POST-SOVIET ASIA: NEW GEOPOLITICAL TRENDS AND RUSSIA'S INTERESTS

Andrei GROZIN

Department head, Institute of the CIS (Moscow, Russia)

Until the late 1999, post-Soviet Central Asia as a whole, with the exception of Tajikistan, was seen as a stable region not prone to conflicts. There was still no talk of another round of the Big Game that brought the leading world centers into the continent's "heartland." This talk began later, at the end of 2001. Today, we all know that the external stability of the 1990s was noth-

ing but a shell filled with vast destructive potential. So far, the Central Asian republics have not yet identified their geopolitical vectors—too many countries with special interests are present in the region.

This, together with the vast and varied raw material resources, has greatly increased the newly sovereign Central Asian countries' geopolitical and geo-economic weight.

In 2005-2006, "new Asia" attracted more attention from observers than the other post-Soviet regions. The Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, the Andijan events in Uzbekistan, and the presidential elections in Kazakhstan provided ample forecasting material. Today the Central Asian situation has become relatively stable, yet serious storms are still to come.

Russia's policy, although betraying new trends in this key region, remains vague. Today, however, Russia should acquire a new conception of its political and economic presence in Central Asia.

Post-Soviet Asia Demonstrates Contradictory Trends

The years of independence of the five newly sovereign Central Asian states can be described as a period when "time is out of joint." The power elites, the absolute majority of which took shape in 1960s-1980s as a product of the Communist Party, are completely engrossed in cementing their position, trading, more or less profitably, in what was left after the Soviet Union collapsed, and building up their image on an international scale.

Two countries—Uzbekistan (half of the post-Soviet Central Asian population, an authoritarian political system that kept society together) and Kazakhstan (rich mineral and raw material base and the most advanced market economy among its Central Asian neighbors with the conviction that this allows it to claim regional leadership)—were more active than the others.

The populations of the five republics experienced sharp social stratification, while freedom of the press, human rights and the rights of the national minorities were limited. In the last ten years, the domestic protest potential has been steadily mounting. In the absence of democratic reforms, the corruption-infested countries could neither offer enough jobs for their people, nor adequate health services to the generally ailing nations, nor high quality education. According to U.N. assessments, 70 to 80 percent of those residing in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan live below the poverty level. In Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (especially in the rural areas), the situation is not much better. Most of the population in Turkmenistan is also struggling to survive. This is a source of continuous replenishment for all sorts of extremist Islamist groups.

In 2000, Islamist radical sects appeared in Central Asia, they even found their way into Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the titular populations of which (nomads and pantheists until the early 20th century) have never been too biased toward the traditional and, even less so, toward the non-traditional Islamic trends.

Today, national security in the post-Soviet Asian republics remains low, a fact amply confirmed by the inroads of IMU fighters into the Kyrgyz-Uzbek-Tajik border areas: twice (in 1999 and 2000) about 200 to 300 fighters nearly defeated Kyrgyzstan and encountered no opposition on Tajik territory. In fact, only routing of the Taliban by the world community's united efforts saved the Central Asian regimes from a massive extremist attack planned for the fall of 2002.

The defeat of the Taliban in Afghanistan weakened the Central Asian Islamist underground network, however the situation remained tense.

Recently certain negative trends have come to the fore in the Ferghana Valley, the meeting place of Kyrgyzstan (three regions of which are found there: Jalal-Abad, with a 0.9 million-strong popula-

tion; Osh, 1.2 million; and Batken, 0.4 million people); Uzbekistan (three regions: Namangan with 1.8 million people; Andijan, 2.2 million, and Ferghana, 1.2 million), and Tajikistan (the Sogd Region with 2.3 million residents).

There is the very real danger of destabilization in Kyrgyzstan; if this happens, tension on its border with Uzbekistan will increase, probably plunging the region into a wide-scale military-political conflict.

