REGIONAL POLITICS

CHINA IN CENTRAL EURASIA: SECURITY INTERESTS AND GEOPOLITICAL ACTIVITY

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Introduction

Today, extended geographical links are the most important yet far from the only factor that makes Central Eurasia[1] highly significant for China's conceptualization of its security. The Soviet Union's disintegration, which created newly independent states, also generated favorable conditions for China's progress toward the superpower status. At the same time, Central Eurasia, or rather the advent of anarchy across its political space and the rising ethnoterritorial problems which might well affect China's northwestern regions, called for fresh approaches to the area. By the same token, its geopolitical importance for China's relations with its main rivals at the supra-regional level was exacerbated.

In these conditions, China should become more actively involved in the Central Eurasian

[1] Here I refer to the conception of Central Eurasia and Central Europe suggested by Eldar Ismailov who counted three post-Soviet regions as part of Central Eurasia: Central Europe—Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine; the Central Caucasus—Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia; Central Asia—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (for more detail, see: E.M. Ismailov, "Central Eurasia: Its Geopolitical Function in the 21st Century," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 2 (50), 2008, pp. 7-29).

space freed from Soviet domination, which means that it should join the current rivalry for geopolitical control over the vast area. In this article I want to look at the security interests which form the cornerstone of Chinese policy in Central Eurasia, identify the geopolitical importance of this area for China, and trace the tactical specifics of China's regional policies.

Geography and China's Involvement in Central Eurasia

China borders only on the Central Asian part of Central Eurasia yet the total length of its border with the Central Asian states can be compared only with the length of Russian geographic connection to the region; the number of China's Central Asian neighbors (four out of the total six if we count Afghanistan as part of the region—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan with a total length of 2,908 km[2]) makes it vitally important for China's security interests. This determines China's behavior in the region and its security interdependence with the Central Asian states.

It is still unclear whether China can penetrate two other Central Eurasian regions: there is any number of positive and negative answers, which means that a straightforward interpretation of the current state of affairs is impossible. On the other hand, one might wonder: Why is it topical for China rather than for Turkey or Iran? The answer should be sought not so much in the history of the Chinese imperial systems in this space, but rather in the present and future global status of this Eurasian power.

In the past, China was obviously much less active in Central Eurasia than Turkey and Iran even though its Great Power traditions are as rich, or even richer, than those of Iran, Turkey, and Russia. In the past, it operated in Central Asia and was involved in the areas adjacent to its territory. By the beginning of the post-Soviet period (when the anarchic political structure in Central Eurasia was restored), its regional policy was fairly obviously riveted to the centuries-old behavior model.

Today, most of the parameters of its national power make China the most serious claimant to the status of the second superpower. More than that, China's current economic scope and development pace mean that it might elbow aside the United States as the most influential global power. This prospect became discernable as the bipolar world system moved toward its end; the fall of the Soviet Union, its northern neighbor, secured the Chinese northern border and allowed Beijing to strengthen the country by concentrating on domestic economic problems, restoring Greater China, and building up its international impact.[3]

This means that China will inevitably become more actively involved on the global level and in geopolitical rivalry in the strategically important Eurasian regions (to say nothing of its close geographic neighbors and the security challenges this closeness generates). Neither China's historical traditions (which its leaders respect) nor the Great China Wall will protect the country from a future confrontation over control of the adjacent areas and the perturbations it will cause.

The superpower status is one of the most interesting cases of geography losing its priority when it comes to the actor's involvement in a regional security system. In this case, involvement in international political and economic processes creates much greater material and status-related demands

[2] Calculated from: *CIA World Factbook 2008—China*, available at [https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ch.html].

[3] See: K. Syroezhkin, "China in Central Asia: From Trade to Strategic Partnership," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 3 (45), 2007, p. 41.

coupled with the oversized potential of this actor to project its influence. This makes it next to impossible to squeeze its security-related activities into limited geographic areas. The United States has already accepted this as one of its "geopolitical security axioms," while China is moving in the same direction together with its growing superpower status.

