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The New Great Game Revised- Regional Security in Post-Soviet Central Asia

When Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan gained independence in 1991 after over a century of Russian and Soviet rule, none of the republics was fully prepared for the consequences from the collapse of the USSR. Their sociological profiles were shaped by Soviet policies and their economic situation was a function of a Soviet planned economy. Their political elites did not have any experience concerning international relations either, as their external borders and affairs were quite strictly controlled by the USSR. They were inexperienced actors exposed from the very beginning to intensive political pressure of foreign powers aspiring to broaden their own influence in the post-soviet space.

The young republics were not the only actors surprised with the geopolitical change. The disintegration of the USSR marked a frantic beginning of a so-called New Great Game (Rashid, 1997). Since 1991 this concept has formed a predominant theoretical framework used for analyses of political changes taking place in post-soviet Central Asia. On the one hand, it reflects the attempts of the Russian Federation to keep control over the post-soviet states after the collapse of the USSR. On the other, it shows the attempts of other international powers competing with Russia, like the United States, to broaden their own spheres of influence. The geopolitical struggle takes place in a region important for both strategic and economic reasons, for it is situated between the Caucasus, Afghanistan, North-West China and Siberia, and it contains reasonable amounts of energy resources – primarily oil and natural gas (Currier and Dorraj (ed.): 83–101).

The term New Great Game was accepted not only because it vividly describes the relations between international powers in the region, which is little known to the average reader. Historically, it refers to the Great Game between the Russian and British Empires at the break of the 19th and 20th centuries, which was taking place in the very same part of the globe. It is also based on the classical geopolitical concept defining the territory of contemporary post-soviet Central Asia as the *Heartland* – the region allowing to politically control the whole of Eurasia (Lach and Wendt, 2010). Thus, the analysis in the terms of a New Great Game gives us useful tools for examining the ongoing political processes in Central Asia. This is based on a theoretical framework allowing one to develop a reference to analogical processes in other parts of the world and places the discourse in the context of a broader history of international relations and international relations theory.

However, after over twenty years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, a closer look at the Central Asian political landscape raises questions, whether the above classic interpretation is still fully functional. The primary question concerns the validity of the analogies as well as the descriptive and explanatory instruments used in political circumstances predating the First World War in the reality of post Cold War Central Asia. The fundamental difference is the presence of a new global actor, the People's Republic of China, which follows different patterns of political behavior than Russia or the United States. China's entrance is slowly but steadily changing the political and economic landscape of Central Asia, just like many other parts of the world. This in turn raises the question about how has the regional political situation changed as far as the strategies of the major players are concerned? Can one still fully describe them in geopolitical or zero-sum game terms?

It seems it is time to update the traditional political approaches regarding post-soviet Central Asia to the reality of 21st century. The primary goal of the article is to discuss the changes occurring in the region since the 1990s, mostly the fact of a growing Chinese presence. It will be achieved by comparing the political strategies of the Russian Federation, the United States and the People's Republic of China concerning regional and security challenges in post-soviet Central Asia in the context of the New Great Game. The strategies of the major players will be supplemented with an overview of the growing political activity of the post-soviet republics. This will allow us to define the limits of the classical geopolitical

interpretations of the political situation, like the New Great Game concept, in explaining the processes occurring in the region. In many respects the predominant geopolitical approaches still remain valid analytical instruments. However, if followed without reflection, they threaten with oversimplifying the situation.

The Approach of the Russian Federation

Despite the collapse of the USSR, the Russian Federation remained the dominant political force in the region. There were many reasons for that. Firstly, the post-soviet republics were economically dependent on Moscow. The major assets of Central Asia are energy resources: oil and natural gas. On the eve of independence their large-scale exports were possible only via the Russian pipeline network. Strategic issues were not less important. Central Asian post-soviet states were not fully prepared for independence and their security was to a serious degree dependent on Russian assistance. Additionally, one should not forget about the historical and cultural ties developed during over a century long Russian rule. Regardless of judgments, the “russification” and “sovietization” processes placed the countries in the space of Russian cultural influence. All these issues allowed the Russian Federation, although it lost direct control over Central Asia, to perceive the region as its own; an almost exclusive sphere of influence.

