
CENTRAL ASIA: THE GREAT-POWER POLITICS IN A VOLATILE REGION

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Abstract

Emerging strategic trends in Central Asia are part of an overarching strategic construct that has been evolving since the end of the Cold War. Central Asia has emerged as a pivotal arena of international security, with an enhanced strategic significance that has superseded the region's geographic isolation and geopolitical marginalization. Security in Central Asia is now a key factor in the broader calculus of Russian, Chinese, and American interests. During the 24 years of independence, security environment in Central Asia has been changing drastically, with changes in strategies and alliances. This region is acquiring day by day more geostrategic importance due, among other things, to the situation in Afghanistan, to their natural resources, hydrocarbons specially, and their localization among Europe and Asia, US, Russia and China. This fight for gaining the complete influence in the region is known with the term "new great game".

Keywords: *Geostrategic, Geopolitical, Cold War, Silk Road and Human Rights*

Central Asia as a regional space is at the heart of strategic rivalry relationships involving several external players. In world politics, Central Asia is identified as a region of geostrategic and geopolitical importance. It is identified as a strategic backyard both by Russia and China. At the same time it is located in the proximity of Afghanistan, Iran and Afghanistan, main spots of strategic instability and uncertainty in Eurasia. This element creates interest for Central Asia in countries involved in military operations in Afghanistan and in negotiations dealing with Iran. The US and other NATO countries are among the most interested. Moreover, Central Asia is being increasingly viewed as an important component of the global energetic system. Central Asian resources in gas and oil, mainly situated in the Caspian Basin, were defined as second only to Persian Gulf reserves. The Central Asian energetic complex is said to become a defining factor in global energy policy.¹ The region has been in a state of constant flux due to developments caused by the external intervention for control over its natural resources, efforts to provide alternate transport routes to most of the landlocked countries of the region. Any geopolitical change in the region has its impact on several states in the neighborhood.² Due to these features, the Central Asian region is attracting many major powers of Eurasian politics, with Russia, China and the US being the most prominent.³ They are involved in a complex web of relationships defined by the logic of rivalry and designed to shape the evolution of the Central Asian regional space and to control its strategic and energetic resources.

The Geostrategic Salience of the Central Asian Region

Today this contested region again carries great influence on the geopolitical strategies of the dominant states. Geologists and industry experts confirm that the area contains a vast underground supply of hydrocarbons.³ These energy resources are not quantitatively

comparable to those of the Persian Gulf, but are ample enough to satisfy, at least for a significant period of time, the gluttonous energy appetite of the major powers and could serve as an excellent substitute for Middle Eastern oil, whose supply is subject to continuous fluctuations due to the threat of Islamic fundamentalism, international terrorism and, since January 2011, “spontaneous” social revolutions. The richest deposits so far discovered are in the Caspian Basin, which is surrounded by Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Russia and Iran. Crude oil extraction in Azerbaijan increased from 180,000 barrel per day (bbl/d) in 1997 to 1.07 million bbl/d in 2010, according to OPEC. This South Caucasus country is also blessed with the largest known reserves of natural gas, production of which reached 583 Billion cubic feet (Bcf) in 2010. Turkmenistan, another major regional gas supplier, produced 189,400 bbl/d of crude oil and 70.5 Bcf of natural gas in 2008. Uzbekistan also commands considerable hydrocarbon reserves, which in 2009 amounted to 59.4 Bcf of gas and 60,820 bbl/d of oil. The Kazakh Caspian coast holds an impressive quantity of oil, production of which was running at 1.45 million bbl/d in 2007.⁴

The geo-strategic salience of Central Asia today has been underscored by two main factors. First, as stated above, Central Asia has become important because of the discovery of hydrocarbon reserves and second, it has become a major transportation hub for gas and oil pipelines and multi-modal communication corridors connecting China, Russia, Europe, the Caucasus region, the Trans-Caspian region and the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, whether it was Czarist Russia or the Soviet Union or even the present Central Asian regimes, there has always been a strategic ambition in the north to seek access to the warm waters of the Indian Ocean.⁵ Thus Afghanistan, which links Central Asia and South Asia, is a strategic bridge of great geopolitical significance. Central Asia and South Asia are intimately connected not only geographically but also strategically.

Russia’s Reassertion in its ‘Strategic Backyard’

Central Asian states have taken different roles in the US, and China’s policies in the region from time to time; however their politics has never completely free of Russia’s political interventions. Since the demand for energy have exploded and prices increased considerably in the last decades, Russia has taken important steps in its relationship with the Central Asian states as well as the Caspian states to preserve its position over transportation routes in addition to exploration of these resources in source countries. Russia made many forward looking moves in sources countries such as long term agreements on the production of natural gas and oil. In addition to the long term agreements between the sources countries, Russia used its political power to continue on the use of existing pipelines in particular to Europe. The region is Russia’s backyard and ‘sphere of influence’ – a zone of “privileged interests”.⁶

However, other actors in the region have not been idle while Russia has penetrating into Central Asia by different means. The US has always been supporter of diversification of these states’ resources to weaken Russian dominant position in the region as well as in world politics. China has managed to penetrate itself as far as the Caspian Sea by building world’s longest pipelines and acquiring exploration rights in these states. There is a competitive environment in Central Asia states. Thus Moscow has compounded its foreign policy priorities and strategic moves related to energy security issues in the region. The US and China have emphasized on rich energy resources of the Central Asian states as an alternative resource for Middle Eastern energy resources. However, transporting oil and

natural gas from Central Asia through Caspian Sea for western market is not completely about security of supply.⁷ It is much more related to challenging Russia's dominant position the region and depolarizing the Russian threat in world politics.