After the Soviet Union's collapse, geography was one of the natural barriers of China's involvement in Central Eurasia. The Russian Federation, the legal heir to the Soviet Union, joined the new world order as a much weakened power, however its geographic ties with Central Eurasia still offered it considerable advantages when it came to projecting its power and protecting its interests there. It could stand up to any Eurasian power, including China. Russia's common frontiers with the three Central Eurasian regions allow it to keep its ties with them on a permanent basis even if it degenerates into an average power. This does not apply to China: its geographic contact with Central Eurasia is limited to Central Asia; this is clearly seen in China's policy in Central Eurasia and its relations with Russia. In future, however, China might push aside the geographical limits of its involvement in Central Eurasia with the help of mounting material and status-related demands and the wider potential of power projection. The increasing interconnection of the three Central Eurasian security sub-systems and the increasingly interrelated phenomena and processes there have already urged China to move to the west, beyond the Central Asian limits.

The New Conditions in Post-Soviet Central Eurasia: The Pluses and Minuses for China

At the beginning of the post-Soviet period, geography was not the only obstacle on the road to China's effective influence over the entire area liberated from Soviet domination. This refers not only to geographically relatively distant Central Europe and the Central Caucasus but also to Central Asia, its immediate western neighbor. Culturally, China's position was much less advantageous than that of its Eurasian neighbors: its geopolitical rivals could rely on ethnic affinity (Turkey in the Central Caucasus and Central Asia; Russia in Central Europe), shared religions (Turkey and Iran in the Central Caucasus and Central Asia and Russia in Central Europe), common lifestyle and mentality shaped by the long history of living in one state (Russia in Central Asia, Central Europe and the Central Caucasus), and cultural affinity created by history and integration prospects (the European Union in Central Europe and the Central Caucasus). China had none of the above in any of the three regions. Its ethnic and religious affiliations and lifestyle and mentality placed it apart from the titular nations of Central Eurasia. Moreover, it is limited in projecting its "soft power" there because of the current political systems.

Even though much more liberal than the Soviet version, Chinese communism is still communism, while in the Central Eurasian countries the national upsurge and striving for independence were largely rooted in the ideas of struggle against the Soviet repressive communist regime and the desire to build sovereign liberal and democratic states. This allowed America, Europe, and even Turkey to use their "soft power" in the post-Soviet regions; Iran and China had no chances in this respect. The 1989 events on Tiananmen Square at the very height of the national-liberation movement in the Soviet republics marred the image of the Chinese social and political model. The cruelty the Chinese authorities demonstrated when suppressing the student riots and the resultant sanctions the West intro-

duced against China isolated the country on the international scene and made China a de facto "rogue state." The Chinese political model could hardly attract the Soviet successor states, however the Chinese economy looked rather tempting.

Indeed, its rapidly developing economy could improve China's image in the eyes of the newly independent states: early in the 1990s and mid-1990s, it could offer their ruined socioeconomic systems more than Russia, Turkey, or Iran. Only Europe and the United States could have competed with China in this respect. On the one hand, Beijing wanted involvement in the newly independent states; while on the other, in the adverse geographic and cultural context described above, the economy looked like the best vehicle for political influence.

China was interested in the newly independent states (and in adjacent Central Asia in particular) as a giant market for its commodities, as a source of natural resources, and as a potential territory for the "second railway bridge" between China and Europe to decrease the former's dependence on Russia in the transit traffic. Its involvement also could have helped China develop the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR). The Chinese academic and political communities pointed to the above as the most positive results of the Soviet Union's disappearance.[4]

On the whole, realization of these interests did not create any risks for China's relations with the Soviet successor states, including Russia, or with other rivals in Eurasia, even though later it became clear that the potential rivals had been not overjoyed at this. This involvement created a platform for China's greater political influence. Today, China's trade expansion in Central Asia is gathering momentum.[5] The regional countries are becoming dependent on Chinese commodity exports. "Neither the Central Asian countries nor Russia can compete with China outside the raw-material sphere… This means that we are doomed to the Chinese commodity boom in the near future. More than that: disappearance of Chinese commodities from the Central Asian market will cause havoc. First, exports from Turkey, the UAE, India, etc. will never close the gap; second, it will deprive a large part of the local population (even those people not engaged in shopping tourism and commerce) of a means of existence."[6] Labor migration from China is increasing,[7] which will create, some time in the future, an "ethnic base" of Chinese influence in Central Asia.[8]

At the early stage of independent development of the Soviet successor states, China could expect its regional claims and stronger position to be welcome. In addition to the other positive aspects, the regional states acquired a wider political leeway: indeed a large number of strong powers involved in the region offered the local states a good chance to remain really independent on the international and domestic scene. Over time, the regional welcome may wear out: it depends on the stability/instability of the balance of external forces. Neither the geopolitical rivals nor the regional states want China's excessive influence in Central Asia.

