

CENTRAL ASIAN SPACE ANALYZED THROUGH THE MOSCOW – BEIJING AXIS

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Abstract: *Russia and China are the biggest national actors of the world from a territorial and demographical point of view. Together, these two actors control The Eurasian space - China being the most populated country and Russia having the greatest geographical surface. The strategic partnership between these countries pursues objectives in various fields, such as: economy, security, industry, resources and military.*

Due to the dynamics of world politics Russia and China were often put in the position to support each other; therefore an official relationship between China and Russia began as early as the 17th century. This relationship affects mostly the Central Asian space, but also powerful global and Asian regional actors.

Keywords: Russia, China, Central Asia, natural resources

1. Introduction

The huge geographical space of the size of Western Europe, found at the crossroads of many civilizations, Central Asia is unfortunately one of the least known areas of the world. The five countries lying in the center of the Asian continent sum up a total of 4 million square kilometers in surface and a total population of approximately 60 million, predominantly Muslim. This area lies between two great powers – Russia and China, and shares common borders with unstable neighbors such as Iran or Afghanistan.

In the last century the competition between the great powers took place especially in Europe. With the decline in intensity of this competition, the focus of the world powers has been increasingly orientated to intensify their influence in Central Asia in domains such as economy, politics and potentially military. The main reason for this shift in focus from Europe to Central Asia is the huge amount of natural resources that can be found in this region. However, the battle for resources is not the only determination

of the competition between The United States of America, Russia and China in this particular area; this battle also affects the region's wider approach in development fields such as war on terrorism, regional ambitions and Islamism. These issues ask for a reexamination of the region's geopolitics and other aspects which determine the competition and rivalry of the world's powers in Central Asia [1].

2. The geopolitical importance of Central Asia

The importance of the Central Asian region can be underlined by exemplifying the Cold War period in which had been dominated by the bipolar competition for global supremacy between The United States of America and The Soviet Union. This competition had brought to light a strategic confrontation between the world's most powerful naval power, controlling the Pacific and the Atlantic oceans – The US NAVY, and at that time, the most important block of land forces represented by the Russian – Chinese block which holds the supremacy of the *heart land* [2].

The geopolitical aspect of this issue concluded that the confrontation was set between North America and Eurasia, the stake being the domination of the world [3].

3. The Dynamics of Central Asia

3.1. Regional overview

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian states – Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, have concentrated their efforts in the direction of consolidating their statute and responsibilities of an independent state. Even though these states have made some progresses over the years, they continue to have social and economical problems. These states are considered poor or failed states because of their lack of industry and also because their main income is based on the export of resources such as petrol and gases. The strategic danger of this states' economic profile are the technological underdevelopment and a high degree of dependency of the fluctuating prices of natural resources.

The phenomena before mentioned generate political tensions and negative evolutions with risks of destabilizing a society which is already nostalgic after the period of social security during the soviet regime [4]. Starting with this idea it could be said that the social attitude towards the Russian influence in the area could be positive and well appreciated amongst most of the populations. Therefore in the next chapter the impact of the Russian and Chinese influence over the last few years will be presented.

3.2. Russian and Chinese approach on Central Asia

First of all, it is necessary to be understood that not only USA, Russia and China have interests in Central Asia, but also highly industrialized states such as Germany, Great Britain, France, etc., but by contrast the only countries willing to risk to make a foreign policy priority in this region were Russia and China, excluding the United States of America because of the fact that in 2003 USA attacked Iraq, even though after

September 2001 USA did accord priority to this region.

Judging by the security demands of the regions, one could say that Russia's national security is directly linked to the Central Asian region, but in the first few years after the collapse of The Soviet Union Russia didn't own enough levers to pursue its cause in this region. By contrast, China, which certainly had the capacity to advance its interests, took a "go slow" approach, Beijing not wanting to make its move too quickly as long as China's long term goals remained uncompromised [5].

Russia remains the most influential actor in this region and it also set foot to a new strategy regarding this region, a strategy which is based on the involvement of other states as well, from which the most important is China. As a result The Shanghai Five Organization was born, which includes China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. At the time, the goals of this organization were to solve border disputes and reduce armed forces. The interests of this organization were expanded in 1998 to resolving and containing the religious extremism and economic cooperation.

In hindsight, the real reasons for creating the Shanghai Five were that Moscow realized that it could not maintain its influence in Central Asia, as it had initially hoped. Russia considered that the threats regarding this area were: the growing influential power of China, the spreading of radical Islamic movements and on the other hand, the United States, which would be able to provide valuable assistance, technology and investments at such a high level, that Moscow would have never reached.

The Russian strategy regarding achieving an overwhelming influence in this regions was to attract the Chinese economic and political resources much needed for setting up governments and prevent them from shifting their political and economical vies towards Washington. This strategy was also beneficial to China, because now it could

more effectively penetrate the Central Asian region. The Moscow approach on China proposed a helping instead of resisting attitude towards China, which also share common beliefs with Russia regarding the influence of the United States of America in Central Asia and the Islamic radicalism.

