

The New Game for Energy: Geopolitics of Central Asia

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INTRODUCTION

The “Great Game”, as the competition between tsarist Russia and the British Empire for control of Central Asia was known, is familiar to all historians of international relations.¹ In the second half of the 19th century, the Game was for territory and strategic positions. Nowadays, a new Game, much more complex and with more numerous actors, focuses on exploitation and control of fossil energy resources. The silent rivalry is ongoing, even if less publicized than conflicts from other corners of the world.

This paper examines and analyzes this phenomenon. It focuses on the five post-Soviet republics, their situation, resources and possibilities, and on global and regional powers involved in the New Game with all of their motivation and present possibilities. The analysis takes two overlapping and complementary directions. One emphasizes current affairs in Central Asia from the point of view of principal state actors; the other considers competition over the region’s fossil fuel resources.

In recent years, specialists in international relations and political analysts have shown increasing interest in the future of Central Asian resources.² This paper approaches this very complex issue from the perspective of global politics, looking at the action, reaction and interaction of the great number of actors involved, among them huge corporations and Islamic movements.

1 As selective Bibliography for the Great Game, see: P. HOPKIRK, *The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia*, New York 1992; K. E. MEYER — S. B. BRYSAK, *Tournament of Shadows: The Great Game and the Race for Empire in Central Asia*, New York 2000.

2 We have to mention a few bibliography titles in here: A. COOLEY, *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia*, Oxford 2012; L. KLEVEMAN, *The New Great Game: Blood and Oil in Central Asia*, New York 2004; S. N. CUMMINGS, *Understanding Central Asia: Politics and Contested Transformations*, New York 2012; M. LARULUELLE (Ed.), *China and India in Central Asia: A New Great Game?*, New York 2010; R. JOHNSON, *Oil, Islam and Conflict: Central Asia since 1945*, London 2007; A. RASHID, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia*, London, New York 2000; A. MUSTAFA, *New Geopolitics of Central Asia and the Caucasus: Causes of Instability and Predicament*, Ankara 2000.

REPUBLICS OF CENTRAL ASIA: A CURRENT STATE

The five central Asian states, all former Soviet republics, include Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, share numerous similar characteristics. Uzbekistan, with its internal stability, is most likely to become a regional hegemonic. It may also be the key for regional security. It is the only one which shares borders with all the others, and has more people than the other four combined.³ Since borders in this region were shaped by central leadership of the Soviet Union during the interwar period, Uzbekistan as Soviet republic represented Moscow's principal agent in the area.⁴ However, it does not currently share borders with Russia or China, which makes it to be more attractive for Western powers, especially the USA, situating it to allow the Uzbek government to have a policy of balance among Russia, the USA and China.

Currently, the authoritarian regime of Islam Karimov seems quite solid, but faces internal challengers, among them fundamentalist Islamist militant groups. This was the main reason why after September 11th 2001, Uzbekistan was among the first ones who joined the Coalition Against Terror, and allowed the US to use its airports and military bases. Due to this, the USA established for the first time a military base on the territory of the former Cold War enemy, at Khanabad.⁵ According to official US statistics, during 2002, the US allocated 79 million USD to Uzbekistan for improving its security and law enforcement, almost double the second most important state from the region, Kazakhstan, thus causing an even more visible asymmetry between the military strength of Uzbekistan and the other Central-Asian countries.⁶ Actually, according to some sources, among them the British Ambassador to Uzbekistan, Craig Murray, Uzbek authorities intentionally misled US forces by exaggerating Al-Qaeda links to Uzbek militant Islamist groups, in order to receive Western help and consent in the liquidation of Karimov's enemies.⁷ But the US-Uzbek romance did not last long.

There are several reasons for this. Probably one of the main reasons is the gap between the political values of the two leaderships. Another possible explanation is that with the use of the Manas airport and airbase from Kirgizstan, Uzbek bases lost their value anyway for US strategists. A third motive can be that due to the lack of its own oil or natural gas resources, Uzbekistan is less interesting for investors than Turkmenistan or Kazakhstan. But with all these, the Uzbek state certainly remains a regional power, and has to be counted as such in any equation of regional games of power.

3 A. HYMAN, *Moving out of Moscow's Orbit: The Outlook for Central Asia*, in: *International Affairs*, Vol. 69, No. 2, 1993, p. 292.

4 N. J. MELVIN, *Uzbekistan: Transition to Authoritarianism on the Silk Road*, Florence 2000, p. 6.

5 M. LARUELLE — S. PEYROUSE, *The United States in Central Asia: Reassessing a Challenging Partnership*, in: *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 35, No 3, p. 429.

6 A. BOHR, *Regionalism in Central Asia: New Geopolitics, Old Regional Order*, in: *International Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 3, p. 492.

7 C. MURRAY, *Murder in Samarkand*, London 2006; A. COOLEY, *Principles in the Pipeline: Managing Transatlantic Values and Interests in Central Asia*, in: *International Affairs*, Vol. 84, No 6, 2008, p. 1175.