The above applies to the greatest extent to the present situation, as well as to the early 1990s in Central Asia. So far, the other two Central Eurasian regions can be discussed only as potential areas of China's influence; the changing international balance in Eurasia does not allow us to lose sight of this prospect. China's achievements on the world arena in the last 20 years signify that it is determined to climb onto the "superpower pedestal" and can do this. Today, however, we should concentrate on Central Asia which, because of its geographic proximity to China, directly affects its national security

[4] See: A. Khojaev, "China's Central Asian Policy (Based on Chinese Sources)," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 3 (45), 2007, p. 27.

[5] See: *Sotrudnichestvo i bezopasnost v Tsentral'noy Azii: sostoianie i perspektivy*, ed. by B.K. Sultanov, KISI at the RK President, Almaty, 2008, p. 146.

[6] Ibidem.

[7] According to conservative assessments, 150-200 million people have been made redundant in China (ibidem).

[8] This is going on in some of the Southeastern Asian states: Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand.

and, for this reason, remains one of the centers of China's key interests. In this context, we can also talk about China's activities in the other two Central Eurasian regions.

China's Key Security Interests in Central Eurasia and Related Strategy

The so-called Uighur problem is the central point from which the security interdependence of China with the Central Asian states is suspended. The related threat is of an existential nature for the country's security: an independent Uighur state (Eastern Turkestan) set up in the northwestern part of the PRC (XUAR)[9] is a real threat.

Historically, ethnolinguistically, and confessionally, Eastern Turkestan is closer to Central Asia than to China.[10] Until the mid-18th century (when the Qing dynasty captured the region),[11] Eastern and Western Turkestan (Central Asia) belonged to a single regional political area/system in which empires were formed and disappeared. (The Turkic Khaganate, which existed for 6 to 8 centuries, is one of the examples.) Ethnically and confessionally, XUAR differs from the rest of China: its population is mainly Turkic—this is true of about 10 million Uighurs and the local Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Uzbeks. In fact, the presence of the latter three groups confirms the postulate of the region's historical unity with Central Asia. Its religion, likewise, keeps it from the rest of the country: it is China's largest Muslim region.[12]

United with China, the region never integrated into the common Chinese national-cultural space. Konstantin Syroezhkin has written the following on this score: "The small numbers of Chinese in these parts, the compact residence of the autochthonous ethnic groups there, and the relatively short historical period of their coexistence with the Hans, coupled with their rejection of the traditional Chinese culture of the Qing Empire, made their natural acculturation next to impossible. The process was advanced by force. The state forced the local ethnic groups, some of them at fairly high (for that time) levels of socioeconomic, political, and cultural development, to embrace the Chinese culture. Cultural assimilation, however, could not be achieved by force, by imposing elements of Chinese culture on the region's autochthonous population. Its fairly developed ethnic awareness rejected the alien elements every time the political situation in the country changed; this created separatism."[13]

More than that: confrontation with the imperial center drove the Uighurs beyond the border[14]; in the late 19th century, Central Asia (then part of the Russian Empire) acquired an Uighur diaspora. Later, Uighurs appeared in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, America, and other countries.[15] Over time, the Uighur

[9] The region covers 1,600 thousand sq km, or one-sixth of China's territory.

[10] See: K. Khafizova, "Separatism in China's Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region: Dynamics and Potential Impact on Central Asia," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 1 (19), 2003, ð. 7; Zh. Huasheng, "China, Russia, and the U.S.: Their Interests, Postures, and Interrelations in Central Asia," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 5 (29), 2004, ð. 117.

[11] See: Y. Shichor, "Limping on Two Legs: Uyghur Diaspora Organizations and the Prospects for Eastern Turkestan Independence," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 6 (48), 2007, ð. 119; K. Khafizova, op. cit., p. 9.

[12] Sunni is the dominant Islamic branch both in Central Asia and SUAR.

[13] K. Syroezhkin, "'Separatizm' v Sintsziane: mify i real'nost," *Tsentral'naia Azia*, No. 10, 1997, available at [http://www.ca-c.org/journal/10-1997/st_14_siroegkin.shtml].

[14] The highest wave of unrest in China's western regions was raised in 1864-1865; it produced five independent states in the territory of Eastern Turkestan and Djungaria united, in 1867, into Yettishar with Yaqub Beg at the head. Later it was reintegrated into the Qing Empire by force (see: S. Okhotnikov, "China and Central Asia after the Beginning of the Anti-terrorist Operation in Afghanistan," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 5 (17), 2002, ð. 22).