The armed Uzbek opposition, in turn, will build up its presence in southern Kyrgyzstan using the Osh, Jalal-Abad, and Batken regions, areas with a vast ethnic Uzbek population, as a toehold. The semi-legal structures of Hizb ut-Tahrir and some other extremist radical organizations are already operating there.[1]

Recently, the regional Islamist structures operating in the south of Kyrgyzstan have been talking about an "Islamic autonomy" (made up of the Namangan, Andijan, and Ferghana regions of Uzbekistan and the Osh Region of Kyrgyzstan), which is understood as a territory "living according to the Shari'a laws," etc.[2]

In the summer of 2005, on the eve of presidential election in Kyrgyzstan, radical Islamists stepped up their activities in the republic; the National Security Council and the Ministry of the Interior had to conduct special operations. They neutralized two groups of Hizb ut-Tahrir, which were distributing leaflets, and liquidated the organization's secret print shop.

In May 2006, small units of IMU fighters (according to certain sources, they acted together with the fighting wing of Hizb ut-Tahrir) attacked the Tajik and Kyrgyz (the Batken Region) border guard outposts to test their combat readiness.

Recently, border skirmishes on Uzbekistan's borders with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have become more frequent—destabilization is being stirred up through a series of domestic and interstate conflicts.

Hizb ut-Tahrir is an obvious threat to Central Asian security, therefore we cannot help but be puzzled by the attempts of certain forces (particularly in Kyrgyzstan) in 2005-2006 to legalize the party for short-term political considerations. If realized this would have produced a negative effect and may have even cost the country its statehood. For obvious reasons Russia is closely following the regional developments.

The IMU scattered underground groups (since 2004, the organization has been called the Islamic Movement of Turkestan, IMT) are no less dangerous. After November 2001 when Juma Namangani, one of the leaders of the IMU's armed units, died, many of the well-known warlords, abetted and financed by al-Qa'eda functionaries, left the organization to set up armed groups of their own. The resultant ramified underground network became al-Qa'eda's additional resource in Central Asia.

Suicide bombers were first used in Central Asia in Tashkent and Bukhara in 2004. Before this, the region had had no taste of this phenomenon, a sure sign of al-Qa'eda's methods and tactics. In 2004, a series of terrorist acts in Uzbekistan carried out by the Jamaat al-Jihad was the first practical result of cooperation of the former IMU fighters and al-Qa'eda.

The scattered ("network") terrorist groups directly cooperating with the so-called world terrorist international, and operating on its money and according to its own instructions, have increased tension and made the antiterrorist struggle much harder to wage.

During the years of independence, the local elites have been demonstrating not only an inability to defend their countries' national security—they proved unable to close their own ranks: oligarchic groups and clans are drawn into an endless war for the right to inherit presidentship.

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[1] See: S. Luzianin, "Prognoz dlia Kirgizii," *NG-Dipkur'er,* 25 April, 2005.

[2] D. Glumskov, "Besslavnyi konets epokhi: blizhayshie mesiatsy dlia Kirgizii stanut ochen' slozhnymi i politicheski, i ekonomicheski," *Ekspert-Kazakhstan,* 12 April, 2005.

The domestic problems are not the only stumbling block—there is no agreement among the Central Asian countries, which are moving from sharp comments and diplomatic notes to demonstrations of military might.

Loyalty and ethnic and spiritual kinship among them are superficial: relations are very complicated, inconsistent, and far removed from mutual understanding on a wide range of defense, economic and political issues: water and land use, delimitation and demarcation of state borders, disputable border territories and enclaves.

Tajik-Uzbek relations have never been as tense as they are today: over 60 citizens of Tajikistan perished in the Uzbek minefields along the border between the two countries; territorial disputes are no less complicated. Over half of the areas settled by ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks do not coincide with these states' borders and geographic locations, a source of never-ending ethnic and state contradictions.

There are between 70 and 100 disputable stretches of Uzbek-Kyrgyz border. The border between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan has about 70 disputable areas.

Turkmenistan is still involved in a dispute with Azerbaijan over certain oil and gas fields on the Caspian seabed. Saparmurat Niyazov, in his time, went as far as saying that the Caspian might "smack of blood." It was only in the past twelve months, that Uzbek-Turkmenian tension was relieved somewhat and the two countries removed their troops from the border areas. In view of the continued mutual claims, this respite might turn out to be short-lived.

Exchanges of fire on the state borders in Central Asia are becoming more and more frequent. Armed clashes between border guards were first registered on the Uzbek-Kyrgyz and Tajik-Uzbek borders in 2006.