Despite the relative strength of the Uzbek army, Karimov has not embarked on military adventures beyond his resources. Uzbekistan is always ready to threaten with repression any Tajik or Kirgiz initiative which is designed to build hydro plants on their portion of rivers which are flowing than into Uzbekistan, but in June 2010, during the massacre of Uzbek community in Kirgizstan, choose not to intervene, even if approximately 185,000 Uzbeks refugees temporarily fled in Uzbekistan.⁸ This attitude might seem strange for most people from the West, where economic issues are more likely to be considered negotiable than the persecution of minorities and genocide.

The current state of Kirgizstan, home of the Manas epics and the air base with the same name, shows similarities and differences. Major differences between Kirgizstan and its other Central-Asian neighbors include Kirgizstan's relative paucity of natural resources, except for water and hydroelectric potential.⁹ After 1919, Kirgizstan was perceived to be the most "liberal" or "western-type" among the five republics. Among the five new state presidents, only Kirgiz academician Askar Akaev had not once been a Communist Party official. He was also the only one of the five to lose his power during his lifetime, due to the Tulip Revolution. At the beginning, Kirgizstan was seen by the USA and the European democracies as "a democratic island in the region"¹⁰ and it appears that Akaev thought seriously of turning his country into the "Switzerland of Central Asia", being very impressed by the Swiss model.¹¹ But things evolved in a different direction: reforms suggested by the IMF brought no prosperity — similar to most of other parts of the world — and Kirgizstan was free of neither corruption nor authoritarian rule. Similar to Karimov, Akaev proved to be sensitive to the danger of Islamic terrorist movements, due to the incursions of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan on Kirgiz territories and the activities of the Hizbal-Tahir,¹² so he was also ready to offer help to the anti-terrorist coalition, in his initially proclaimed plan, for one year.¹³ However, the US could use the Manas¹⁴ for more not affected by the outcome of the Tulip Revolution, which caused the downfall of Akaev's corrupt regime. Following the Americans, Russia also established a military base of its own in Kirgizstan, in 2003.¹⁵

If Kirgiz leaders play their cards well, Kirgizstan could become truly the Switzerland of Central Asia, but with key differences. For Kirgizstan did not declare neutrality but shared the interest of three world powers. It shares borders with emerging

8 J. HEATHERSHAW — N. MEGORAN, *Contesting Danger: A New Agenda for Policy and Scholarship on Central Asia*, in: *International Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 3, 2011, p. 605.

9 MELVIN, p. 7.

10 LARUELLE, p. 434.

11 M. M. PURI, *Central Asia Geopolitics: The Indian View*, in: *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 16, No. 2, pp. 248–249.

12 P. MANN, *Religious Extremism in Central Asia*, in: *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 25, No. 9, p. 1030.

13 L. BUZSYNSKI, *Russia's New Role in Central Asia*, in: *Asian Survey*, Vol. 45, No. 4, 2005, p. 556.

14 While writing this, the plans of Kirgiz leadership are to close it as a military base during 2014, and to turn it into a civil airport.

15 BUZSYNSKI, p. 553.

continental China, which looks to increase its influence in the region, and arouses fears especially among Russian politicians and analysts that Kirgizstan might turn toward China in the future. Russia therefore considers its presence on Kirgiz soil to be important, while Kirgiz politicians tolerate it as a counter to Uzbek hegemonic claims¹⁶ and possible aggression against Kirgizstan. Similarly, with all the delicate procedures around closing the Manas, for the US government Kirgizstan still occupies an important geopolitical position, since it is relatively close to several states of Eastern Asia and the Muslim world which are considered to be enemies of the USA. This interest of the world powers can bear great dangers for this fragile state, but also great possibilities. The future will show how the Kirgiz government can deal with this unique strategic situation.

The northernmost republic, Kazakhstan, is more than double the size of the all other four together, and regarding population, is second only to Uzbekistan. By far, it has the best potential regarding economic development, its main natural resource being its oilfields. Actually, Kazakhstan is ranked second among oil producing countries of the ex-Soviet Union, behind only Azerbaijan.¹⁷ The other main advantage of Kazakhstan is its geopolitical situation: it shares borders with countries like Russia, China and Uzbekistan. Since it was theoretically out of the range of the Soviet Union's western adversaries, and close to China, South Asia and the Middle East, it was the site of the Soviet Union's most strategic units, the main nuclear test site (Semipalatinsk) and also its space center (Baikonur).¹⁸

Following to the fall of the Soviet Union, the former Communist Party leader, Nursultan Nazarbaev took power as president, and remains in office. He proved to be one of the most efficient authoritarian rulers of the present time, Kazakhstan being a relatively open country for foreign investors, and a pillar of stability in the region. Most of its oil exports go to Russia, but Western companies as Chevron, Texaco, Agip and British Gas are also present in the country.¹⁹ Nazarbaev remains open to different pipeline projects of his main trading partners, a game from which Kazakhstan can only win.