[15] See: Y. Shichor, op. cit., pp. 118-119.

diaspora spread the ideas of independence of Eastern Turkestan worldwide; Central Asia, in turn, became the most important space, keeping the separatist sentiments in China's northwestern part boiling. The Chinese were justifiably concerned by the fact that Uighur separatism was not limited to the Uighur leaders—it enlisted international support and money.

History justifies these concerns: "In the 19th and 20th centuries, the problem of an independent state in Xinjiang touched upon the interests of the great powers and other states. It was an area where intelligence services of many countries were most active. In the 1930s and 1940s, Japan and Turkey, two German allies, initiated buffer states between the Soviet Union and China. The result was not only the ETR (the Eastern Turkestan Republic.—*J.E.*), but also two other structures: Manchukuo and the Republic of Mongolia."[16] After World War II, the issue was revived as part of the Soviet-Chinese confrontation and followed the ups and downs of their bilateral relations.[17] The Kremlin encouraged all sorts of Uighur organizations in Central Asia, which was transformed, for confrontation purposes, into the main base of the forces of Eastern Turkestan.[18]

The Soviet Union quit the scene, leaving China to shift its concern to the newly independent Central Asian states and the much stronger regional and global rivals (Turkey and the United States and later the non-state extremist religious organizations). "When dissolution of the U.S.S.R. brought independence to 'Western Turkestan' (i.e., the Central Asian states), the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region experienced a marked increase in sympathy for pan-Turkic sentiment and for a Uighur state of 'Eastern Turkestan.'"[19] Beijing feared, first, that the separatist and fundamentalist movements would move from Central Asia into XUAR to rock the situation there[20]; and second, that the Central Asian states would shelter the separatists or supply them with weapons.[21]

China was even more suspicious of its geopolitical rivals, which tried to fill in the power vacuum in Central Eurasia left by the Soviet Union and its rapidly declining legal heir. It should be said that earlier Chinese policy contributed to a certain extent to internationalization of the Uighur problem. The Uighurs were a discriminated minority to say the least: this was true of Mao's period, and it became even more pronounced in 1980-1990 during the New Course of Deng Xiaoping. "Most important, after Mao's death Beijing adopted an Open Door policy that has led to a greater interaction with the international community, to active participation in international organizations and to greater exposure to international norms—for the first time in its history. At the same time, China began to increase its pressure on nationalities to guarantee its continued control of the periphery even, and especially, under the new conditions of 'openness.' Under these circumstances, Uighur identities (ethnic, political, social, religious, economic, international, etc.) in general and 'Uighur separatism' in particular, have become a primary target for this ongoing crackdown, unprecedented even in Mao's time."[22]

Together with the Tibet issue, the Uighur problem became the main target of international criticism and an instrument of pressure in the hands of the United States and its closest allies. This could have legalized support to Uighur separatism in the form of political as well as financial and military-technical aid. This was all the more possible because it perfectly fit the Reagan Doctrine (still on the agenda) and could rely on the mechanisms used to support the Afghan insurgents fighting

[16] K. Khafizova, op. cit., p. 15.
[17] See: Ibidem.
[18] See: Zh. Huasheng, op. cit., p. 117.
[19] R. Burnashev, "Regional Security in Central Asia: Military Aspects," in: *Central Asia. A Gathering Storm?* ed. by B. Rumer, M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, New York, 2002, p. 127.
[20] See: O. Oliker, "Conflict in Central Asia and South Caucasus: Implications of Foreign Interests and Involvement," in: *Faultlines of Conflict in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. Implication for the U.S. Army*, ed. by O. Oliker, Th.S. Szayna, Rand, Santa Monica, 2003, p. 214.
[21] See: Ibidem.
[22] Y. Shichor, op. cit., p. 119.

the Soviet intervention. These mechanisms had proven their worth on the local (the Soviet Union pulled out of Afghanistan) and global geopolitical scale (overstrained, the Soviet Union lost its efficiency).