Russia fears the proliferation of regional independence movements tied to radical Islamic groups, which compromise its national security, a perception shared by China.⁸ Religious fundamentalism, in conjunction with the smuggling of weapons and drugs, continues to be a real threat. Since the early 1990s Moscow has committed a significant number of troops to Tajikistan to prevent the destabilizing effect of radical movements in nearby Afghanistan on neighboring countries.

U.S. Considerations in Central Asia

U.S. interests in Central Asia primarily are strategic. They derive first from the proximity of this area to Russia, Iran, and China.⁹ The US quickly recognized the newly independent republics following the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, as during the Cold War, in the subsequent years independence, Central Asia did not constitute a priority among American foreign policy orientations. Until the second half of the 1990s, the US assigned secondary status to the region as it was busy with the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq, Middle East Peace Process, Bosnia and Kosovo events, future of Russia and the reconstruction of NATO. In this respect, until 1994, US interests were restricted to economic and political pursuits; military interests were nowhere in sight. In other words, American strategy towards the region focused on strengthening the independence of its states and on the transfer of values including democracy, human rights and economic liberalism. Therefore, during this period, the outline of the US security policy in Central Asia was mainly about the control of instability. In this respect, the US encouraged friendly relations with the Central Asian states, supported a range of governmental and non-governmental organizations, sponsored projects and given assistance under different frameworks, especially the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and even turned a blind eye on the mismanagement of funds.¹⁰

It was soon apparent though, as the Soviet regime became a historical relic, that Washington had an unambiguous interest in the region's energy resources. Since it had not yet found a valid replacement for Middle Eastern oil, the U.S. took the initiative to conclude agreements with energy supplier countries in Asia. Great efforts have been made to promote the construction of alternatives to the Russian energy corridors, including the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline from the 2000s and now the Nabucco and TAPI pipelines. The terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in September 2001 in New York, combined with a neo-conservative republican presidency, changed the priorities of presidential politics and the world scene.¹¹ The "global war on terror" was seen by the American political class as an inevitable step to show what makes America tick and ensure that U.S. leadership, not only in Asia but throughout the post-bipolar world, remained intact.

The US does not support any international project which includes Iran in the region because of the fact that if Iran is supported by the pipeline projects, this may lead Iran challenging the US dominance in the Middle East as well as in Central Asia. While the US supports and attempts to convince Turkmenistan to fill the pipeline, China has made considerable progress in the transportation of natural gas from Turkmenistan including commitments to fill the pipelines with the amount of natural gas that could not be produced in the near

future. It is obvious that China attempted to prevent Turkmenistan from signing any other international agreements on natural gas exports. The most important move towards this end was the Central Asian gas pipeline project which was supported and financed by China. A year later when the Nabucco pipeline was proposed in 2002, the Central Asian gas pipeline was offered by China to Turkmenistan as the source country, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as the participating countries. China was successful to guarantee the long term gas supply from the source countries. Thus, Turkmenistan cannot be able to supply natural gas to any projects unless new gas reserves are discovered. This situation curtails the availability of the Turkmen gas in the near-to-medium term for the Nabucco project and the other components of the Southern Corridor to Europe as the US desired.

Another project that is strongly supported by the US is The Trans-Afghanistan Pipeline (TAPI) Project. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan Natural Gas Pipeline Project will be connecting Dauletabad fields on southeast Turkmenistan with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India. Within a short period of time after the start of the Afghanistan war, participating countries met in Pakistan in 2002 to make the necessary arrangements about the implementation of the TAPI Project. During its first meeting in July 2002 in Ashgabat, the Steering Committee of the project requested the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to take part in the development process and to grant a regional technical assistance (TA) for feasibility studies of the TAPI. It should be noted that the US is the largest shareholder of the Asian Development Bank. The US efforts to realize TAPI will be supported by many organizations and through wide range of financial tools. TAPI gas pipeline project is expected to transfer 30 billion cubic meters of natural gas annually from the Dauletabad fields in southeast Turkmenistan to Pakistan, Afghanistan and possibly India.

