlov, “Tajikistan vprave trebovat’ ot Rossii bol’shei otvetstvennosti,” *Avesta*, 25 September, 2005.

### *C o n c l u s i o n s*

For Tajikistan, as for the other countries of Central Asia, a biased orientation toward Russia is rather traditional. For many decades (before and after the Soviet era), the nations of the region have been in the habit of looking at the world around them, primarily the West, from the perspective of Russia and its culture, as well as through the prism of its national perception.

The independence achieved at the beginning of the 1990s made it possible for the Central Asian countries to communicate with the world around them without going through Russia. In foreign policy, this meant being able to carry out multi-vector diplomacy and make direct contact with the rest of the world. What is more, Russia's influence in the region was never restricted to policy, most of the local population still has ties with the Russian culture and Russian language, and has a similar mentality. It seems that this is precisely one of the main resources of Russia's influence in the region.

Today we have to recognize that an entirely multi-vector foreign policy is still impossible for most of the Central Asian countries. The reason for this is that these states have still not resolved their economic and social problems, which means they are still too vulnerable to influence from the outside. Even Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, which have significant reserves of energy resources, are compelled to orient themselves toward one specific center of power or another. Of course, under the new conditions, there is greater freedom for maneuver, and each country can make a geopolitical choice which best suits its national interests. Of course, in this context too, the Central Asian countries do not have the same opportunities for maneuver and choice, for example, Kazakhstan (with its relatively developed economy) has many more than neighboring Kyrgyzstan.

Today, the main vector of their foreign policy is oriented toward Russia. It appears that the new geopolitical choice of these states will introduce certain specifics into their further development.

- First, emphasis will be placed on the development of the macro economy. Essentially all the investment plans initiated by the Russian side in Central Asia are large long-term projects with a clear raw material and energy component. Correspondingly, the problems of employment and job placement of the local population related to the development of small and medium business remain in the background.
- Second, in the foreseeable future, the status quo will be retained in domestic policy and in the alignment of forces in the region. Essentially all the current ruling elites of these countries are members of the former Soviet and party establishment, that is, they have a corresponding mentality, their own way of understanding the economy, specific methods of political activity, and so on. In this respect, many of them cannot or simply do not wish to carry out serious reforms in their countries. As natives of the Soviet system, they are largely pro-Russian in their orientation, particularly when it comes to the threats posed by the color revolution phenomenon. Their orientation toward Russia will help them to retain their position for quite a long time to come, to which Russia's exclusively pragmatic involvement will also help. Russian politicians are ready to be friendly with and support any leader in the post-Soviet space, from Lukashenko to Karimov, as long as they uphold a pro-Russian orientation. In this respect, the U.S. had much less freedom for maneuver, which led to its current defeat in the region. The thing is not that the American establishment is not as pragmatic as the Russian. But in contrast to the Kremlin, the White House was forced to look back over its shoulder at its own country's public opinion and act within the framework of that ideology (democracy and human rights) which the United States declares as its state ideology. And when the Uzbekistan authorities openly violated human rights, official Washington was forced to at least criticize these authorities.

- Third, in most countries of the region, the role and influence of the Third Sector and of civil society as a whole will gradually decline. Unfortunately, it is civil society and nongovernmental organizations that are viewed in many post-Soviet countries, primarily in Russia, as the main instigators of the Color Revolutions and the conveyers of Western influence. So in many CIS countries there are plans to take specific steps, or they are already being taken, to restrict the activity of NGOs, independent mass media, and public associations. In 2005, the Russian parliament adopted a law on nongovernmental organizations, which placed stricter control on their activity. It is likely that most of the Central Asian republics will follow the same path. Of course, in every country, this process is acquiring different forms and dimensions, but on the whole the trend will be similar.

Of course, there is no point in shifting the blame for the Color Revolutions onto public organizations and NGOs, but apparently the matter here concerns the clinging Soviet “class instinct” of the former party leaders and Komsomol heads, many of whom are in power today in most of the CIS countries. And the activity of the Third Sector and civil society is based on a diametrically opposite ideology, which is still largely alien to the local elites and, unfortunately, to a significant part of the population.

But, no matter what, in the next few years, most Central Asian countries will develop along sufficiently similar lines and under the influence of the Russian center of power.