In the early post-Soviet era, the U.S., as seen from Beijing, was not the only potential source of external interference in the Uighur question—the Eurasian rivals looked equally threatening. The Russian Federation, trying to cope with the domestic socioeconomic and political upheavals and straining to keep together what it had inherited from the Soviet Union, had no ethnopolitical levers with which to challenge China as a geopolitical rival. Turkey, on the other hand, which, in the early 1990s, was in the grips of pan-Turkic sentiments, looked like a more probable source of danger. It still had the largest Uighur diaspora and funded it. Besides, "the Ottoman Empire and then Turkey had become an inspiration and a model for Eastern Turkestani pursuit of cultural and political independence already since the late 19th century."[23] In 1996, the World Uighur Kurultai convened in Istanbul passed a resolution on the need to take up arms to set up Eastern Turkestan.[24]

Extremist religious organizations were another source of material and ideological support of Uighur separatism; from the very beginning the independence movement in XUAR was religiously biased. Religion was gathering political hues across the post-Soviet space; the post 9/11 events allowed Beijing to point to the connection between Uighur separatism and the extremist Islamic organizations and movements operating in Central Asia (such as al-Qa'eda, the Taliban, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and Hizb ut-Tahrir) which relied on terrorist methods. In 2003, Beijing published its first lists of the terrorist organizations of Eastern Turkestan, which included the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, the East Turkestan Liberation Organization, the World Uighur Youth Congress, and the East Turkestan Information Center.[25] China regards Central Asia as a space for the transborder activities of the Uighur separatists and a potential base for other extremist and terrorist groups and organizations connected with the Uighurs which might cross over to China. This was why Beijing wanted a more secure Central Asia.[26]

On the one hand, the leaders of China tried to limit the dangers presented by the Uighur question by developing the region's economy; on the other, it is working toward formulating common approaches to separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism with the Central Asian states and Russia. Both tasks required China's political and economic involvement in Central Asia. Over time, this justified itself.

Late in the 1990s, Beijing formulated a strategy of large-scale development of the country's western regions; in the final analysis they found a place of their own in the country's modernization: "Twelve administrative entities of the western region had started playing a key role in the country's development."[27] The Central Asian countries, together with the Russian Federation and Mongolia, had a special role to play in the process as recipients of the products of the western provinces' industrial activities.[28] This was all the more possible because these countries were close geographical neighbors with similar cultures; their producers, with relatively low competitive power, could not fill their capacious markets. The western provinces of the PRC, therefore, could operate on these markets in the best possible conditions and achieve the highest possible rates of their socioeconomic development.

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[23] Y. Shichor, op. cit., p. 120.

[24] See: R. Burnashev, op. cit.

[25] See: Zh. Huasheng, op. cit., p. 117.

[26] See: Zh. Huasheng, op. cit., pp. 117-118; M. Laumulin, *The Geopolitics of the 21st Century in Central Asia*, KazISS, Almaty, 2007, p. 121.

[27] A. Kaukenov, "China's Policy within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 3 (45), 2007, p. 65.

[28] See: Ibidem.

Beijing is engaged in intensive political cooperation with the Central Asian countries and Russia on the bilateral and multilateral (the SCO) levels. Its interests go beyond the Uighur question and are related to the territorial issues inherited from the Soviet Union. In 1996, China initiated the Agreement on Confidence-building Measures in the Military Sphere in the Border Regions signed in Shanghai; in 1997, the Agreement on Mutual Reduction of Armed Forces in the Border Areas was signed in Moscow. The two documents laid the foundation of the Shanghai Five (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan); later Uzbekistan joined the structure, which in 2001 was transformed into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.[29] Border settlement was facilitated by the same token: the basic agreement with Russia was signed in 1997, with an additional agreement following suit in 2004; with Kazakhstan in 1994 and 1997; with Kyrgyzstan in 1996 and 1999; and with Tajikistan in 1999 and 2002.[30]

Simultaneously, Beijing achieved complete understanding with these states on the struggle against separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism related, first and foremost, to the need to cut short Uighur separatist activities in these countries and prevent transborder infiltration of terrorists and extremists from these countries into China.[31] In July 2000 at its Dushanbe summit, the Shanghai Five indicated that it would be developing into a regional structure of multilateral cooperation and specified the main threats it intended to confront as international terrorism, religious extremism, and ethnic separatism.[32]

Later, after 9/11, when the threat of terror reached the world level, it became even easier for China to achieve understanding with its SCO partners with respect to the threats created by the Uighur problem. “By signing agreements with the local countries, China enlisted them as allies in the struggle against ethnic separatism. More than that: by the same token, it split the ‘Muslim unity’ of the Xinjiang peoples and the autochthonous Central Asian nationalities to a certain extent. As a Shanghai Five member, it became immune to the interference of third countries in the ‘Uyghur’ factor.”[33]