Russia defines its approach predominantly in terms of broadly understood security. From the military perspective, regional asymmetrical threats are particularly important (Redo, 2007). The Russian military presence is also meant to guarantee the safety of local borders (especially in Kyrgyzstan) and internal stability (primarily in Tajikistan) (Kozłowski, 2009: 137–138). Russia has ambitions to limit the activity of local extremist groups (especially in Uzbekistan) who could potentially generate instability in the vicinity of its borders. Despite the fact that this issue is not as important as in case of the Caucasus, it became a reason for closer Russian-Chinese military cooperation with the post-soviet states (Strachota, 2008).

Not any less important is another dimension of security, energy security, which is closely related to economic politics. Central Asia, the Caspian region in particular, is relatively rich in energy resources: oil (mostly in Kazakhstan) and natural gas (predominantly in Turkmenistan). As it was

already mentioned, during the first years of independence the Central Asian states had no alternative ways of large-scale export, except for the Russian pipelines running through the territory of the Russian Federation (the only alternative for pipelines is the railway). Before the development of the Baku–Tibilisi–Ceyhan pipeline (BTC) (2006), the Kazakhstan–China pipeline (2009) and Turkmenistan–China pipeline (2009), the energy policies of the Central Asian states were to a large extent dependent on the energy policy of the Russian Federation.

In general, Russia managed to keep the privileged position in post-soviet Central Asia, although mostly in the military dimension and less in an economic one. Despite the Chinese expansion the Russian Federation is still the major economic partner of all of the states in the region. Although the system of pipelines has become more and more diversified, Moscow is still controlling important export routes of energy resources. However, one should note that the Russian Federation did not manage to reasonably and lastingly strengthen its influence (Ross, 2011). A characteristic feature of the Russian approach to the region is its post-colonial perception. A lack of constructive cooperation in managing the economic and social challenges troubling the Central Asian political actors is also noticeable (Jarosiewicz and Falkowski, 2008). The Kazakhstan–Belarus–Russian Federation Customs Union does not seem to be able to effectively address these problems. The emerging alternatives of cooperation with other powers endanger the future position of the Russian Federation.

All of the remarks above lead to a conclusion that the analysis of Russian foreign policy concerning Central Asia in geopolitical terms of the New Great Game is relatively accurate. Russia defines its approach mostly in geopolitical categories, which matches the metaphorical content of the concept well. However, one should notice that the influence of the Russian Federation during the first two decades of Central Asian independence became visibly weakened, which may lead to a conclusion that its approach is relatively less functional than ones exercised by the other actors engaged in the region.

The Politics of the United States of America

The political reality of Central Asia has undergone dramatic changes after September 11, 2001. The most striking difference was the introduction of a U.S. military presence in two post-soviet states. The first military

actions against the Taliban were already undertaken on October 7, 2001 as operation Enduring Freedom. They would not have been possible without military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Although the U.S. was present economically in the region already in the 1990s, American military bases have brought significant changes (Karrar, 2009). First and foremost, Central Asia partly became a theater of the War on Terror. This happened without any control of the UN Security Council, which was particularly disturbing for the other key players: China and Russia. In the long run both of them were anxious as to whether the military intervention against the Taliban regime would turn into a long lasting strategic presence in the region, rich in energy resources and situated at the back door of both the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Russian Federation (Karrar, 2009). Secondly, after some time the military offensive proved to be less effective than it was expected. Although the Afghan capital was under the control of a pro-Western regime, large parts of Afghanistan were still controlled by Taliban forces. Meanwhile, the military operations seemed to destabilize the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in the northern part of Pakistan. The seemingly permanent military conflict close to Chinese and Russian borders negatively influenced the prognoses concerning security in Central Asia (Medeiros, 2009: 133–142).

