RUSSIA, THE U.S., AND THE EU: THEIR POLICY IN CENTRAL EURASIA

THE GREAT GAME IN THE EURASIAN HEARTLAND: A NEW SPIRAL

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Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union revived active geopolitical processes of regional and global dimensions across Central Asia. This could not but bring to mind the post-imperial past when the region was an arena for the great geopolitical game between Soviet Russia (which replaced the Russian Empire) and the British Empire.

Today, the situation is much more complicated in many respects. In the early 20th century, two main players operated in a region full of weak states (Afghanistan, the Bukhara Emirate, and the like). In the early 21st century, many more outside actors are involved: Russia, the U.S. and the E.U. complete with NATO, their military component, China, Iran, Pakistan, and India.

Within the region, all the local states (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) are actively positioning themselves as geopolitical entities of particular importance. Their elites have already formulated their national interests and are busy with fairly consistent strategies for their defense and promotion. The effects, however, vary depending on the countries geopolitical potential.

Afghanistan is another system-forming factor of regional geopolitics that affects, if not all, at least many of their aspects. This is a unique country that geopolitically belongs to three regions—Central Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia—while remaining, to a certain

extent, a sub-region with a development logic of its own.

The fairly vague nature of its geopolitical status is responsible for a great deal of spontaneity in Central Eurasian politics and the balance of forces. It is a unique geopolitical phenomenon: domination of one of the regional actors (for example, Pakistan, which prevailed there in the mid-1990s) tips the balance of forces in the neighboring regions and introduces a great deal of instability. The other regional actors are responding with more active involvement in the "Afghan developments:" Iran, India, and some of the Central Asian countries deemed it necessary to support the Northern Alliance against the Taliban with its Pakistani bias.

On the other hand, the ascent of one of the extra-regional powers over Afghanistan stirs up apprehension among all or at least a large number of the regional and some of the influential external actors. There is always the threat that one of the external actors might use Afghanistan as a springboard for geopolitical expansion. Iran and Pakistan, as well as the United States and China, were very concerned about the Soviet military presence in the country and shared the fears that Moscow might press southward, to the Indian Ocean.

In fact, the regional countries are fully aware of the potential threats to their "living expanses" (partially or completely connected with Afghanistan's strategic field) created by unilateral domination in Afghanistan of one of the external actors. We all know that the "living expanse" of any state is not limited to its borders—it spreads beyond them to the adjacent territories, the developments in which directly affect the state's political, economic, social, and ideological stability. Complete geopolitical autarchy is impossible: what goes on in one country inevitably echoes beyond it.

To achieve regional stabilization and a balance of interests of all the forces involved Afghanistan should be transformed from a geopolitical playing field into a full-fledged political entity. But this is highly unlikely at the moment: the country is a hub of too many problems. The future of all actors involved depends, to a certain extent, on how these problems will be resolved. Today Afghanistan should be regarded as a key factor of global geopolitics which determines the world's post-crisis image. This explains why the new U.S. administration has spurred on the Great Game around Central Asia and Afghanistan.

New Subtleties of the Old Great Game

Barack Obama campaigned with several fairly unorthodox foreign policy statements, including the future of America's policy in Afghanistan. He promised to make it one of his foreign policy priorities to reverse the generally negative developments and help Afghanistan complete the edifice of its democracy. So far, however, President Obama has not put forward any novel initiatives: he is still talking about sending more troops to intensify military activities and deliver a final blow to the Taliban. Thirty thousand more men are to be moved from Iraq where, according to the Americans, the situation has stabilized to a certain extent.

Early in 2009 it looked easy: acquire Congress' consent and start moving people and materiel along the familiar routes. At that moment the newly elected president was obviously unaware of the Great Game's inner logic. Today it has become even subtler than before—there are too many actors involved, which make forecasts next to impossible.