In the geopolitical context, China needs a stable strategic rear in the adjacent northern and northwestern territories to be able to effectively concentrate on its key geopolitical supra-regional problems. This means that the south of the post-Soviet space is closely connected with China’s security. Zh. Huasheng has written the following on this score: “Securing Central Asia as China’s stable strategic rear area is an important aspect of Beijing’s grand strategy and geopolitics, it means involving Central Asia in China’s overall external strategy and, in doing so, defining Central Asia’s position in this strategy.”[34]

This brings the Chinese position in relation to Central Asia closer to the Iranian stand on Central Asia and the Central Caucasus. Today, neither state regards the southern post-Soviet stretch as the main theater of their rivalry or a source of urgent military threats (even though their ethnic and territorial interdependence with these post-Soviet areas is as functional as ever). In Iran’s case, the Persian Gulf presents the greatest potential threat; in China’s case, this role belongs to Eastern Asia or, rather, the Pacific, on which it borders in the southeast together with the American outposts there (Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan). Both Tehran and Beijing are concerned about a possible conflict with the United States in these areas more than anything else. The so-called Taiwan problem, the still unresolved issue of China’s territorial integrity, serves as one of the most serious sources of the worsened relations between China and the U.S. or even of an armed conflict in Southeast Asia.

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[29] See: K. Syroezhkin, “China in Central Asia: From Trade to Strategic Partnership,” p. 43.

[30] See: Ibidem.

[31] See: Zh. Huasheng, op. cit., pp. 117-118; Bao Yi, “China’s Strategic Interests in Central Asia. Cooperation with Central Asian Countries,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 5(11), 2001, ð. 101.

[32] See: K. Syroezhkin, “China in Central Asia: From Trade to Strategic Partnership,” p. 44.

[33] Ibid., p. 43.

[34] Zh. Huasheng, op. cit., p. 118.

The United States has officially recognized Taiwan as part of China,[35] yet Taiwan remains de facto independent under America's patronage. America's efforts to build up the military-technical potential of the Republic of China (based on The Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 and Six Insurances on Taiwan of 1982) are intended to protect its independent status. In the post-bipolar world, the United States has reconfirmed its obligations in the military sphere, which was amply illustrated by Washington's response to the upsurge of tension between Beijing and Taipei in 1996.[36]

The still unresolved Taiwan problem looks like the main and highest stumbling block for China on the road to the superpower status. It seems that it will remain beyond its reach as long as the most developed of China's territories, which broke away in the mid-20th century, avoids integration. Washington, comfortable as the world's only leader, is well aware of this: it does not need a neighbor on the pedestal and will, therefore, go on with its patronage of the island's de facto independence. This will increase tension between America and China in East Asia and force China to work harder to maintain stability in Central Asia, its strategic rear. According to Zh. Huasheng, the latter 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."[37]

On the whole, this can be accepted. Irrespective of the priority of any of the conditions, to remain sustainable they all depend on too many factors to be realizable at any time in the future. This means that Beijing will keep Central Asia in sight as one of its security factors. The last of the conditions might well turn out to be the weakest point in the chain of China's post-Soviet political successes in Central Asia because of the geopolitical processes underway in the region.

- First, the United States and its NATO allies have already stationed their troops there; the operation in Afghanistan, which serves the interests of the entire world community, inevitably changes the region's geopolitical landscape. In the context of the struggle against international terrorism, religious extremism, and separatism, Russia and China need the counterterrorist operation in Afghanistan. Today, however, "America became a de facto neighbor of the Central Asian countries,"[38] which cannot but affect what is going on in the Central Asian countries, their foreign policy, and the regional involvement of other states. The "Afghan toehold" moved the U.S. Armed Forces directly to the Chinese, and more importantly, XUAR borders. This provided Washington with a lever of pressure in the event of worsened relations with China on, for example, the East Asian flank. It can also be used to contain China, which is striving to expand its influence in Central Asia, and to fortify the West's position there.

[35] The Joint Communiqué on Establishing Diplomatic Relations between the U.S. and PRC of 1 January, 1979 stated that the United States recognized "the PRC government as the sole legitimate government of all China" and that "there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China" (see: K. Dumbaugh, "Taiwan: Texts of the Taiwan Relations Act, the U.S.-China Communiqués, and the 'Six Assurances,'" 21 May, 1998, available at [http://digital.library.unt.edu/govdocs/crs/permalink/meta-crs-695:1]).