The American intervention should not be perceived as absolutely negative for the other players. During the first few years of Operation Enduring Freedom and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) had a positive influence on the regional security. The Taliban forces had to retreat and Al-Qaida was on the defensive, which solved some of the immediate problems for Russia, China and the new post-soviet states. The actions taken by the U.S. military diminished the threat of radical Islamic expansion in Central Asia. This in turn gave more time for local regimes to adapt to the international environment and to the changing geopolitical situation. One can state that in the short run Operation Enduring Freedom and ISAF were beneficial for Russia, China and the post-soviet states. They effectively targeted the same threats as the Shanghai Five and later the Shanghai Cooperation Organization did (Kozłowski, 2011: 208–202).

The energy relations between the U.S. and Russia are more one-dimensional in character. As the representatives of the American government put it, the major goal of the U.S. engagement in the energy sector in Central Asia was not to gain access to regional oil and natural gas; rather,

it was to limit the scope of Russian domination in the region. The regional energy resources became an element of a geopolitical game. This emanated particularly from the BTC pipeline project, which became the first alternative route of oil exports from Central Asia not passing through the territory of the Russian Federation.

The above-mentioned observations lead to a conclusion, that defining the interests of the U.S. in the region in geopolitical terms of the New Great Game is only partly valid. The U.S. definitely took steps to weaken the position of the Russian Federation, especially in the area of the energy resources. However, the consequences of their military activity are not so one-dimensional. One can also have some doubts whether the American presence in its current form will become a permanent feature within the Central Asian reality. Negative consequences of the Global Financial Crisis in 2008–2009 for the American economy as well as the difficult situation in Iraq and Afghanistan may limit the potential of expansion for the U.S. in other parts of the world, including Central Asia. Thus, it seems to be more accurate to depict the actions of the U.S. in terms of tactical advantages in relations with the Russian Federation, especially in the field of energy resources, than strictly in geopolitical terms of the New Great Game competition.

The Approach of the People's Republic of China

Beginning from December 1991, China was slowly but steadily developing the fundamentals for its future activity in the post-soviet Central Asia. It followed two parallel routes. The PRC was developing bilateral relations based on mutual trust and was aiming to develop a multilateral platform for cooperation in the region – the Shanghai Five and later the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. On the current level of its position's development in Central Asia, China is concentrating its efforts on economic activity in the region.

This approach proves not only to be successful but also seems to be the most prospective in the future. Post-soviet Central Asian states were eagerly developing growingly sophisticated economic and political relations with China. It is worth noticing, that this process occurred without any serious crisis, as was the case in the relations of the U.S. or Russia with the states of the region. While the regional potential of the U.S. or

Russia was fluctuating (within the context of the War in Afghanistan for America, and the Georgian War for Russia), the regional potential of China was steadily growing. The PRC has also proven to be able to adapt to dramatic changes, like the events of September 11 or the 2008–2009 Global Financial and Economic Crisis (Lanteigne, 2009: 158–153).

China did not enjoy the advantage of local connections, as was in the case with Russia, nor a global scope of action, as it was in the case of the United States. As the immediate neighbor of Central Asia, China cared about stable and consensual development of long-term relations with the new states. Instability in Central Asia could have caused instability in the Chinese Xinjiang – Uighur Autonomous Region. Thus, during the first years of coexistence, regional security and economic cooperation were the imperative of Chinese politics as Central Asia is perceived by Beijing not only in terms of international politics but also in terms of the stability of Xinjiang (Zhu, 2010: 111–139).