China's strategic perceptions of Central Asia

China has improved its footprint in Central Asia largely through trade, energy deals, building up of infrastructure in Western China and linking it up with Central Asia and through the gradual enlargement of the scope and purpose of the SCO, especially in the security arena.¹² Securing and stabilizing its periphery is central to China's plan for developing its western area. Enhancing its influence in Central Asian Muslim nations also helps China address its security concerns regarding separatist Muslim movements in Xinjiang. Besides Uyghurs, China's source of concern is the Fergana Valley, the main fountainhead of Islamic fundamentalism in the Central Asian region, which is not far from China's borders. Preventing separatism, extremism and terrorism (which China classifies as the 'three evils') is China's key security concern. Hence, through the Chinese-led SCO it carries out border management training and joint exercises with the Central Asian armies. To promote stability China supports the current political regimes in neighboring Central Asia, which reciprocate by acknowledging China as a regional and international leader seeking a 'harmonious world'.¹³

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asia has been an important element in Chinese security. Structurally, there are three pillars to Chinese security regarding Central Asia. The first, rooted in Chinese history, is a recognition of the pivotal role of Central Asia for security along China's western borders. This is further grounded in the centuries-old debate over Chinese strategic security between proponents of maritime power and territorial defense and land power. The deep seated Chinese perception of vulnerability along its more remote western borders, driven by the sparse populations and distance from traditional

centers of Chinese power, was further exacerbated by the emergence of an open Central Asian frontier. But the main driver for this Chinese emphasis on security along its western borders is concern over instability in Xinjiang. With Central Asia much closer to the over seven million Moslem, ethnic-Turkic Uighurs than the ethnic Han Chinese, the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region is seen by Beijing as especially vulnerable to separatism and “foreign, anti-Chinese influences.” This view is largely warranted by history, as the nearly six-year period of an independent, Uighur-ruled “East Turkistan” was only incorporated into the People’s Republic of China in 1950. There is also an active, although still marginal separatist Uighur movement advocating an independent “Turkistan.” This group has been, according to China, linked to a series of anti-Chinese activities, ranging from local riots to a 1997 bombing in Beijing, and has some reported links to both Central Asian Islamist movements and Al Qaeda. Second, the economic implications of an open Central Asian region posed several new considerations for Chinese security. Specifically, there was an appreciation of the potential role of the Central Asian market in fostering greater economic development along China’s more remote and impoverished interior and border regions. Although this economic aspect was also enhanced by the clear energy appeal of the region, only magnified by China’s mounting energy needs during this period, there was an even more powerful political consideration. Specifically, there was a new sense of urgency for ensuring economic growth as a means of political legitimacy following the Tiananmen Square episode of 1989.¹⁴ Thus, the economic aspect of Central Asia’s place in Chinese strategic security offered the Chinese government a significant *political* opportunity to leverage the development of economic and commercial links to Central Asia to consolidate central control over the Chinese regions and border areas.

The Chinese government’s plan to build a high-speed rail network to connect the Far East with Central Asia and Europe is, among other reasons, a product of a clash between the great powers over Caspian and Caucasus energy resources. Dating back to the Prime Minister Li Peng (1987-98), the ambition to create a modern transport infrastructure in Eurasia took a large step forward in November 10, 2006, with the signing by representatives of eighteen countries of an agreement to implement the high-speed rail project. The network is expected to be completed by 2025, with the consent and cooperation of the countries involved. The project is a contemporary reinterpretation of the ancient Silk Road and an attempt to unite West and East, albeit in an environment of fierce competition with the Siberian railway, the historic and imposing Russian railway network through Eurasia which serves as the gateway between Siberia and European Russia. This high-speed train service is not intended solely for passenger use. A fundamental reason for this project is the emergence of new industrial centers in Eurasia, which have generated the need to speed up trade in goods, lower onshore transport costs, and facilitate the import of hydrocarbons. Beijing’s strategy, although simple, is carefully thought out. It wants to broaden its participation in, and cooperation with, countries on all continents, from Central and South America to South East Asia. To achieve this, it has decided to adopt the proven “African method,” which consists of providing, at low cost, a technologically advanced railway system to the prosperous governments of energy-rich countries in the Central Asian region. In exchange it will gain access to raw materials, including oil and natural gas.

Hydrocarbons are indispensable in meeting the vast energy needs of the new economic Asian giant. However, China’s strategy is perceived as a profound threat by Russian energy monolith Gazprom, which currently holds a monopoly in the region and tries to withstand

mounting attacks on its position, particularly the geo-economic ones coming from China and the United States.¹⁵ These take the form of ongoing pipeline project proposals, devised as viable alternatives to the existing pipelines controlled by Russian

Basically the Chinese political agenda in Central Asia addresses two important priorities:

- ensuring the physical integrity of the People's Republic of China and securing the integrity of the region's national borders, thus promoting regional stability.
- obtaining a significant share of the vast energy resources of the former Soviet republics of Central Asia by establishing profitable and lasting economic ties with them.¹⁶

Conclusion

Energy has become an important part of the geopolitics of the 21st century. Today, energy is an instrument of geopolitical competition. Central Asia provides significant energy resources for the US, China, and Russia all in order to reach their long term geo-strategic and geo-economic goals. These actors use different tools and pursue different strategies to have an influence on Central Asian countries in order to ensure an access to rich energy resources. As long as Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan preserve their oil and natural gas reserves, the US, China, and Russia's engagement will likely to increase in the near future. In the past there was a "Great Game" between Soviet Russia and the British Empire to take control over the Central Asia region. Now "New Great Game is started between Russia, US and China to get more control over this geopolitically, and strategically important region of Central Asia.

END NOTES

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