The country's geopolitical importance results from this. The Kazakh leadership proved to be cooperative in the nuclear disarming process, gaining by this the trust of all involved great powers. Even if Nazarbaev is not a puppet of Moscow, he tries to avoid challenging Moscow's strategic interests, since the Russian Federation is not only a merely powerful neighbor, but also guarantees Kazakhstan's territorial integrity and safety against militarily strong Uzbekistan and the potentially territorial challenger, China. Kazakh gestures toward Russia illuminate the friendly attitude of Kazakh leaders: such as the Nazarbaev proposals in 1994, for a Eurasian Union, which followed on his idea of 2001 for a Eurasian Economic Union.²⁰ On the other hand, Kazakhstan partners in several NATO projects and is currently the only state from Central Asia which

16 Ibidem, p. 556.

17 C. ARVANITOPOULOS, *Geopolitics of Oil in Central Asia*, Athens 2002.

18 A. SERGOUNIN, *Denuclearizing Central Asia*, in: *Pacifica Review: Peace, Security & Global Change*, Vol. 11, No 3, 1999, p. 275.

19 C. ARVANITOPOULOS, *Geopolitics of Oil in Central Asia*, Athens 2002.

20 BUSZYNSKI, p. 551.

participates in UN peacekeeping forces with a brigade.²¹ Connections with stable governments of the Muslim world are also good, especially with Turkey. After 1989, Astana proved interested in the Turkish financial and legal system,²² which was considered by Nazarbaev at that time to be a model for a modern Islamic state.

Socially, Turkmenistan, the most backward of the Central Asian Republics, remains more like a tribal confederation than a modern nation.²³ The most western central Asian republic, the desert-dominated Turkmenistan proved to be the most isolated territory of the former Soviet Union- for example, the Ashgabat earthquake from 1948, which claimed more than 100,000 death, could remain unreported in Soviet and international press, and was known for long time only by locals. Following independence, this isolation and backwardness was exploited to its maximum by its megalomaniac ruler, Saparmurat Niyazov.

Niyazov established an authoritarian dictatorship and a megalomaniac cult of personality, this latter aspect often surpassing in absurdity even the last Stalinist dictatorship of the world, North Korea. But that was tolerated by neighbors and by the great powers of the world, partly because of the lack of great power ambitions, as well as because of the large gas reserves of the country. Niyazov played the card of the potential richness very well, keeping its population as isolated as possible from the rest of the world, and in International Relations he adopted the “positive neutrality” doctrine. Niyazov claimed his own book to be at the level of Islam’s holy book, the Quran, and advised his people that for preserving the health of their teeth, they should chew bones, like dogs; but the positive neutrality doctrine was not did not sink to the same level of absurdity, despite coming from the megalomaniac dwarf dictator of a small and relatively weak state. The policy sought to keep Turkmenistan out of any of the regional conflicts. For example, Niyazov remained neutral during America’s war on terror, without suffering reprisals from one of the sides — and continued dialogues with all of his country’s partners without being compromised in the eyes of the interlocutor’s rivals. For example, during the 1990s Turkmenistan received as gifts from the USA several patrol boats to establish its own fleet on the Caspian sea, without being pressed into formalizing any kind of strategic partnership or cooperation;²⁴ It also developed good trading relations with the pariah of international life, its powerful neighbor, Iran, especially regarding railway infrastructure, which was built only after 1989;²⁵ and made gestures affecting Russian prestige, without suffering any reprisals. Following an attempted coup in November 2002, Niyazov accused Russia with complicity and adopted harsh measures against the Russian minority of the country. Putin, instead of responding with an iron fist, as he did in Chechnya, Georgia and recently in Ukraine, chose dialogue, respecting not so much the megalomania, but the stability of gas supplies.²⁶

21 LARUELLE, p. 431.

22 BUSZYNSKI, p. 560.

23 HYMAN, p. 291.

24 LARUELLE, p. 434.

25 E. HERZIG, *Regionalism, Iran and Central Asia*, in: *International Affairs*, Vol. 80, No 3, 2004, p. 514.

26 BUSZYNSKI, p. 563.

Turkmenistan's gas reserves are strategically important on a global scale, and competition for them is vigorous. This fact was also very efficiently speculated by the leaders from Ashgabat, since even nowadays, with Niyazov replaced by a person more open toward the West, the gas reserves are still controlled by two big national companies, the Turkmengas and Turkmenneft. President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov allowed, and even invited foreign companies to exploit reserves from the Caspian Sea, attracting German, South Korean, Arab Emirates, Russian, American and Malaysian companies in the country, and the Chinese CNPC even received direct access to a terrestrial oilfield at Bagtyyarlyk.²⁷ Due to its gas potential, Turkmenistan can easily become the epicenter of central Asian geopolitics: and even if currently the stability of gas supplies prevails in the face of eventual democratization attempts, similar to the Arab spring, this possibility can bring major risks also. In its first phase, risks for the actual ruling elite; and in the long term, incalculable ones.