The water issue is another permanent factor of tension. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, two water monopolists, want Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to pay them for the use of their water resources. The problem is unlikely to be resolved: the Aral is rapidly disappearing, while the local rivers have been steadily losing water since 2006.

In recent years, the region acquired two inner centers of attraction—Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan—involved in mutually exhausting rivalry over regional political leadership that is consistently undermining the weak regional integration impulses. On the whole, real consolidation and regional integration (under Kazakhstan's leadership) to which Kazakhstan is calling its neighbors are obviously far away. Neither Tashkent nor Ashghabad, which are paying lip service to the idea, feel tempted enough. Bishkek and Dushanbe have their own doubts.

Until recently, only "new Asia's" closest neighbors paid keen attention to what was going on in the region. Russia and Iran helped Tajikistan end its domestic strife with a settlement, while China reached certain agreements with Kazakhstan on localizing the separatist movements of the ethnic Uighurs, who in the first half of the 1990s tried to use Kazakhstan as a toehold of their struggle in Xinjiang. China even settled territorial disputes with Kazakhstan. Kyrgyzstan chose to settle the territorial and Uighur issues with China. Turkmenistan, the huge burden of its subjective problems notwithstanding, organized effective trade and economic relations with Iran, Russia, Ukraine, and other countries. Working together, Russia and China extended the Shanghai Five (SCO) membership to include all the post-Soviet Central Asian republics (with the exception of Turkmenistan). The organization was set up to implement certain major transport, economic, and trade projects and to develop a good-neighborly climate on the borders of the SCO members.

In an effort to balance out the mounting pressure of domestic and external factors, the Central Asian countries have been actively working on the best possible security and stability models. Today, their involvement in regional cooperation increased, but it has become neither more consistent nor more efficient. They have not yet selected the best security system for the region, in which there are several mutually excluding stability mechanisms.

The countries that have recently gained their sovereignty should clearly identify themselves on the international arena; they need foreign policy doctrines that will take into account their geopolitical and polyethnic specifics. Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbaev has correctly pointed out: "Central Asia is a potentially conflict region… Conflicts might develop in the region and around it. Some of them might flare up because of territories, water, and rich natural resources."[3]

By sitting on two or even three chairs (if we take into account China's weight and influence in the region), the ruling elites acquire tactical advantages and a lot of strategic headaches.

The still vague national interests of the Central Asian republics are forcing the political leaders to maneuver among several external forces, making their foreign policies less predictable with every turn.

Western Strategies

Until 2001, the United States, and the West in general, paid little attention to the Central Asian Soviet successor states; from time to time they issued statements on the region's rich energy potential and did next to nothing to support the few local dissidents. When pursuing economic and defense cooperation, Washington concentrated on (a) unilateral advantages and (b) minimizing spending.

Official Tashkent was the first to respond to the anti-Taliban measures undertaken by the United States and its allies. President Karimov allowed America to use his country's air space and permitted the U.S. to deploy its troops on Uzbek territory. The air base in Khanabad (Karshi) was used by air reconnaissance units with pilotless Predator aircrafts and radar surveillance units.

Kyrgyzstan followed suit: it allowed the coalition forces to use its military infrastructure. Tajikistan was the third to permit the counterterrorist coalition to use its airfields for military transportation aviation and military experts.

Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan were the last two states to allow the coalition to use their air space. Astana sent a sapper platoon to Iraq, while Ashghabad is actively reviving the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan main pipeline project.

By the early 2005, Uzbekistan had the largest American contingent (over 2,000 privates and officers) in Central Asia deployed at the Khanabad airbase. In 2002-2003, Tashkent actively invited Washington to rent the airbase for 25 years.

Over 1,500 military were stationed in Kyrgyzstan at the Manas airport in Bishkek, which has the region's longest landing strip. The territory was considerably extended shortly before President Akaev lost his post.

From the very beginning the "honeymoon" between the United States and the autocratic regimes of "new Asia" was a contradictory one. The United States was quick to set up a significant military infrastructure in the region: air bases and "proto-centers," at which local military were trained by American (NATO) instructors. The Western special services obtained complete information about the region's airfield network and gathered exhaustive information about their new "Asian" allies. They still finance certain joint military programs and supply ammunition, medication, and special devices (communication, night vision and other high-tech military gadgets). The American and NATO bases of great potential geostrategic (so far regional) importance and the "proto-centers" have become a tool of American and Western geopolitical influence in Central Asia, forming a springboard from which the U.S. can bring pressure on the neighboring territories. In fact, the region can be easily controlled from these advantageously situated local airfields.