At first the White House was somewhat puzzled by the shifted accents of the Taliban's military strategy: it concentrated on interfering with military, foodstuff, and fuel deliveries for the American and NATO troops in Afghanistan and blocked the main roads between Kabul, other regions, and Pakistan.

The main blow was delivered to the Pakistan routes: 75 percent of the freight service goes across Pakistan (up to 600 containers every day and 3 million gallons of petroleum products). According to experts, the Western troops in Afghanistan need up to 70 thousand containers of various goods every day.

The Taliban tried to cut off the road between Peshawar and Kabul via the Khyber Pass to prevent the counterterrorist coalition from storing up enough military equipment and fuel to launch an offensive in the spring and summer. Since early December 2008, they have organized three large-scale attacks and managed to suspend deliveries.[1]

The American command insists that the attacks did nothing to undermine the combat-readiness of the American contingents while experts who rationalize on the basis of Taliban tactics believe that in the near future the situation might reach a critical point. In its December report the Senlis Council, an international think tank, informed that the Taliban was in control of 72 percent of the entire territory (compared to 54 percent in November 2007); they have established their administrative control in many of the southern and eastern settlements. Today they are moving to the north and northwest in an obvious effort to encircle Kabul.

There are large motor roads between the capital and the regions; three of them under regular Taliban attack. Experts have pointed out that the goods carried from Kabul to Kandahar via Vardak are attacked at the entrance to the province, 30 minutes away from the outskirts of Kabul. The Kabul-Logar road that heads south is not safe along essentially its entire stretch; nor is it safe to travel along the east-bound motor road that leads to Pakistan via Jelalabad where attacks can start just an hour out of Kabul. Of the two north-bound roads only one is completely safe—it crosses the Pandsher Gorge, negotiates the Salang Pass, and continues on north to Mazar-i-Sharif. The second road via Bagram is becoming increasingly dangerous as attacks increase.

The Senlis Council experts point out that the Taliban's tightened control over the roads allows it to move its bases closer to the capital, which is becoming less and less safe. Attacks, terrorist acts, and kidnapping of Afghanis and foreigners in Kabul and its environs are growing more and more frequent.

The Obama Administration was caught unawares for the second time when the Kyrgyz leaders decided to close down the Manas airbase in Bishkek.[2] The Americans planned to use it as the key transit point for troop movement and as partial substitution for the Pakistan route.

At a press conference during his Moscow visit President Bakiev (who came for talks with President Medvedev) announced that he had decided to close down the base. Later it was announced that the base would be closed gradually over a span of 180 days. Several official reasons were given: the Kyrgyz president reminded everyone that in 2001 an agreement had been reached that the American troops would stay for a couple of years; the American presence added almost nothing to the state budget because Washington ignored the repeated requests to pay more.[3]

Experts believe that Kyrgyzstan is trying to stabilize the situation very much shattered by America's refusal to hand over the American private guilty of murdering a Kyrgyz citizen employed at the base to the Kyrgyz authorities.

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[1] On 1 December, Taliban fighters attacked the Faysal transport terminal and destroyed 12 trucks that were moving armored Hammer off-roads to the coalition troops in Afghanistan. The attack took place in Peshawar in the northwest of Pakistan. An even larger attack followed on 8 December in the same area. Two hundred and fifty fighters destroyed a large convoy of 106 trucks moving foodstuffs and military equipment. Fuel tanks being taken to the American troops are regularly destroyed in the Khyber Pass.

[2] Under the U.N. mandate, the American airbase was deployed at Manas airport in December 2001 to support the Invincible Freedom operation. It has 1,200 U.S. servicemen deployed on a permanent basis, military transport aircraft, and fuel-supply planes.

[3] According to official information, Kyrgyzstan is rewarded a mere $17.5 million a year for the use of its base. According to CENTCOM Commander General Petraeus, the sum is much higher—at least $63 million. The Foreign Ministry of Kyrgyzstan insists that since 2001 the country has not been receiving anything for navigation while the United States has never paid either customs dues or taxes. These questions were regularly raised by Kyrgyzstan and were as regularly declined by the United States.