[36] The presidential election in Taiwan, to which China responded with wide-scale military exercises on its coast and the Taiwan Strait, triggered the crisis. America responded with the most impressive demonstration of its naval might since the 1950s. It moved in two aircraft carriers and 36 ships and submarines (see: St.J.Yates, "The Taiwan Relations Act after 20 Years: Keys to Past and Future Success," The Heritage Foundation, Backgrounder #1272, 16 April, 1999, available at [http://www.heritage.org/research/asiaandthepacific/BG1272.cfm]).

[37] Zh. Huasheng, op. cit., p. 119.

[38] M. Imanaliev, E. Abdyldaev, "Globalization Challenges in Central Asia and Certain Aspects of China's Central Asian Policies," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 3 (45), 2007, p. 94.

- Second, nearly all the newly independent Central Asian states regard the West as a desirable but so far distant sociopolitical and economic aim. In other words, the West can use its "soft power" to build up its influence in the region much more successfully than China with its levers. The West is encouraging the Central Asian countries' ardent desire to integrate into the West-dominated international economic and political system—in this way it is opening the door into the region.
- Third, the SCO, which China hopes to maintain, together with Russia and the Central Asian states, as a mechanism of regional security[39] and containment of the United States and its allies in the region,[40] might crumble under the burden of objective disagreement between its key players—China and Russia.

Today, Beijing is content to act together with Moscow when addressing the problems described above; in the future, Russia might be confronted with China's greater and still increasing involvement in the region based on its obvious economic and demographic advantages.

The current demographic and territorial problem will exacerbate the relations between the two Eurasian giants even more and may also cause conflicts. A. Khojaev has written the following in this respect: "Overpopulation in China affected its foreign policy at all times in the past. So far it is hard to predict what will happen if China and Russia develop different ideas about regional policy, the economy, and energy, or if the balance of forces tips in favor of China at the regional or international level."[41]

In post-Soviet Russia, on the other hand, the demographic decline still remains one of the key problems of its security. Much is being said about the declining Russian population of Eastern Siberia and the Far East and the threat of Chinese demographic expansion there.[42] Illegal Chinese migrants have already begun spreading across these expanses; the continued depopulation of the two regions and China's "territorial shortage" will push the ethnoterritorial issues to the fore in the two powers' security interdependence. This might well end in negative dynamics or even conflicts between them.

Energy security is keeping China in Central Asia; in the future, its dependence on energy sources will draw Beijing deeper into regional security relations.

The amazing scope of the Chinese economy needs equally amazing amounts of energy sources; the country cannot rely on its domestic sources alone. In 2006, its dependence on oil imports reached 47.3 percent; by 2020, the expected gap between the available and imported hydrocarbons will reach 50-60 percent.[43] Its future superpower status demands energy security.

The leaders should not depend on external factors; this is even truer of the "super-leader" status. China, which has set itself this goal, relies on its economy (which is so far fairly vulnerable with respect to energy security). Gas and oil are non-renewable resources; they are rapidly becoming scarce on the global scale, however China and the other developed countries depend on them. The amity/enmity relations between China and the rest of the developed world will unfold in the context of the mounting global deficit of energy resources. The outcome is easy to predict. Today, China is the world's second largest (after the U.S.) "superpower" with respect to the consumption of deficit energy sources. In other words, the sphere of possible conflict between China and the United States (and between

[39] See: M. Laumulin, op. cit.

[40] See: A. Kaukenov, op. cit., p. 62.

[41] A. Khojaev, op. cit., pp. 35-36.

[42] See: G. Vitkovskaia, "Ugrozhaet li bezopasnosti Rossii kitayskaia migratsia?" Briefing at the Moscow Carnegie Center, Vol. 1, Issue 8, 1999, available at [http://www.carnegie.ru/ru/pubs/briefings/issue08-99.pdf]; E. Wishnick, "Migration Issues and Russia's Economic Integration in Asia," 25 June, 2003, available at [http://gsti.miis.edu/CEAS-PUB/200103Wishnick.pdf].

[43] See: Li Lifan, "National Energy Security and Sino-Russian-Kazakh-Japan Energy Cooperation," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 1 (43), 2007, p. 110.

China and the other energy-dependent states) is widening. This spurs on their geopolitical rivalry in the gas- and oil-rich regions of the world.