[3] N. Nazarbaev, *Na poroge XXI veka,* Almaty, 1996, pp. 78-79.

At the same time, the U.S.'s newly acquired "third neighbor" status (not limited to geographic interpretation alone) triggered a new phase in "elite warfare." The series of Color Revolutions and the downfall of the Akaev regime in particular demonstrated that Washington would abandon the former communist secretaries-turned-presidents to their fate without any qualms in an effort to replace them with younger, and more pliable, pro-Western politicians.

The American money being poured into the newly independent Central Asian states is not enough for all the citizens of "new Asia" and cannot solve all its problems. We can hardly expect Washington to assume full financial responsibility for the vast territory and its 50 million-strong population plagued with a multitude of domestic and international ailments.

Kyrgyzstan is a good example: after realizing that the republic has become a vast field of new risks and unsolved problems, the West is energetically denying its involvement in the Kyrgyz events and has moved away. America's involvement—and the money it is prepared to spend in any given case—is limited. Today, Washington is not as enthusiastic as it used to be about the "Orange Revolution process." It obviously went wrong in Kyrgyzstan and was shelved until better times.

For a long time, the Uzbek leaders were sure that economic and military-strategic cooperation with the United States would pay for their country's numerous economic problems. By the end of 2002, however, Tashkent had grown tired of its excessive dependence on the United States in many spheres caused by America's military presence in the country.

The Western state and human rights organizations unleashed a wide-scale information war against Uzbekistan in the wake of the Andijan events. Tashkent retaliated by expelling the American base from the republic's territory, siding with Russia and China, and joining the EurAsEC and the CSTO.

After losing its position in Uzbekistan, the United States hastily moved toward new strategies in Central Asia.

Today, Washington is tempting Astana with the role of "strategic regional partner." There is the opinion that "America decided to place its stakes on Kazakhstan not only in the economic, but also in the military sphere."[4] This is a logical step: having lost Tashkent, Washington was left with no choice. Out of the five local countries, only Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are eligible for the role of regional leaders. There is another consideration: Astana's highly pragmatic policy in the Caspian is making it possible for the American transnational companies to invest in oil production and derive huge profits.

The current lull in America's advance in Central Asia can dupe no one: after launching several alternatives of regime change on the post-Soviet expanse (the so-called velvet revolutions) in late 2003, the West built up its pressure on the former Soviet republics and intensified the power struggle in them. Despite the talks about "strategic partnership" and the promises of "dollar showers," the United States remains resolved to change the political leaders on the post-Soviet expanse.

On the whole, the U.S. and NATO intend to strengthen their long-term military-strategic presence in Central Asia. However, this is a fairly complicated process involving numerous factors, primarily Russian, Chinese, and Iranian. In view of this, the United States might either carry out all sorts of "democratic transformations" in the authoritarian Central Asian republics or use them as a threat.

There is every reason to believe that Washington has learned the Iranian lesson: back in 1979, it took the Islamic revolution in Iran a couple of months to wipe out the fruits of a decade of persistent work with the Shah regime, which looked pro-Western enough even though it was burdened with clan and family corruption and the appalling poverty of over 80 percent of the Iranian population. The post-Soviet Asian expanse brings pre-revolutionary Iran to mind.

[4] P. Sviatenkov, "Kazakhstan sdelaiut liderom," *APN-Kazakhstan,* 7 November, 2005.

The Chinese Factor

Recently China entered the new Asia field as one of the central players together with the RF and the U.S. The radical geopolitical changes in the region forced Beijing to radically revise its relations with the Central Asian newly independent states.

This strategy was suggested by the local countries' cautious attitude toward China's military, economic, and demographic might. The local Sino-phobia obvious at the grass-roots and elite levels should not be forgotten either.