Three parliamentary committees (for international, constitutional, and defense affairs) of the Kyrgyz parliament agreed that the base should be removed. Later, on 19 February, the parliament supported this decision with 78 votes for, 1 against, and 2 abstentions. The decision could have passed with 46 votes out of the total 90.

The White House found itself facing two unexpected problems in Afghanistan where, from that time on, it had to deal with Russia and Pakistan, two countries with which the previous administration had dealt summarily. The new president had either to readjust the old practices or face the mounting isolation of the American troops in Afghanistan.

The American expert community was the first to offer its comment on the Manas-related situation: it detected Moscow's hand in Bishkek's actions on the grounds that President Bakiev's statement came together with an agreement on unprecedented Russia's financial and economic aid.[4]

Defense Secretary Robert Gates was much more evasive. Russia was acting in its interests and trying to wring dry the base closure issue, said he. He also pointed out that the base was very important for moving freights and personnel from the U.S. to Afghanistan where the American military presence would be doubled in the next twelve months. The defense secretary said that, on the one hand, Russia declared that it was ready to cooperate with America on the Afghanistan issue; while on the other, it was working against the U.S. at least in the case of the base which was of great importance for America.[5]

The Russians, in turn, insist that as a sovereign state Kyrgyzstan is free to make any decision it wishes; as for the financial and economic aid, it was extended within the allied obligations. Indeed, Moscow could not abandon its ally to cope with the acute economic crisis on its own.

Some Russian experts have openly admitted that the closure served the interests of Moscow and Beijing. Andronik Migranian, for example, has pointed out that the American administration is involved in many things that Moscow does not like and described the closed base as the Kremlin's trump card. He added that while the CSTO was developing into a powerful military-political organization, the base of a country that belonged to another military structure in the territory of one of the CSTO members could not be accepted. The Russian expert said in so many words that the "closure of the Manas military base should be regarded in the context of Russia-NATO and Russia-U.S. relations" and that this act can be interpreted as an answer to the question "how should Russia build its relations with NATO and America when it comes to Afghanistan?"[6]

Manas as a Result of Geopolitical Processes and Their Catalyst

Seen in the Great Game context the Manas issue does not look like a random decision. From the viewpoint of the U.S.-Russia rivalry across the post-Soviet expanse and in Eurasia, the efforts to cut short or at least limit America's presence in Kyrgyzstan are absolutely logical: they reflect the entire gamut of the deep-cutting contradictions that resurfaced during George W. Bush's second term.

[4] Moscow announced, in particular, that it would extend a grant totaling $150 million, as well as $300 million on easy terms to be repaid in 40 years at a 0.75 percent interest rate with a 7-year grace period. The loan should be used to set up a stabilization fund. Moscow agreed to write off Kyrgyzstan's debt of $180 million in exchange for 48 percent of Dastan's shares, a company that produces equipment for torpedoes. There is information that Russia was prepared to take part in the construction of the Kambarata-1and 2 hydropower stations on the Naryn River.

[5] See: "Pentagon: politika Moskvy vyzyvaet bespokoistvo, no bez Rossii ne oboitis," *Vesti.Ru*, 19 February, 2009.

[6] "Kirgiziia vystavliaet amerikanskuiu bazu 'za dver,' a obidetsia za eto SShA mogut na Rossiiu," available at [www.prime-tass.ru], 19 February, 2009.

This logic belongs to the changes in Russia's policies in the sphere of its vital interests. Today, Moscow is obviously more determined to defend its interests which, as could be expected, increased tension in American-Russian relations. This became especially obvious in 2008.