In the short and medium run, China adapts itself to the existing balance of power in Central Asia. In this respect the goal is to exploit Russian and American involvement in maintaining regional security to minimize the costs of its own involvement in issues regarding regional stability. If the PRC got involved in security issues in Central Asia it would mean confrontation with Washington or Moscow and the relocation of large political and economic potential needed elsewhere, especially in the booming Chinese economy. In the long run the PRC is trying to develop a tight web of economic interconnections in the region. If it succeeds, the economic development should positively influence stability in the region, thus keeping the costs of regional security low, as well as erode Russian and American influence, based largely on military strength (Lanteigne, 2005: 115–142).

A perfect emanation of this approach and one of the greatest achievements of the PRC on the more and more complex Central Asian political and economical arena was to initiate the multilateral regional dialogue between China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The initially informal talks of the so called Shanghai Five, after accession of Uzbekistan in 2001 were formalized into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Its first goal was confidence and trust building between the member states. As time went by the agenda of the organization started to widen. Members of the SCO are proudly emphasizing that it was the very first international organization of the 21st century designed

to combat terrorism and organized crime (in the nomenclature of the organization, the three evils: terrorism, separatism and extremism), as well as to develop economic cooperation. Soon the organization became an emanation of the new approach of China to international affairs. Chinese leaders emphasize its multilateral and egalitarian character, which puts it in a stark contrast with unilateral politics of Washington or the post-imperial ambitions of Moscow. The smaller members of the organization declare that it is the main reason of its success. One must note that it was China who bore the burden of the SCO and its institutions. The first signal of Chinese dominance was organizing its secretariat in Beijing in 2001 (Pan, 2007: 99–109). Other signals were Chinese preferential loans for the members of the organization in 2004, reaching around 900 million USD, and scholarships for 1500 students from other states of the organization to study in China (Zhu, 2010: 121–127). It is also noteworthy, that the organization became an arena for the first political tensions between the Russian Federation and the PRC ('Sino-Russian Split at Regional Summit', *Asia Times*, 15 Nov 2007: 5). The rise of China and the relative decline of the U.S. and Russian power may change its character in the future.

It is hard to fit the Chinese approach into the categories of the New Great Game. China is more inclined to perceive the local situation in terms of a sophisticated *win-win* scenario rather than in terms of aspirations of geopolitical dominance in the region. While geopolitics formed the context of China's evaluation of the situation in Central Asia after the collapse of the USSR, the issues currently dominating the Chinese approach are economic interests calculated against the political costs of their realization. Thus, in the case of China, one should be particularly cautious in accepting the purely geopolitical perspective of Central Asian political or economic affairs.

The Post-Soviet States of Central Asia

The creation of five new independent republics in 1991 opened a new chapter in the history of Central Asia. In the 18th and 19th century it was dominated by civilization centers in Beijing and Moscow (Dillon, 2004: 66–67). In the 20th century it became an arena of socialist modernization: Russian in five republics and Chinese in Xinjiang (Gladney, 2004: 375–378). Since the middle of the century, the rule of the PRC and the USSR

seemed to be undisputable. The situation changed dramatically in 1991. Nevertheless, historical experiences made many observers reduce the role of the new post-soviet states in the context of the New Great Game in Central Asia to pawns in the hands of the international players. This tendency, however, is misleading. Of course, the post-soviet republics do not have the same potential as any of the earlier discussed global players. However, their attempts to strengthen their own position in the international environment have become growingly intense. After almost 25 years of independence they have become an important factor in the regional political landscape.