The oil of Kazakhstan's Caspian sector served as one of the key attractions that pulled China into the Big Central Asian Game. In order to continue, China's unprecedented economic growth needs more energy fuels. According to certain forecasts, in 2010, the Asian Pacific countries will import up to 1.5 billion tons of oil alone, with China's share reaching 200 million tons.[5] Meanwhile, domestic oil production in China is dwindling.

Under the pressure of mounting energy consumption, Beijing decided on a wide-scale strategy of gaining access to Central Asian oil and gas fields. Today it is busy realizing it. Russia, the United States, and some other countries have already recognized China as their rival in the struggle for Central Asia's fuel resources.

It should be borne in mind that the economic ties between China and Kazakhstan cannot be described as "silent expansion." Some Kazakh experts and politicians are concerned about the flow of Chinese goods into the country—yet this happens elsewhere in the world. As early as 2004, China became the world's trade leader with the trade turnover of $1 trillion. Central Asia is not a link detached from the chain that connects China with the rest of the world.

So far, the relations between the Central Asian republics and China, as well as the potential radicalization of Beijing's position on certain Central Asian issues, are still affected by the continued Western (American to be more exact) military presence in the region, which potentially may bring pressure on the neighboring territories, China's western provinces in particular.

In the altered geopolitical situation, Beijing deemed it necessary to complement its economic cooperation with the Central Asian new independent countries with cooperation in the defense sphere. So far it is acting selectively: its policies vary from one post-Soviet state to the next; the defense partnership still coming second to China's economic influence in the region.

Being very much concerned with America's presence in Central Asia, which is seen from Beijing as a sphere of its immediate national interests, it is accelerating the process of turning the SCO (which in 2001 developed from the Shanghai Five) into a regional counterbalance of sorts to the "extra-regional forces."

Recently China has been making a clearer show of its interest in local raw materials and the local markets, as well as making a claim to political and economic leadership, through the SCO structures in particular.

Russia is drawing closer to China because its relations with the United States and the West deteriorated when it came to defining the spheres of influence on the post-Soviet expanse. The Russian Federation is not yet strong enough to oppose pressure single-handedly; it has to look for, and find, common interests with China. Indeed, the two countries are resolved to keep America's growing influence in Central Asia in check with the help of the SCO.

Recently, the Chinese factor became Moscow's utilitarian tool used to bring pressure on the EU states that keep Gazprom away from the European gas distribution networks. It is precisely for this reason that Russia is actively discussing, at different levels, the possibility and carrying out

[5] See: O. Sidorov, "Neftianye interesy Kitaia v Tsentral'noy Azii," *Gazeta.kz,* 16 October, 2003.

feasibility studies of investments in a vast gas infrastructure with the intention of increasing fuel export to China.

The 2005 Astana SCO summit demonstrated that the SCO members perceive America's rising involvement in the region as a cause of concern prompted not only by the U.S. military presence, but also by its efforts to "democratically transform" the local political regimes.

The SCO members do not agree with America's approaches to the Central Asian region. Partly because of its ideological obsession, partly because of its deep conviction that democracy can cure all social and geopolitical ills, Washington is resolved to "spread democracy" in Central Asia. Any impartial observer can see that any attempt at prompt democratization will bring chaos and make the local republics "failed states."

Moscow and Beijing are exhibiting much less democratic messianism, but they know the region much better. In it, democratization should come after economic and social modernization, otherwise it would never strike root and would remain counterproductive; democracy is part of modernization, not its vehicle.

Both China and Russia prefer to preserve the Central Asian regimes in the short-term and, if the worst comes to worst, long-term perspective; they prefer regional stability and the semblance of peace among the local elites and nations.

So far the SCO is orientated toward "counteracting terrorism and creating an efficient mechanism needed to cope with the task."[6] There are signs, however, that with the active involvement of Beijing and Moscow, the SCO may, in the near future, develop into a powerful regulatory and attractive regional factor.

The 2004 Tashkent summit was marked not only by the statements of the heads of member states to the effect that the SCO permanent structures (the Secretariat in Beijing and the Headquarters of the Regional Antiterrorist Structure in Tashkent) would start functioning to their greatest capacities, but also by the PRC's much more active position. China is the SCO's main donor; it also offered trade credits to its SCO partners for a total of $900 million.[7] The offer was repeated at the Astana summit.