President Medvedev countered Washington's continued attempts to set up a third missile defense positioning area in Eastern Europe with the statement that Russia was prepared to deploy its tactical Iskander missile systems in the Kaliningrad Region and target them at the radar in the Czech Republic and the interception missile bases in Poland. The Russian president did not mince words:

- first—there would be no concessions on this issue if America went ahead with its plans and,
- second—Russia would be ready to abandon its plans if America abandoned its.

The Russian-Georgian war produced another no less uncompromising clash in 2008. Russia acted promptly and harshly, which came as a surprise to the world since it was the first time in post-Soviet history that the Russian army had fought outside its territory. A second surprise followed the first: Moscow recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, established diplomatic relations with the former Georgian territories, and guaranteed their security.

At that point the tension reached unprecedented heights: American and NATO battleships entered the Black Sea. Russia reciprocated by sending its battleships to Latin America. Despite the statements that military exercises with Venezuela and visits to Nicaragua and Cuba had been planned well in advance, in the context of the war in South Ossetia this looked like a deliberate measure. This was when the announcement came that Moscow might block off the northern route to Afghanistan.

The third crisis in Russian-American relations was caused by another gas conflict between Moscow and Kiev in late 2008 and early 2009 fanned by Ukraine's gas debts and discontinued transit of Russian gas to Europe across Ukrainian territory. Some analysts believe that the crisis went far beyond the limits of bilateral economic relations. Several reasons for the crisis can be offered:

- The attempt to convince Europe to support Russia's Northern Stream and Southern Stream projects;
- The desire to demonstrate that Ukraine was an unreliable partner;
- The intention to deprive the Orange leaders of the large hard currency profits they earned by selling Russian gas to Europe; the money thus gained was used for Orange political projects;
- The intention to reduce Ukraine's competitiveness and change the balance of political forces in the country.

Washington, which refrained from criticizing the Kremlin, remained one of the interested parties: at the height of the crisis the media reported that earlier, late in 2008, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Vladimir Ogryzko and U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had signed a Charter on Strategic Partnership under which Washington would modernize Ukraine's gas pipelines.

Washington's repeated attempts to secure NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia caused even more contradictions: this would have moved NATO close to Russia's southwestern border (the northern Black Sea coast with the larger part of Russia's oil and gas export pipelines included).

As a NATO member Ukraine would have been in a much better position to demand withdrawal of the Russian Navy from Sevastopol. This would have deprived Russia of all territories in the Caucasus and the Northern Black Sea coast, the result of two centuries of wars and territorial acquisitions. So far, Russia is standing firm in the face of American pressure, mainly thanks to Germany and France which refused to quarrel with Moscow over Georgia and Ukraine. Theirs is a pragmatic stand—NATO membership for these two post-Soviet states would have endangered the economic and energy components of Europe's relations with Moscow.

The Manas move perfectly fits the logic of the Russia-American rivalry. We can presume that this could apply to all the processes underway in Central Eurasia and may be used for bargaining with the United States on a wide range of problems. The fact that the base was closed immediately after Barack Obama became president suggests the intention to create a context in which the new president would be unable to follow George W. Bush's Russian policy.

Inertia is very strong in politics; rhetoric may change to create the illusion of a fresh start—it is very hard, however, to overcome inertia in the practical sphere. The closure of the Manas base did not wipe out the inertia, however it did force Washington to seek new alternatives. This is a novel situation in another respect: Russia, which has always merely reacted to America's moves in the past, is now taking the initiative. Washington is going to either have to talk to Moscow or to the other Great Game players, which will naturally demand considerable financial and other resources.

Russia and America: Possible Tactics

The rapidly approaching closure of the American base in Kyrgyzstan has created a fairly complicated balance of forces in Central Asia and Afghanistan, in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the northern Black Sea coast, and the Caspian area. In fact, in view of Russia's long-term interests of security and political leadership, the closed base is not a completely positive factor. It has improved Russia's geopolitical standing but left it vulnerable to the threats emanating from Afghanistan. The Taliban is gaining momentum in Afghanistan and is seen as a direct threat to Central Asian stability. To remain battle-worthy the Western troops must be sure of uninterrupted supplies, otherwise stability in the neighboring countries, and Russia, will be seriously threatened.