3.3. Russian – Chinese goals and strategies regarding Central Asia

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has declared the ex-soviet space of crucial importance. The foreign policy concept of the Russian Federation considers this region a “special responsibility” for Moscow [6]. The most important issues underlined by Russia are the economical and the security interests in this area. The most important are the following: the military and defense industry is focused on keeping the role of leading power in this region by promoting the selling of weapons to these states and an increased presence of the Russian army on the ground; the energy industry is focused on ensuring full rights over gas pipelines from Central Asia to Europe; the security services are over watching the possible transnational threats in this region: Islam, terrorism and drug traffic.

Until 2005 all pipelines coming from this region to Europe were going through Russia, giving Moscow the right to impose new prices and taxes for gases, and therefore the economical and political leverages upon states depending on these gas deliveries. The building of alternative pipelines has eliminated the Russian monopoly on gas transit from Central Asia, making it possible for the Central Asian states to sell their product directly to under states from Europe, China, Turkey or Iran.

China, on the other hand, is aiming to increase its economic and political influence in Central Asia with Russia alongside. The reasons for not leaving Russia's side could be that Central Asia has become the main provider of energy for China or even security measures such as having a buffer zone between China and the United States of America or Russia. China

is also using its influence in this region to prevent the Uyghur separatist from the Xianjiang province to use Central Asia as a safe zone.

In order to achieve these objectives China has made considerable investments in the economy of these states, especially in the energy infrastructure. In exchange for raw materials and resources China offers finite technical products, aliments and other goods. As a consequence, the Central Asian states, if they want economic and political support from China, and of course they want it, must play by China's rules.

From the security strategy point of view, for Russia and China, Central Asia represents the geographic region in which the security interests of both countries are the most intertwined. Even though these countries are mostly in competition over energy problems and commercial opportunities of Central Asia, these two governments share the objective of diminishing the potential instability in this region. The common threat for both states is the ethnic separatism in the borderlands, supported by the fundamentalist movements.

The regional security interest shared by Moscow and Beijing means that the new independent states of Central Asia - Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have become a strong bond in the Russian-Chinese relationship. These common security interests are materialized in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, but even though both manifest suspicion for each other regarding the activities of the state controlled companies which compete for petrol and gas.

A very important security issue regarding this area is the Afghanistan war (The international coalition 2001 – present). Therefore, in order to prevent the Taliban incursion the Tajikistan government had doubled the number of guards alongside the border with Afghanistan. The perspective of the withdrawal of the coalition troops from Afghanistan has given Tajikistan a rising

geostrategic importance in the process of maintaining the stability of the region and preventing the extremist Islamic groups from defying the states of Central Asia. With the foreseen withdrawal of the coalition troops from Afghanistan, a rise of international assistance for the economic and social reconstruction of the region is highly expected to happen in the following years. Because Moscow and Beijing are very active regarding Central Asia it is possible that companies from these two countries subsidized by the governments to come and make offers to rebuild the region's transportation infrastructure, energy infrastructure and petrol pipelines. A series of projects have been proposed between Russia and China regarding the regional cooperation, considering that the multidimensional development must include Afghanistan also [7]. This can mean that both Russia and China are searching for opportunities to widen their influence in the region by including Afghanistan. In order to underline the importance of this region Zbigniew Brzezinski's approach in "The Grand Chessboard" presents the Russian-Chinese block with three strategic fronts.



It can be easily understood that the Central Asian region is the "third defensive front" as Brzezinski states; therefore the strategic security importance in this region will always be on the agenda of the foreign policies of both Russia and China – especially since the Afghanistan war, which

changed the political and social dynamics at the border of Central Asia.

The Central Asian states promote a multi-orientated foreign policy which tends to balance the stakes not only for Russia and China, but also for the United States of America, Turkey or other international financial institutions. If these states were to mention their preferences, they would state that Russia is the "known evil" because all Central Asian leaders are a product of the soviet era, and therefore they are aware of the behavior of their russian partners [8]. Although, towards China exists a certain amount of uncertainty, the Central Asian states are aware of the dependence of the Chinese assistance and economic resources. The European Union is also present in Central Asia with some economic programs, but the EU implication in this region is not comparable with China's or Russia's influence in Central Asia.

4. Conclusion

Overall, Russian policy in Central Asia is still conceptualized as competition with the United States and China is still seen as an economic support country for Moscow. Since 1940 Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin had both accepted that the United States of America should be excluded from Eurasia, and because of the spam of Russian and Chinese territory, the only place from Eurasia that United States may be able to influent remains Central Asia, from this assumption resulting the much needed influence in this particular place on earth. Both China and Russia realized that the American penetration in Central Asia is jeopardizing their ambition of world dominance.

The common ideology between all three actors comes from Brzezinski's statement – that the one who controls Eurasia controls the world. But, in the same time it is highly necessary that an Asian opponent such as China should not rise and control this Central Asian space – because of this reason Russia is playing friendly with China and vice versa.

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