The SCO organizers want to see it one of the poles of the gradually emerging multipolar world; in the future, the SCO may develop into a link of the future "arc of stability," as opposed to the "arc of instability" that stretches from Western Europe to Southeast Asia.

The above should not be taken to mean that the SCO has exclusive advantages over the other regional security mechanisms. It looks as if the Central Asian republics have no specific and well-substantiated strategies—both in relation to the SCO and to the other regional military-political projects. We can agree with Kazakhstan expert Erlan Karin, who says that the Asian newly independent states are guiding by their short-term rather than long-term interests.[8]

Russia's Interests

During the time that has elapsed since the Soviet Union's disintegration, Moscow failed to elaborate an integral Central Asian policy. There were no more or less clear principles of what to do in the region and how. There was no clear position in relation to the Russian and Russian-speaking diasporas in the Central Asian republics. Nothing was done to work in any consistent way with the local

[6] K. Kosachev, "ShOS kak al'ternativa amerikanskomu vliianiu v Tsentral'noy Aziii," *NG-Dipkur'er,* 29 September, 2003.

[7] See: T. Stanovaia, "Iz ShOS v ODKB pereletaia," *Politkom Ru,* 21 June, 2004.

[8] See: E. Karin, "ShOS i ee znachenie dlia Tsentral'noy Azii. Gosudarstva TsA posle 11 sentiabria," *Assandi Times,* 25 June, 2004.

elites. In 1991-1996, the Russian political leaders wanted nothing but to "uncouple the Asian car." This, and the unlimited Euro-Atlantic orientation, crippled Russia's interests—the region was gradually pulled into the spheres of interest of third countries.[9]

In recent years, the situation has been gradually improving: slowly but surely the Russian Federation is acquiring its Central Asian tactics and a basic strategy. The foreign policy bloc of Russian politics has changed to a certain extent: Moscow treated the power change in Bishkek very effectively;[10] it offered a very balanced assessment of the Andijan riot; it is successfully promoting Russian's energy interests in Central Asia (this is especially true of the recent Russian-Turkmenian-Kazakh agreements on the Caspian pipeline) and some of the Kremlin's other steps. From this we can conclude that Russia is seeking a more active position in its dialog with the CIS regimes, which some experts regard as "candidates for regime change." By the 21st century, its sphere of influence in Central Asia had shrunk; Moscow, however, is not discouraged, it is working hard to preserve and even expand what is left of its regional position. In 2003 and 2004, it achieved a great deal, but its policy is still impulsive—Russia responds to local developments. We get the impression that Moscow is merely trying to keep up with the United States.

Central Asia's rich natural resources are landlocked; the region's limited access to the world markets and undeveloped communication networks make it dependent on Russia. The years of independence have not brought about many changes: the Russian Federation is the chief trade partner and transit territory for energy fuels and other raw materials, as well as the main supplier of fighting equipment and weapons.

Foreign military presence is not Russia's only concern; the prospect of a very expensive and prolonged struggle over the region's natural and industrial resources is another. The territories of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan hold 4.3 percent of the proven gas reserves (about 8 trillion c m).

The Americans' unwillingness to reveal their long-term plans is adding to Russia's worries.

The Kremlin has already outlined its political targets in post-Soviet Central Asia: it will develop its own oil industry and increase its export of energy resources. The Russian president has already warned Washington that he will not shun steps going beyond the limits of his country's cooperation with the United States.

America's military presence undermines Russia's, China's, and Iran's influence on the regional economies and policies. Today, the Russian Federation is cooperating with the U.S. and, on the whole, shares its antiterrorist aims. As the war in Afghanistan is developing into a slack, "chronic" process, America's continued military presence in the region annoys Russia, China, Iran, and India—the Eurasian leaders with direct interests in the region.

Central Asia is a strategic buffer that keeps external threats away. For this reason, Russia has to keep Central Asia in the sphere of its interests. This explains its negative feelings about the foreign military presence there.

Russia's Central Asian policy hinges on its economic interests, which calls for continued control over those countries that Russia finds to be very important. Kazakhstan is one of them, its economic and political importance cannot be overrated: Soviet military and industrial facilities, including Baikonur, are still on its territory.