To stall off possible negative repercussions Moscow came forward with its own freight service—it offered the United States an alternative that has been successfully tested with other NATO countries, viz. moving non-military freights and personnel across its territory by air and railway. The United States has similar agreements with some of the Central Asian countries.

Moscow addressed two strategic tasks: on the one hand, troop supply will go on; on the other, the dangers of the Pakistani route make Moscow a monopolist where freight and personnel traffic is concerned. This might develop into a powerful tool of pressure in other spheres as well.

On top of this, Moscow is working hard to change the situation on its southern borders: for several years now their security has largely been ensured by the NATO troops fighting in Afghanistan. By placing its stakes on the CSTO the Kremlin intends to deprive Western diplomacy of its trump card. Early in February 2009, the CSTO Moscow summit passed a decision on setting up the Collective Rapid Response Forces (CRRF).

President Medvedev offered a detailed account of their aims. The new structure, said the president, would be used to repel military aggression, fight terrorists and extremists, organized crime, and drug trafficking, and liquidate the aftermath of emergencies. The summit decided to staff the CRRF with the best military contingents of adequate sizes and supplied with the latest weapons and military equipment. The Russian president deemed it necessary to stress that the new structure's fighting potential should be equal to NATO's corresponding structures.

Some analysts believe that the invitation to use Russia's air space and railway system for transit purposes says that the Kremlin does not want confrontation; it demonstrates, say analysts, its readiness to talk about productive and mutually advantageous cooperation, that is, to bargain.

The closure of the Kyrgyz base damaged the White House's bargaining position, which means that the American president will work hard to improve it before moving to the talks. This can be done if the situation in Afghanistan improves radically to reduce the heat of the hostilities: the international coalition will pull out some of its contingents. There are other possibilities: either the Americans continue using the base or another alternative to the Russian route is found. None of this is easy.

To achieve any noticeable progress in Afghanistan President Obama must "break the backbone" of the Taliban during the 2009 season to be able to switch to a national reconciliation process that should involve the Pashtoon leaders. We cannot but wonder whether President Obama will follow the tactics of his predecessor or offer a new variant.

Under President George W. Bush the United States tried several different things in Afghanistan: it placed the stakes on the Pashtoons as the core of the Taliban and tried to set up a Pashtoon Border Guard Corps staffed by volunteers from the border regions. It was expected to be 85 thousand strong with a budget of $350 million and armed with the latest Western weapons. The Corps was to be used to stem the flow of Taliban fighters and foreign terrorists. So far, there has been no progress for several reasons.

- First, the skeptics doubted that the borderland Pashtoon tribes would fight co-religionists, most of them being Pashtoons. The Pashtoon chiefs fear the Taliban: it is responsible for several murders of tribal chiefs loyal to the West.
- Second, the latest weapons entrusted to the Pashtoons might spread across the region and reach the Taliban fighters. Pakistan cannot accept this: continued militarization of the borderland tribes threaten its stability and territorial integrity.

In 2008, still under the old administration, talks with the "moderate" Taliban leaders were gradually gaining popularity; it was believed that they might be tempted with posts in the official power structures in Afghanistan. Realization of this idea proved harder than imagined: the Taliban ranks remained united with the exception of small groups of fighters who changed sides. It seems that the failure is rooted in the psychology and logic of Oriental warfare: those ready to talk and to accept concessions are seen as weaklings.

In turn, having failed to exercise any of the novel approaches, the George W. Bush Administration had to go back to the use of force in the form of bomb strikes on the border regions of Pakistan: according to military intelligence, Taliban fighters had set up their bases there. This did nothing to improve the situation in Afghanistan and worsened America's relations with Pakistan.