Tajikistan, with its long civil war, is the perfect example where internal instability can lead in Central-Asian republic. Probably the poorest of the five, Tajikistan is the only one inhabited by an ethnic Iranian majority, and also the one where independence was quickly followed by destabilization. Violence erupted in 1992, when the countries pro-communist leadership, strongly backed by Uzbekistan and Russia, faced the violent challenge of a coalition of nationalists, radical Islamists and westward-leaning democrats. The long-lasting and very violent conflict ended with a negotiated compromise, which allowed the ruling president to retain power. The conflict itself was a Great Game in miniature, with multiple external powers — Russia, Uzbekistan, Iran, Taliban Afghanistan and Al-Qaeda — pursuing their own interests.

This devastating conflict did not reveal Tajikistan as a failed state, even if state control over its territory is the weakest in the region. The conflict didn't produce centripetal effects, and the country did not fall into its pieces. Moreover, Tajik official government attempts to act in favor of regional stability and security, by participating in international organizations and different security programs. For example Tajikistan is a founding member of the Collective Security treaty Organization (CSTO) and of the Shanghai Forum.²⁸ Despite this, training camps of radical Islamist groups still can be found on Tajik territory, especially fighters of the IMU, which annoys Uzbek leadership, who periodically accuse Tajikistan with harboring anti-Uzbek terrorists.²⁹ Tajik economic development focuses on its aluminum industry and potential for hydro-plants, this latter being another source of discord with Uzbekistan, which fears that planned hydro plants might have a catastrophic impact on Uzbek water supplies.³⁰

27 A. PETERSEN — K. BARYSCH, *Russia, China and the Geopolitics of Energy in Central Asia*, London 2011, p. 48.

28 R. ALLISON, *Regionalism, Regional Structures and Security Management in Central Asia*, in: *International Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 3, 2004, p. 471.

29 MANN, pp. 130-132.

30 F. TOLIPOV, *Micro-geopolitics of Central Asia: A Uzbekistan Perspective*, in: *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 35, No. 4, 2011, p. 637.

GREAT POWER INTERESTS IN THE REGION AND THE NEW GREAT GAME

The main external power with an impact on Central Asia was, is and will be Russia, through its economic, military and cultural influence, and also through the great number of ethnic Russians in the region. Since the demise of the Soviet Union, Russian influence has naturally weakened, and will never reach the same level. The region will never see a return of Russian influence to the level seen in Belarus. Nevertheless, Russia remains the main exporter of raw materials — among them gas and oil — from the republics, and its trade corridors with important partners like India and Iran cross Central Asia.³¹ The three eastern states also rely seriously on the Russian military for their own security, especially against the hegemonic claims of Uzbekistan, but also in their relationship with China. The “joint defense of borders and air space” translates in practice to Russian border patrols at the borders of Tajikistan, Kirgizstan and Kazakhstan with China,³² sending a strong message to the eastern neighbor not to have irredentist ideas, and the Dragon appears to understand the message.

However, Russian influence is currently challenged, especially in the economic sphere. It is no wonder that the Gazprom tried recently to lock Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan into new production agreements,³³ which could assure a monopoly status for Russian investments in the regional energy field. The contestants still represent powers like the United States, China and the European Union.

The USA was among the first states that opened embassies in all of the five republics, followed soon by its Western European allies. After this the Newmont Mining Corporation quickly received the concession to exploit the Maranthau gold mine from Uzbek authorities.³⁴ But after this, relations became during the 1990s somehow distant. Following September 11th 2001, the possibility of deeper cooperation seemed greater, because regional regimes sharing the same enemy with the US. Tajik, Uzbek and Kirgiz leaders offered their help almost immediately. However, nowadays relations are more distant. The US military has been driven out from most of its Central-Asian bases, and cooperation has been dogged by a variety of controversies. For Central-Asian ruling elites, ideals like “democracy” and “civil society” are not only strange, but contain dangers similar to Islam terrorism, and are not welcomed, even when such a position is costly. For example, cotton represented 90% of the Uzbek exports to the USA, until Wal-Mart decided to boycott Uzbekistan,³⁵ due to moral concerns regarding the respect of human rights by the Karimov regime. However the USA remains an important provider of security assistance to these countries especially for Tajikistan and Kirgizstan.

31 S. BLANK, *India's Rising Profile in Central Asia*, *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 22, No. 2, p. 149.

32 R. MENON — H. SPRUYT, *The Limits of Neorealism: Understanding Security in Central Asia*, in: *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 1999, p. 102.

33 A. COOLEY, *Principles in the Pipeline: Managing Transatlantic Values and Interests in Central Asia*, in: *International Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 6, 2008, p. 1183.

34 HYMAN, pp. 300–301.

35 LARUELLE, p. 436.

It remains possible that in case of a possible failure in Afghanistan — similar to the one in Vietnam — the US will pull back from Central Asia, leaving it to become the playground for other powers while following its interests elsewhere. But knowing American national strategy concerning energy security and especially the nature of US based corporations, this appears unlikely, since Central Asia represents great opportunities in its energy supplies.