Post-soviet Central Asia encompasses five republics that proclaimed their independence in 1991 after the collapse of USSR: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Kazakhstan, the biggest republic of the five, is also a regional political and economic leader. Its large oil reserves are an important element in regional competition for natural resources between the Russian Federation, the U.S. and recently more and more often China. The success of the Kazakh politics is marked by the fact that nowadays Kazakh oil can be exported not only to and via Russia, but also to China and directly to Western countries. Another country enjoying considerable energy resources, namely natural gas, is Turkmenistan. Since the death of Turkmenistan's first president, Saparmurat Niyazov, its authorities have been dynamically searching for partners that would make them less dependent on Russia in the context of gas exports. China tries to take advantage of this situation, which is best expressed by the development of a new Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline in 2009. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are the poorest countries of Central Asia. The former seemed to be the most democratic state of the region. However, it experienced two radical changes of power in just five years, as well as ethnic unrest (Kozłowski, 2010: 119–145). The latter, after a civil war in the 1990s, faces serious economic challenges. Some commentators even state it is on the verge of collapse (Falkowski, 2009). Uzbekistan, the most populous country of the region, bordering all the new republics and ruled autocratically by Islam Karimov, has to deal with anti-systemic Islamic opposition, particularly active in the Fergana Valley, a natural corridor leading from Afghanistan to the heart of post-soviet Central Asia (Olcott, 1995: 23). Its geographic position helps it to be an important factor in the transit of regional energy resources as well as in regional security politics.

In the beginning of the 1990s, all the mentioned republics were active only to a very small degree internationally. Today, the situation has changed. Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in particular strive to widen the scope of their international activity and to capitalize on the economic and political opportunities brought by the changes occurring in the international scene. For example, after September 11, all of the Central Asian states became closer with NATO states, temporarily balancing Russian military influence in the region. The most significant steps were taken by Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan as they accepted U.S. military bases and NATO military presence on their territories, in consequence benefitting financially and politically from closer relations with the West (Collins, 2006: 308–304). This did not prevent them from exploiting the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (however, Turkmenistan is not a member) and Russian-Chinese initiatives to call for a timetable of U.S. military presence in the region in 2005. Three years later, they used the same organization to show assertiveness to Russian expansion by not acknowledging the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia after the Georgian-Russian War (Kozłowski, 2010: 154–165). Yet, all the republics continue their security cooperation with Russia, which is still a key factor in this respect in Central Asia and a counterweight to Chinese economic expansion.

If one analyses the political situation in post-soviet Central Asia, one must not underestimate the importance of the post-soviet states. All the new republics remember well the years of Russian and Soviet hegemony. While historically dependent on Russia, since the U.S. and China entered the region they have gained unprecedented political opportunities of playing one power against the other. It is important to understand, that all of the regional actors have a historical experience of political maneuvering between great world powers (Collins, 2006). Two decades of independence have provided them with new political perspectives and opportunities. One may say, that none of the five republics wishes for the absolute success of Beijing, Washington or Moscow. None of them wants to openly confront any of them as well. Finally, none of them wants to become a pawn in a dispute between these strong powers. Now they do not seem to be eager to give them up nor to exchange the old hegemon for a new one. None of the Central Asian societies is going to resign from even a small part of young independence. The emerging multilateral reality of international relations and conflicting interests of the global players

in the region gives them a lot of opportunities to exploit for the good of their own national interests. Thus, such a creative adaptation to the delicate situation by regional post-soviet elites is a factor that should not be neglected in the analysis of the international situation in the context of the New Great Game.

Conclusions

The analysis leads to a conclusion that the New Great Game concept or other geopolitically inclined approaches, although still useful in the assessment of the Central Asian political situation, do not entirely match the current situation in the region. If they are to be taken into consideration they have to be supplemented with the following remarks.

Firstly, the geopolitical situation has changed the most because of the growing Chinese presence in post-soviet Central Asia. Chinese politics regarding the post-soviet states in the region are a characteristic example of Chinese approach to international affairs based on an economically flavored *win-win* approach rather than geopolitical hegemonic ambitions. On the contemporary map of post-soviet Central Asia there is a place for intense bilateral relations between China and local actors (mostly Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) and for the very first Chinese multilateral initiative, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, for dynamic development of Chinese economic collaboration with the politically new region of the world. Additionally, this also allows for ambiguous cooperation against three evils: terrorism, extremism and separatism, which are the particularly important in context of Western intervention in nearby Afghanistan. All of these initiatives have fundamentally changed the balance of power in the region compared to the 1990s, when the concept of the New Great Game was first formulated.