Russia maintains wide economic and political contacts with Kazakhstan; it renewed the lease on Baikonur for the next 50 years.[11] There is an agreement on exporting Kazakh gas to Europe through the Gazprom transportation network.

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[9] See: V. Khliupin, "Tsentral'naia Azia: kogda bessil'na vostochnaia mudrost'," *Rosbalt,* 6 April, 2005.

[10] See: M. Walker, "Problema 'Bol'shoy Karty.' Izdaleka i svysoka sobytia vidiatsia po-drugomu," *United Press International,* 29 March, 2005, available at [http://www.inosmi.ru/print/218443.html].

[11] See: R. Streshnev, "Na novyi uroven' integratsii," *Krasnaia zvezda,* 21 April, 2004.

Kazakhstan comes 13th (11th by Astana's official figures) in the world as far as oil reserves are concerned and is the second, after Russia, oil producer on former Soviet territory. It accounts for about 60 million tons of oil production and is resolved to reach the figure of 100 million by 2010-2012 and 150 million by 2015. Control over energy resources and transportation means is easily translated into strategy and economic tools.

One of the key pipelines, Central Asia-Center, which brings Uzbek and Turkmenian gas to the Russian Federation, Ukraine, and the Southern Caucasus, runs across Kazakhstan.

Uzbekistan is another important Central Asian state. Moscow has wrung dry the advantages supplied by the withdrawal of America's support of President Karimov because of the human rights violations by his government. Russia formalized its economic and military agreements with the republic, which strengthened its position in the Republic of Uzbekistan and in the region as a whole. Under this agreement, the countries will work together on a wide-scale security system that will involve their defense ministries, the ministries of foreign affairs and the interior, and the security councils to oppose terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, drug trafficking, and organized crime.

By reviving, after a six-year interval, its CSTO membership, Uzbekistan radically changed the geopolitical game in the region. Today, four out of the five states (with the exception of Turkmenistan) are in the CSTO's influence zone, which gives Moscow a much better chance of gaining more weight in the region.

Gazprom is producing gas on the Shakhpakhty gas field[12] and is prepared to invest up to $1,500,000 million in the Ustiurt gas fields in Uzbekistan. The Russian company has already bought up almost the entire transportation capacity of the region up to the year 2010: for at least three years Moscow will remain the monopoly buyer of Central Asian gas.

It should be said that hydrocarbon reserves (gas in particular) are not Uzbekistan's only trump card: Russia's light industry largely depends on Uzbek cotton; the country is the world's ninth gold producer and is in the first ranks of uranium producers. There is the opinion that today the republic is the world's third largest uranium exporter and the fifth largest uranium producer with the seventh largest uranium deposits in the world.[13]

On the whole, there are a great many economic ties between Russia and Central Asia.

Russia's vital interests in the Central Asian raw material complex can be described by the words: hydrocarbons, uranium, steel, gold, rare earth metals, aluminum, cotton, etc. This means that Moscow should always keep its economic interests in mind in a region rich in natural resources and, at the same time, should tread with caution so as not to be accused of neo-imperialism.

Proper defense services do not come cheap. Russia's effective policy should be placed on the firm basis of a wide economic presence and large-scale and mutually advantageous economic projects. Genuine alliance relations require an economic basis—Moscow should take part in mining, it should have a share in the region's railways and highways, power lines, power generating facilities, and pipelines.

Moscow should build up its influence in the region and attract the local elites by investing in oil and gas prospecting and extraction; large loans; modernization of transport infrastructure, promotion of the Russian companies, and setting up JVs for the production and transportation of oil and gas.

Central Asia is strategically important for Russia's control over oil and gas production and their transportation to the Near Abroad. To avoid economic isolation Russia should build new pipelines in

[12] See: K. Aiapova, "Kranovaia diplomatia," *Delovia nedelia, Kazakhstan,* 11 February, 2005.

[13] See: D. Kholmatov, " 'Medvezhia usluga': SShA ne puskaiut evropeytsev k uzbekskomu uranu," *Transkaspiyskiy proekt,* 19 June, 2001.

Central Asia. Russian oil and gas companies have stepped up their involvement in Kazakhstan, an arena on which the world centers of power clashed over oil exports. This is true of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan as well.