In the field of energy supplies, US diplomacy strongly supports US-based companies, like Amoco, Texaco and Chevron, not for economic and strategic reasons. The USA, as the leading oil consuming country in the world, wants its share from fossil fuel supplies of Central Asia, but the way it gets it is just as equally important. In an indirect way, the USA is also interested in reducing the energy dependency of Europe on Russia. Currently, the idea for Central-Asian gas intended for American customers to be transported in pipelines which goes through Russia or Iran are risky and unacceptable; therefore, pipeline projects through the Caspian sea, Turkey, the Balkans and East Central Europe are encouraged.³⁶ Among these, the Nabucco-project is currently the most advertised, the most serious and the nearest to being put into practice. But due to different regional security risks — such as Turkish reprisals against Kurdish rebels — currently the Nabucco is postponed, and its immediate future seems gloomy.³⁷

Even if in the energy sector the USA and Russia in the form of companies with American and Russian capital, strongly supported because of strategic reasons by official state diplomacy are competitors, in security issues they are rather parallel, having similar interests regarding stability of the region and preserving the status quo, which has immeasurably fewer risks than do a potential political upheaval. Moreover, both of them have other concerns in the region than each other. For the USA, the main goal is preventing the rise of radical Islam, and Russia has its own uneasy and very complex relationship with communist China.

If there is a chance for an external power to give direction to the region, it will not be the USA, but the — integrated or not — European Union. The EU represents currently the largest economic system of the world, and even if militarily and even in terms of foreign politics integration is advancing very slowly, it is already a major normative power, whose values are found to be attractive by elites of developing countries, while the USA, which shares the same values, but in promoting them is using a different approach, instead of being perceived as a “Gentle Giant” or “Policeman of the World” is seen more as an aggressive boogeyman. “*On major strategic and international questions today, Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus. They agree on little and understand one another less and less,*”³⁸ wrote Robert Kagan in 2002 in one of his short articles, seeing the “wind of change”, which over time became increasingly visible. Several analysts and observers blame the Bush-government,

36 E. KIRCHNER, *European Energy Security Co-operation: Between Amity and Enmity*, in: *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 4, 2010, p. 874.

37 More about the Nabucco: D. FINON, *The EU Foreign Gas Policy of Transit Corridors: Autopsy of the Stillborn Nabucco Project*, in: *OPEC Energy Review*, 2011, pp. 47–69.

38 R. KAGAN, *Power and Weakness*, in: *Policy Review*, No. 113, June 2002. <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/bush/kagan.htm>, [2012–10–15].

which sought moral support of its allies for its own War on Terror, but did not seek policy dialogue on a strategic level, often ignoring its “unasked” suggestions.³⁹ It is true, that especially in the case of Iraq, the USA ignored international treaties, organizations and understandings, which were formally respected until then, and when this was raised in discussion by major European decision-makers, the answer was dismissive.

For leaders and their supporting elites of Central Asia, the EU is a benign giant, which represents no danger to their independence, territorial integrity or society, but actually, it could offer beneficial aid and know-how.⁴⁰ Currently, the main instrument of EU policy in Central Asia is represented by the Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS),⁴¹ which is designed to help former Soviet states in their transition toward functioning democratic market-economies. Except for this, there is no coherent EU foreign policy in this part of the world, neither for the region as a unit, nor for its individual countries.

The EU shares the interest of other powers in the energy resources of Central Asia. Currently, with all the efforts for implementing renewable and “green” energy strategies, energy consumption in the Union still has fossil fuels on its base. According to some statistics, during the mid-2000s oil represented 37% of consumption in the countries of the Union, followed by natural gas (24%), solid fuels (18%), nuclear power (15%). Renewable sources provided a mere six percent,⁴² and this high percentage is mainly based on imports. Regarding provenance of the EU’s oil imports, Russian companies provided around 1/3 of the fossil fuel supplies, followed by Norway and several oil producing countries from the Middle East.⁴³ Dependence on Russia for natural gas surpassed even oil: imports from Russia in 2008 represented 55% of EU imports.⁴⁴ Since Russian oil and gas is cheap on the global market, and is both nearby and available, this trade functions to the interests of both buyer and seller. On the other hand, responsible European politicians perceive a strategic interest in diversification of energy imports and reduced dependence on Russia. This goal increases EU interest in direct dealing with Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan; in third place based on the EU’s economic interests is Uzbekistan, which has no significant energy resources, but a series of other minerals.⁴⁵ However, the lack of a common foreign policy represents a major disadvantage for the Union, but Russian-American competition, and the competition between the Nabucco and South Stream projects represents great opportunities for European specialized companies, especially from East-Central Europe.

39 A. TOJE, *America, the EU and Strategic Culture*, London 2008, pp. 135–136.

40 PETERSEN — BARYSCH, p. 61.

41 E. KAVALSKI, *Partnership and Rivalry between the EU, China and India in Central Asia: The Normative Power of Regional Actors with Global Aspirations*, in: *European Law Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 6, 2007, p. 843.

42 G. BAHGAT, *The Geopolitics of Energy: Europe and North Africa*, in: *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2010, pp. 39–49.