It is commonly believed in the West that the present stakes on building up military force in Afghanistan and ensuring the Taliban's military defeat is the only realistic option. The United States should do everything in its power to stop the Taliban, which is spreading its control far and wide, and pave the way to presidential elections. These are short-term goals. In the long-term perspective the stakes on force are not unanimously approved especially if America follows the tactics of the previous administration of spreading the hostilities to the borderland of Pakistan.

Zbigniew Brzezinski was very open about this in his interview to *Le Figaro*. He suggested caution so as not to turn the problems with al-Qa'eda into problems with Pakistan. We all know, said he, that there were al-Qa'eda shelters in the areas over which Pakistan had virtually no control, but the Americans should distinguish between them. The Taliban and al-Qa'eda, Mr. Brzezinski specified, should be treated separately to arrive at a constructive strategy with the Taliban, a rather coarse and backward movement limited to Afghanistan and not a global terrorist structure at all. The American politician insisted that the United States should prevent its operation (at first hailed by the locals) from turning into a great disadvantage. He said that troops could be dispatched in any region but this should not be the main target. Americans should seek a political solution to detach the Taliban from al-Qa'eda

and arrive, at least in some places, at a political agreement with the Taliban leaders in exchange for their divorce with al-Qa'eda.[7]

In its editorial of 18 February, 2009, *The Washington Times* offered a fairly radical assessment of the "building up force" policy in Afghanistan. It pointed out that in recent years the size of the military contingent in this country has been increasing while the situation has been steadily deteriorating. The newspaper reminded: "But boots on the ground are not a panacea. It is worth noting that as troop strength has increased in recent years, conditions have grown worse. In 2001, Afghanistan was a model of success for a 'small footprint' war characterized by coalition success in working with tribal leaders, augmenting their forces with critical capabilities such as intelligence and fire support.

"In this way the Coalition was able to gain functional control over Afghanistan, a larger and more populous country than Iraq, with a fraction of the force used in Operation Iraqi Freedom."

The article looked at Soviet tactics in Afghanistan: "A far greater error than over-reliance on troops in Afghanistan would be to pursue unrealistic goals. This was the root cause of the Soviet defeat. Contrary to popular belief, the Soviet Union did not rely exclusively on military power in their Afghan war. A close reading of the Soviet counterinsurgency strategy shows that they avidly pursued political reforms, economic development, infrastructure improvements, education and all the other elements of what is now the 'smart power' agenda. Rather, Moscow's original sin was in trying to create a stable, socialized Afghanistan with a strong central government. Central control is inimical to the Afghan political culture and way of life. No amount of military power or political bargaining could bring that about. The harder the Soviets tried, the more people resisted."

The Washington Times did not merely analyze what America was doing in Afghanistan but also offered its recommendations: renouncing the "centralization" stakes and better relations with tribal chiefs as much more appropriate in the context of the country's political traditions: it had never known strong central power and always resisted those who tried to impose it on the nation.

"Dealing with Afghanistan requires accepting a level of ambiguity that may be beyond the Democrats' philosophical predilection for bureaucratic centralism," *The Washington Times* goes on. "If the U.S. seeks to make Hamid Karzai or his successor into an Afghan bureaucratic potentate, we will find ourselves in the same situation the Soviet Union faced, a never-ending struggle against a determined people defending nothing less than their freedom."[8]

Prompt stabilization is not President Obama's only concern. He needs supply routes alternative to Russia that would prevent any weakening of America's position in Central Eurasia and in the continent's other strategically important regions. Washington needs new bases for its troops and logistics. Without this, consistent supply of the contingent in Afghanistan would be next to impossible.

Here another geopolitical factor of the Great Game—the position of the Caucasian, Central and South Asian, and Middle Eastern countries—comes into play. I have already written that today the Great Game, with a much larger number of players, is more complicated than before. Together with the great powers, the regional states are involved with interests of their own and an ardent desire to extract the maximum profit from the geopolitical processes.