America does not want to share its control over these regions with any other country; it is even less inclined to share it with China, which has practically caught up with it. Washington may try to exploit is influence (including its military dimension) in these regions to put pressure on China, which depends on imported energy sources and is, therefore, vulnerable.

China receives about half of its imported oil from the Middle East, while another 25 percent arrives from Africa,[44] two of the most unstable and conflict-prone regions of the world. The military presence of America and its NATO allies in the former remains impressive; in the near future, both regions will remain as unstable and conflict-prone as ever.

The oil transportation routes to the People's Republic of China are fairly vulnerable: mid-Eastern oil is moved "along a route that has several bottlenecks—the Bab al Mandab Strait at the outlet from the Red Sea, the Strait of Hormuz at the outlet from the Persian Gulf, and the Strait of Malacca at the entrance to the South China Sea. The last stretch of the tankers' route of almost 1,000 km in length, which lies between the coasts of Malaysia and Indonesia, is particularly narrow."[45] This can hardly be described as a safe route. China's Navy is not adequate to the task of protecting its interests along a route dominated by the U.S. Navy.[46] Washington may use this as a pressure lever if and when its rivalry with Beijing goes too far.

This makes post-Soviet territory, the territory of Russia and Central Asia to be more exact, the safest alternative for the diversification of Chinese energy imports. The SCO zone is China's safest "energy rear" in the event of its confrontation with the United States. Beijing has been working in this direction since the late 1990s; it concentrated on the pipeline system to bring gas and oil from the gas- and oil-rich Central Asian states and Russia.

In 1997, it began exporting Kazakh oil by railway[47]; in 2004, the main oil pipeline Atasu-Alashankou, with a planned annual capacity of 20 million tons, was launched. In 2006, Russia and China agreed on the Eastern Siberia-Pacific oil pipeline with an annual capacity of up to 80 million tons.[48] The same year, the same partners reached an agreement on plans relating to the Altai gas pipeline with an annual capacity of up to 80 bcm to move gas to China from Western and Eastern Siberia. In 2006, the Chinese signed another energy-related agreement, this time with Turkmenistan. Under the intergovernmental agreement, the newly built gas pipeline will carry 30 bcm of Turkmen gas to China over the next 30 years.[49]

In Lieu of a Conclusion

The newly independent states which appeared in Central Asia in the early 1990s supplied China with new security-related ideas about the region. The common geographical and ethnoconfessional factors it produced in the course of time made Central Asia the most functional space connecting China with Central Eurasia.

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[44] See: Ibidem.

[45] V. Belokrinitskiy, "Southwesterly Enlargement of Greater China," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 3 (45), 2007, p. 54.

[46] This route forms part of the responsibility zones of the 5th and 7th U.S. fleets.

[47] See: V. Belokrinitskiy, op. cit.

[48] This pipeline will bring oil to Japan as well.

[49] The Turkmen stretch will be 188 km long; it will cross Uzbekistan (530 km); Kazakhstan (1,300 km) and China (over 4,500 km) (see: I. Tomberg, "Energy Policy and Energy Projects in Central Eurasia," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 6 (48), 2007, p. 49).

The Uighur question is by far the only existential threat to China's security that might come to the fore under the pressure of the ethnopolitical factors forming in Central Asia. China finds the region geopolitically important when it comes to its relations with the other powers, the United States in particular, while it is moving toward the status of a superpower of the 21st century. This makes Central Asia the stable strategic rear and source of energy China needs for its economic development.

To achieve this, Beijing has settled the most urgent issues with Russia and the Central Asian countries, set up a regional cooperative environment, of which the SCO is a part, and tried to prevent domination of any other power in the region. It is encouraging cooperation with Russia and the Central Asian states in the gas and oil and transportation-communication spheres. This process is not entirely smooth, the main obstacles being found in Russian-Chinese relations. Their competition might upturn the stability of China's "strategic rear" not only in the northern (Russian), but also in the northwestern (Central Asian) sectors.

Today, Russia has more effective levers of pressure to be used in Central Asia, meaning that in the near future Beijing will have to come second, after Moscow, in the regional issues (politics and security); at best it can become a tandem partner. It will, however, capitalize on its strong sides—its economy and demography.

At the same time, on the road to world leadership China will become even more involved in Central Asia and the other Central Eurasian segments. Its newly found power will allow Beijing to bridge the relatively long distances between them and China. In fact, the three Central Eurasian regions will become increasingly interconnected in all respects, which will make the security interests of the "external" powers, as well as other factors, much more intertwined.