43 PETERSEN, pp. 60–61.

44 KIRCHNER, p. 861.

45 PETERSEN, pp. 1182–1183.

National and private European companies by themselves cannot compete successfully in this part of the world with giants like the Russian Gazprom or Lukoil, American Amoco, Texaco or Chevron, or Chinese CNCP. The current state of affairs involves two transport-projects that are currently in competition, the Nabucco, which is supported by Americans and the West-European allies, and South Stream, supported by Russia and its West-European allies. Negotiating the route of the pipelines and the share of national and local companies responsible for the security of transport infrastructure on their portion, and remaining outside the deal can seriously influence the relative positions of these companies on international markets. Bulgargaz (Bulgaria), Transgaz (Romania), MOL (Hungary), OMV (Austria) and other interested companies face unique opportunities and great risks, especially in the mirror of recent events in Ukraine. Their responses and probable strategies will be the subject of a separate academic article.

Unlike the distant EU, China is not just close, but actually *in* Central Asia, geographically speaking, through its western province Xinjiang (Chinese Turkestan). 93% percent of this province's population consists of minorities, rather than the Han population which forms China's majority. Xinjiang is home especially for the Uyghur, but is also home to Tajik, Hui, Kirgiz, Uzbek and Kazakh minorities.⁴⁶

In the vision of the Australian expert Emilian Kavalski, currently Chinese foreign policy interests manifest themselves through four dominant areas of interests: (1) diversifying and ensuring China's access to energy resources, (2) cutting any international links between Muslim Uyghur separatists in the province of Xinjiang and their ethnic and religious kin across central Asia, (3) encouraging economic and trade relations between China's western provinces and Central Asian states and (4) indicating China's preparedness to become a global actor.⁴⁷ Two of these, the first and the third are basically economic, the second deals with a realistic approach to internal security, and the fourth is related to the international image of China. Of the four, the first point seems to be the most important.

China currently is the most rapidly developing great country of the world, and some experts think it will pass the United States as the world's leading economic power. The fast growth also implies high costs: since 1993, China has been a net oil-importer and is currently the second largest consumer after the USA.⁴⁸ In this sense, it is a strategic necessity for Chinese supplies to be guaranteed and diverse. Continental China currently invests large amounts in Africa, nurtures relations with countries of the Middle East, and constantly increases the value of its orders toward Russia and Kazakhstan.

When the five republics became independent, and were struggling to forge new ties and relationships that would allow them greater independence from the Russian federation, China was nearby, and the province of Xinjiang province redeveloped quickly interdependent trade relations with neighboring Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan and

46 D. KERR — L. C SWINTON, *China, Xinjiang and the Transnational Security of Central Asia*, in: *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 1, p. 122.

47 KAWALSKI, p. 845.

48 P. K. LEE, *China's Quest for Oil Security: Oil Wars in the Pipeline?*, in: *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 18, No. 2, p. 165.

Tajikistan.⁴⁹ From the point of view of its energy security, Kazakhstan and an opening Turkmenistan are crucial for China, since even if they cannot supply the whole structure of the Chinese state economy, they represent an alternative to provision from Russia, on which China, like the EU, does not want to become dependent. Currently, with all of its favorable factors — geographic state, mutual economic advantage — Russia is only the fifth largest supplier of oil to China, following Saudi Arabia, Angola, Iran and Oman,⁵⁰ and China strives to reduce even that position. China will also try to act as a global power in the region, bringing it into direct competition with Russia and the United States.

In this latter sense, in the vision of professor Zhao Huasheng, China has five alternatives: 1st seeking strategic advantage (going in alone), 2nd a combined Sino-Russian front, 3rd an American dominated security structure, 4th a Russian dominated security structure, 5th a synthesis of balance between these powers.⁵¹ The first option is a win-lose situation, which is very risky, even given China's advantageous geographical position and regional cooperation arrangements, like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization; the fifth option offers the ideal win-win situation, but the most difficult to attain. None of the realist policy-makers of the three powers involved will adopt this approach, for fear of duplicity among the others. Meanwhile, complete Russian or American domination are unacceptable for Chinese policy makers, so probably the common Sino-Russian front has the greatest probability, even if it has its vulnerabilities also. On the level of global policy, in the last two decades, a deepening Russian-Chinese consensus can be observed related to several major conflicts, in which they successfully challenged US positions, especially in the General Assembly and the Security Council of the UN. But this cooperation may not apply on a regional level, where the common interests are limited to opposition toward American and Islamic influence, in other sense the two powers being competitors. And China has to face a third competitor also, its geopolitical rival, India.

Some geopolitical analysts perceive the emergence of a New Great Game in the growing interests and presence of India and China in the region, where they compete to avoid isolation by the other's diplomacy and seek to encircle the other one by their system of alliance and cooperation.⁵² India has many of the prerequisites for great-power status, a large population, vast territory, economic resources and a large economic system, which exports a wide variety of goods and services. However, its rise remained somehow in China's shadow, a state with which Indian relations has not been always good, not even in the recent past, like the Sino-Indian war from 1962 or the skirmish in 1987. In the tradition of Cold War diplomacy, in its conflict with Pakistan, India was supported by the Soviet Union, and Pakistan by the USA, later also by China. The situation changed after 2001, when India began to see the US as the

49 J. R. WALSH, *China and the New Geopolitics of Central Asia*, in: *Asian Survey*, Vol. 33, No. 3, 1993, pp. 279–280.

50 PETERSEN, p. 13.

51 Z. HUASHENG, *Central Asian Geopolitics and China's Security*, in: *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 33, No. 4, 2009, p. 476.