What can the U.S. Administration do to resolve the transportation dilemma? Besides the Russian alternative, it has two options: restored security along the Pakistani route and a new route bypassing Russia along the Caucasus—Central Asia—Afghanistan line. Both will call for considerable foreign policy adjustments and huge spending.

There is the opinion that restored security is possible if cooperation with Islamabad (similar to that during President George W. Bush's first term) is completely returned. President Musharraf sided

[7] See: Brzezinski: "Esli Amerika ne smozhet spravitsia, to ostalnoi mir i podavno," *Le Figaro*, available at [http://www.inosmi.ru/stories/08/11/05/3535/247550.html].

[8] "Lessons from Soviets in Afghanistan," The Washington Times, 18 February, 2009, available at [http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/feb/18/lessons-from-soviets-in-afghanistan/].

with the Americans by abandoning his earlier recognition of the Taliban and depriving it of his country's support (Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the U.A.E. officially recognized the Taliban regime in Afghanistan), which was undoubtedly conducive to the coalition's prompt victory.

Over the course of time, the relations between the two countries deteriorated: the barely controlled borderland Pashtoon territories were teeming with Taliban and foreign fighters who set up their bases there and destabilized the situation in Afghanistan. In an effort to avoid even worse relations with the West and to quench Washington's and Kabul's incessant protests, President Musharraf, in turn, dispatched a 70-thousand-strong group, but failed to achieve his aim because of the stiff resistance put up by the Waziristan tribes. Faced with the threat of a wide-scale Pashtoon revolt that might destroy the country, the central powers had to sign an agreement with the tribes of Waziristan on a cease-fire and exchange of pows. Neither Washington nor Kabul liked this.

In view of the highly negative developments, those in the White House and the Pentagon who believed it expedient to move the military operations to the border regions of Pakistan strengthened their position: missile strikes on the border regions became a regular feature, which Islamabad interpreted as a violation of its sovereignty. The local people were not happy either: each strike killed civilians along with the fighters.

The widening gap between Washington and Islamabad cost President Musharraf his post: he was replaced with pro-American Asif Ali Zardari, while the Americans moved toward geopolitical cooperation with India. Contrary to expectations, the new president of Pakistan did not extend the official agreement on America's operations in the border area and failed to stabilize the situation there with his country's armed forces. The situation in the country's west was deteriorating: American transits were more threatened than ever before while terrorist activity in Pakistan was mounting. Today the convoys are threatened not only in the mountains but also close to Peshawar, the transportation hub.

This suggests a question: Will the United States be able to improve the convoy-related situation if it restores Pakistan's status of America's main regional strategic partner (and readjust, by necessity, its Indian strategy by downplaying some of its aspects)? The Americans will have to abandon the missile and air strikes on the border areas, which undermine the authority of the new president and add weight to the radically-minded Pakistani politicians and the military.

It seems that the American administration will not return to the old strategy: its Indian trend looks like a long-term one in South Asia. India is a regional power with dynamic financial, economic, and military sectors; it is actively developing into an unquestioned leader of South Asia. The economic potentials of Pakistan and India are incomparable: while the former can hardly pay for its oil import the latter is justly regarded as a locomotive of global economic growth. This means that Washington will hardly abandon its Indian policies pursued with vaster geopolitical aims in view for the sake of its transit in Afghanistan. The United States might return to its former Pakistani policy if those in the Indian establishment who oppose too close relations with Washington triumph.

Washington will hardly abandon the tactics of strikes on possible terrorist bases on the Pakistani side of the border especially in the context of President Obama's tactics of building up the military contingents and adding vigor to the hostilities. These tactics will be pretty useless without strikes on the bases of fighters in Pakistan; the Americans might find themselves in a quandary similar to that of the Soviet troops. They will liquidate fighter groups but will never defeat them because they are trained and recruited outside the Americans' reach, which makes the rebel movement resilient.