A close alliance with Turkmenistan, still at the post-Niyazov crossroads, is vitally important for Russia. The European Union has already offered to pay Turkmenistan 1.7 million Euro for feasibility studies of the Trans-Caspian Pipeline project (TCP) to move gas to Europe via Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey. Earlier, shortly before President Niyazov's death, China (which by 2010 will import up to 80 billion c m of gas)[14] made Turkmenistan the offer of laying a pipeline across Central Asia with the future involvement of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Whether Ashghabad can fulfill its export obligations remains to be seen. So far, it remains an unpredictable state; no one knows whether its "old-new" leaders will stick to their obligations relating to new pipelines and gas deliveries.

The new president, G. Berdymukhammedov, hints that he is interested in the TCP project, which requires a trans-Caspian pipeline with an annual carrying capacity of 30 billion c m.[15] On the opposite Caspian coast it will join the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipeline and continue on to Europe through the Nabucco pipeline. For several years running, Europe and America lobbied a project that recently ran into a dead end. The EU shelved it until the spring of 2008. If implemented the project will bring Turkmenian gas to Europe bypassing Russia; it will become Gazprom's rival. It looks as if Moscow is prepared to go far in its opposition to the TCP and will not limit itself when choosing means and methods.

Russia has to implement a large set of measures to preserve its role of an energy superpower and to step up its influence in Central Asia. In May 2007, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited several Central Asian states to avert the TCP danger and to create a single energy system with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, a sort of an energy alliance in which Russia could control fuel exports to the world markets. By the same token, the Kremlin initiative will supply the Central Asian countries with wider access to the foreign markets and increase their export revenue.

The Russian Federation has entered into a long and exhaustive battle for its continued monopoly on the transportation of Central Asian fuels; it has already scored success: it was decided that an agreement should be drawn up by 1 September on building a Caspian gas pipeline with a capacity of 30 billion c m, construction is planned for the latter half of 2008. In addition, the Russian Federation undertook modernization and extension of the Central Asia-Center system (the agreement was signed by Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan).

In recent years the outlines of Russia's involvement in Central Asia has been changing: Moscow is seeking a stronger position by extending its involvement beyond the energy and transport-communication sphere to defense. It has already signed several bilateral and multilateral agreements with the region's countries.

Together with Russia's economic and military contacts, the Collective Security Treaty, transformed into the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), serves as another tool of Russia's influence; in fact it makes the Russian Federation the key "player" in this structure. Russia is also strengthening its position with the SCO.

To cement its regional position Russia should rely on the fundamental principles: its obvious territorial superiority should not remain the linchpin of Russia's strategy. Russia should continue with strengthening stability as one of the foreign policy cornerstones, which makes the economic and military tools most efficient.

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[14] See: N. Ziiadullaev, "Tsentral'naia Azia: konkurentsia i partnerstvo," *Nezavisimaia gazeta,* 2 July, 2007.

[15] See: A. Matveev, "V tsentre geopolitiki superderzhav. Ekonomicheskaia aktivnost' na Kaspii dopolniaetsia voennoy," *Voenno-promyshlennyi kur'er,* 20-26 June, 2007.

In the future, America's continued presence in the region and its influence will threaten Russia's interests. If the Central Asian states reorient themselves toward serving the West's interests, Russia's military, economic, and energy ties with post-Soviet Asia, which are critically important for Russia's national security, will suffer.

China's attempts to establish control over Asia are no less detrimental: Beijing's constantly mounting economic might and its military and economic influence may undermine Russia's interests in the mid-term perspective.

In view of the above, Moscow's new strategy in Central Asia calls for the harmonized interests of Russia and China, the two main "natural" guarantors of Central Asian stability; this process is successfully developing within the SCO and within bilateral cooperation.

It was suggested that a regional Energy Club (united energy expanse) should be set up within the SCO as an element of a global energy policy that would unite energy producer and energy consumer countries.

So far it seems that most of the local elites are much more attracted by Russia's determination to preserve stability rather than by accelerated democratization enforced from the outside. The absolute majority of the regional leaders prefer gradual economic and sociopolitical transformations—they are rejecting attempts to impose Western models. For this reason, Russia has acquired a "window of opportunity" that will not be closed at least in the short term. If used rationally, it can be used to preserve and even increase Russia's influence in Central Asia.