52 For example: D. SCOTT, *The Great Power 'Great Game' between Indian and China: The Logic of Geography*, in *Geopolitics*, Vol. 13, No. 1, pp. 1–26.

most formidable opponent of Islam radicalism, and generally as a large, but benign external force willing to invest efforts in the stability of the region. India supported the US⁵³ presence in Central Asia following 2001, and sold weapons to the governments of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, for strengthening their forces in conflict with Islamic radicals.⁵⁴ Indian leaders turned their attention in larger measure toward the republics, fostering bilateral agreements with them, even opening military cooperation with Mongolia and Tajikistan, which could have been construed as a hostile gesture toward China.⁵⁵ As an Indian newspaper wrote in 2003, “for us, Central Asia is our immediate and strategic neighborhood” and “for sure, more and closer contacts between India and Central Asia can be expected in the future”.⁵⁶

Other than the competition with China, India has two major interests in the region. One is related to security and stability in general, including control of the volume of trafficking in drugs, arms and fissile material.⁵⁷ This commerce has the potential to generate problems for Indian society, and make Central Asia a hotbed for Islamic radicals and thus produce an additional source of challenge for Indian security, by itself or in conjunction with India’s old enemy, Pakistan. The second interest is more economic. For India, the region is not only a market for its products — especially for those goods which cannot penetrate European, American or Far-Eastern markets — but also a potential source of energy. In this latter sense, India is trying to develop its relations with the geographically most distant Turkmenistan, which some see as the “gateway to Russia, Iran and the West”.⁵⁸ Turkmenistan has actually a crucial role in the ambitious Indian pipeline project, the TAPI (an acronym for the names of the countries through which it pass — Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India),⁵⁹ which could not only supply India with important quantities of gas, but also could represent a step in reconciliation with Pakistan, through economic cooperation.

Among regional powers interested in Central Asia, Turkey has the best current situation and opportunities, for a variety of reasons. First of all, it is the model of a democratic, secular Islamic state, and thus is strongly backed by the USA in its efforts to strengthen its relations with the republics.⁶⁰ Second, four of the state-forming nations are part of the Turkic family of language and nationalities, and exploiting cultural links and kinship can benefit both parties involved. Currently, Turkey is expanding the presence of its press in republics with Turkish culture,

53 Actually, there are voices among Indian analysts that India should be the USA’s new global ally, especially because of the rise of China. For more details, see: F. ZAKARIA, *The Post-American World*, New York 2008.

54 BLANK, p. 143.

55 SCOTT, p. 8.

56 Ibidem, p. 12.

57 BLANK, pp. 2278–2282.

58 M. M. PURI, *Central Asian Geopolitics: The Indian View*, Central Asian Survey, Vol. 16, No. 2, 2007, p. 250.

59 PETERSEN, p. 54.

60 B. R. KUNIHOLM, *The Geopolitics of the Caspian Basin*, in: Middle East Journal, Vol. 54, No. 4, 2000, p. 548.

and regularly hosts university students from these countries who want to study in Turkish universities.⁶¹ Turkey is also trying to build up an image as a bridge between Central Europe and the West, with more or less success. Some Turkish lumatic nationalists, nostalgic for the centuries when their country was a great power, even dream of a unified pan-Turkic state, but these visions are not backed by the Ankara government.⁶²

Turkish presence in the region depends on three external factors: American support (positive), Iranian adversity (negative) and the attitude of Russia, which is currently neutral, but can change anytime. The reason for American support is obvious: Turkey already hosts a great part of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, and has a crucial role in the planned Nabucco pipeline too. Iran is its main competitor, but the main dangers could come from Russia: until now, the Russian federation has not perceived Turkish influence as a serious challenge for its interests, and it may be crucial for Turkish diplomacy to maintain this state, since Russian jealousy could cause troubles beyond the potential gains of its Central Asian strategy.

Unlike Turkey, the USA clearly perceives Iran as a “rogue state”, with its Islamic fundamentalism, plans to develop atomic weaponry. In the region, Iran can compete for expanded influence,⁶³ but is at a clear disadvantage compared to Turkey, since the Iranian political model is not as attractive for leading elites of the Republics. But it is also vital for Iran to avoid encirclement by US allies, in case of a violent conflict, since it shares a border with Turkmenistan. Iranian diplomacy and intelligence might try to weaken, or even drive US influence from central Asia, but the success of such an initiative, due to unequal power, is unlikely.⁶⁴ But still, for Iran Central Asian republics can be a source of opportunities, for markets, investments, and cultural cooperation. To these ends, Iran must turn to a regionalist public discourse and develop regional cooperation projects in fields of culture and economics.