Secondly, the approaches of the main players do not always match the geopolitical criteria. The geopolitical thought process seems to pervade the Russian perspective of the situation in the region and to be an important factor in the regional strategy of the United States. However, this may not be said about the Chinese perspective. In the 1990s, China had to accept the initial advantage of Russia and the U.S. on the regional scene, and thus their geopolitical approach. However, all of its later actions were aimed to develop a strategy based on mostly economic *win-win*

scenarios. Actually one may say that the PRC does whatever possible to lessen the importance of geopolitical factors, which work against it, and to strengthen the economic ones, which work in its favor. One also has to note that while the positions of Russia and the U.S. in the region fluctuated and generally deteriorated, while the Chinese position is becoming increasingly important in Central Asian affairs. This seems not only to point to one of the limitations of the concept, but also to suggest that in the case of Central Asia the geopolitically oriented approach is not always the most accurate one.

Finally, the traditional geopolitical approaches to the region and the New Great game concept underestimates the role of regional post-soviet states in Central Asia. Many analysts reduce them to pawns in the New Great Game between the U.S., the Russian Federation and the PRC. While Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan may not be able to run fully independent economic or security policies, they are still able to skillfully maneuver between the conflicting interests of Beijing, Washington and Moscow and to develop their own political potential. In conflict situations they are increasingly able to take advantage of contradictory ambitions of the great players.

The analysis of the political relations in contemporary post-soviet Central Asia suggests that China is the best student within the history of achievements and mistakes of other empires (Mearshimer, 2001). From the Chinese perspective, the political situation in the region right after the collapse of the USSR was very complex. The rise of an absolutely new political space on the western flank of the Middle Kingdom required a coordinated and immediate and long-term reaction. From 1991 China was cautiously and steadily developing the fundamentals for the future activity (Feng, 2007: 204). The Chinese strategy was twofold. On one hand, Beijing was investing in trust and confidence building with the new republics by bilaterally solving border disputes and developing closer economic relations. On the other, it funded and strengthened multilateral platforms of contacts: the Shanghai Five and later the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The approach gave the desired effects. Post-soviet Central Asian states quickly opened up economically and politically for cooperation with China (Sun, 1998: 153). It is worth emphasizing that the cooperation between China and Central Asian states was fluid and free of crises, while similar contacts with the U.S. and Russia were not. One can just mention consequences of the intervention in Afghanistan in the case of the U.S.

and of the war with Georgia in the case of the Russian Federation. Even the global changes after the September 11 did not prevent China from expanding in Central Asia (Medeiros, 2009: 45–60).

However, China's role in the region started to become noticed only after the 2008–2009 Global Financial Crisis and continually keeps being underestimated. This tendency is also the most often recurring flaw, besides underestimating the role of post-soviet Central Asian states, of political analyses conducted from the perspective of the New Great Game. China has chosen to adapt to the circumstances, at first modeled mostly by Russia and the United States. However, this does not mean that it was passive. From the perspective of almost a quarter century of independent Central Asia, if one compares the approaches of the Russian Federation and that of the United States with the Chinese one, the evaluation seems to be in favor of the PRC. While respecting the initial advantage of Russia and the temporary advantage of the U.S. after September 11, China managed to exploit the opportunities and nullify the threats posed by the political situation. From the regional perspective, this meant greater dynamics of trade and improvement of the Xinjiang economic situation. As years went by the cooperation encompassed also security issues and energy resources. At the same time the burden of keeping Central Asia stable was put on the shoulders of Russian and the United States, allowing China to concentrate on economic issues. From the perspective of over two decades, developing bilateral and multilateral cooperation, and concentrating on economic aspects of collaboration proved to be the most effective way to build and preserve strong political position in the region, and to change the rules of the New Great Game.

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