The Central Asian New Great Game might even lead indirectly to an improvement of US-Iranian relations. An oil pipeline through Iran, may turn out to be cheaper than other options for American companies than any other solution as well as easier to control due to the centralized character of the Persian state than options through Iraq, Turkey or the Caucasus. The problem of extraordinarily cold US-Iranian relations could be mediated by intermediary actors, among them several neutral states. Currently, economic powers of East Asia like Japan, Taiwan and South Korea are present in Central Asia through their entrepreneurs,⁶⁵ and while they are allies of the US, they are certainly not enemies of Iran. The same might apply to Indonesia, Australia

⁶¹ WALSH, p. 278.

⁶² HYMAN, p. 299.

⁶³ E. HERZIG, *Regionalism, Iran and Central Asia*, in: *International Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 3, 2004, pp. 503–517.

⁶⁴ Actually, in our opinion, key for US-Iranian relations is not represented by competition in Central Asia, but by three other issues: Iranian program for nuclear development, anti-Israeli discourse of former Iranian president Ahmadinejad and evolution of events in Syrian civil war. But since none of the three issues mentioned are not related to the issue of Central Asia, we won't analyze them in this paper neither.

⁶⁵ HYMAN, p. 301.

or New Zealand too. Iranian administration is unlikely to oppose to such an initiative from one of these countries, or from companies connected to them.

A third regional power which might be interested in Central Asia is Pakistan. For Pakistan, central Asia represents markets, and sources of oil and gas, as well as energy supplies, which Pakistan lacks. Existing and planned water plants of the Republics could meet this need of Pakistan, but they face serious geographical and infrastructural obstacles, since planned transmission lines would cross unstable Afghanistan. During the 1990s, Pakistan was one of the firsts to invest in the newly independent states, especially in the telephone industry, and was active in developing diplomatic relations, especially with Uzbekistan,⁶⁶ with which it has much in common. The main obstacle facing possible growth of Pakistani influence in Central Asia is the lack of stability in Pakistan's internal affairs itself.

Central Asia shares a common religious heritage with the Arab world and has received significant assistance from several Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia, aimed at building and repairing mosques and promoting the values of Islam. Global powers tolerate the possible growth of religious influence of responsible Arab actors is preferable to the emergence of a In any case, given the differences in the Islamic heritages of Central Asia and the Middle East, it is very unlikely that the Central Asian republics would become somehow subservient to the Arab world.

Israel also has interests in the region. It has specialists in the region, mostly in agriculture, where Israeli experience and expertise is valued in drip-irrigation techniques.⁶⁷ Israel is no less interested than other state actors in preventing the region from becoming a hotbed for radical Islamist movements, which can threaten its security in the long term. But this matter belongs more in the realm of intelligence agencies than the domain of official diplomacy.

Other states, especially from Asia and Europe, may also be interested in central Asia's potential, and its markets, through their firms. Their number is too large to enumerate here, and in any case they are less significant actors than the countries mentioned above.

THE POSSIBLE FUTURE OF THE CURRENT GREAT GAME

History tends to repeat itself, but never in the exactly same way. The Great Game is once again present in the Central Asian scene, but this time with multiple actors, and various interests. The Central-Asian states confront a series of problems — social inequality, poverty, backwardness, the drying of the lake Aral, rise of organized crime, inter-tribal conflicts, to name a few — but also have great possibilities for economic development. Turkmenistan with its gas, Kazakhstan with oil, Uzbekistan by its various mineral resources, especially non-ferrous metals and coal, but also cotton, Kirgizstan in hydro plants, and Tajikistan in aluminum industry and hydro plants. And since gas and oil currently have a strategic importance in the world economy, competition for control of these resources take place in a global framework. Without these

⁶⁶ Ibidem, pp. 299–300.

⁶⁷ Ibidem, p. 301.

resources, the region would be no more interesting for military and economic powers of the world than for example Somalia. And the interest in economic possibilities, particularly sources of energy, lead to a related concern for stability and security in the region.

Currently, all the external state actors agree that stability and security of the region is vital, and this implies first of all maintaining the status quo, even if this means not challenging the power of current ruling elites. The Arab spring had shown that democratization and fall of authoritarian regimes does not lead necessarily to stability, which is a primary requisite for the exercise of political and economic interests.

Even if stability is practically a common desire, resources generate competitions. At first sight, competition is among companies, economic units, which can often be multinational entities. In practice, on such a level company interests represent state interests also, due to their contribution to their national economy. And in this sense, the backing of diplomatic institutions and of states as actors of international life is normal.

The Great Game, in its classic sense, had no winner, since a powerful outsider, imperial Germany appeared on stage of the world politics, and the two competitors joined forces to eliminate this threat. The New Great Game takes place in the present, and the final results remain to be seen.

ABSTRACT

This paper is dealing with a complex issue of current geopolitics, the revival of the Great Game in Central Asia. For our analysis, we used some of the latest published sources concerning actions and strategies of all of the world's current great powers and regional powers having strategic interests in states of Central Asia. The analysis is centered on two directions, first on strategic-political dimension, especially in the mirror of conflicts within the Islam world and America's war on terror. The second direction of research is focusing on economic problems, and is focused especially on the pipeline projects.

KEYWORDS

Central Asia; Great Game; Geopolitics; Pipeline Projects; Post-Soviet States; War on Terror

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