The Obama Administration will not change its policy in the above respects (at least in the near future). Economic aid is all the Americans can offer Pakistan in return for more resolute actions against the Taliban and security guarantees for the transit convoys.

In principle, Pakistan can help the United States to certain extent in exchange for financial aid: top Pakistani officials have already confirmed this. According to adviser to the prime minister of Pakistan Shaukat Tarin, in the last 9 months his country had spent $1 billion on the anti-terrorist struggle;

every month the budget spends $150 million on antiterrorist operations in its own territory. He asked the United States to repay the money and referred to an agreement under which Washington had pledged to allocate $100 million every month for antiterrorist purposes. He also pointed out that his country had not received America's contributions since May 2008. The prime minister assessed the cost of the antiterrorist operations in the northwestern regions in the last fiscal year at $8 billion.[9]

The question of transit across Pakistan looks fairly complicated, which makes the northern route bypassing Russia a priority; for several reasons the White House has no other alternative to this route.

So far, the U.S. is having no problems gaining permission to transit freights through Central Asia, one of the key components of the bypassing route. Washington has already reached agreements with several Central Asian countries on non-military transits. The bulk of them will be moved across Tajikistan where a bridge across the Pianj had been built with American assistance (its carrying capacity is 1 thousand trucks a day). Americans expect to move from 50 to 200 containers daily. They have to complete this with Caucasian transit.

Some experts believe that this route is technically and economically inadequate: the freights will be moved across the unstable Caucasian region and will have to be reloaded twice, on both Caspian coasts, to be moved across Central Asia.

The route across Russia is much more practical, despite its disadvantageous geopolitical aspect for the U.S. Trains loaded in Riga will cross Russia to reach the Afghan border without reloading. This is the second best alternative after the best one: 1 thousand kilometers from Karachi to Afghanistan, but it is much more secure than the Pakistani route.

Transit rights are not all: America needs logistic bases complete with transport infrastructure directly at the Afghan border. This is extremely important because all American bases (including Bagram) are vulnerable to Taliban attacks. Many of the bases to the south of the Hindu Kush can be blocked off—this happened during the Soviet invasion when the fiercest battles were fought for control over transport communications.

American diplomacy obviously wants to know whether the Central Asian countries will permit the United States to deploy its bases on their territories. The Central Asian countries concerned with regional stability and security should help America and NATO—they all, Kyrgyzstan included, know this.

Those who support the idea of logistics bases on their territories insist that the situation will not improve if NATO is defeated in Afghanistan or just pulls out. In either case, the struggle between the Pashtoon Taliban and the remnants of the Northern Alliance (which represent the national minorities) will resume. As soon as NATO pulls out, the old contradictions will resurface and take the country back to the late 1990s.

Regional forces will move in to fill the vacuum in Afghanistan: they will have to do this to keep the regional balance of forces intact. The vicious circle can be broken only by concerted efforts from certain hypothetical benevolent actors.

If NATO is defeated or just draws back, the Central Asian countries will be left to their own devices—there will be no southern transport corridor or a secure southern border.

There is a third possible variant: the Taliban's restored control over the entire country will make the situation unpredictable. A large number of foreign fighters in the Taliban ranks might try to transform Afghanistan into a large training base for a "terrorist international," which will undoubtedly upset the balance in the neighboring countries. This will push Central Asia to the forefront of the struggle for Central Eurasian security. It will be hard, if possible at all, to seal off the long mountainous border stretches between Afghanistan and Central Asia, which means that the regional countries should side with the United States and NATO and help them as best they can.

[9] See: "Pakistan potreboval ot SShA oplatit voinu s Talibami," available at [www.centrasia.ru], 23 February, 2009.

Those who object to NATO bases in Central Asia have their own, no less weighty, arguments. An expanded NATO military presence in the region will turn it into an arena of uncompromising geopolitical rivalry because of the obvious fact that the global balance of forces is radically changing before our very eyes.

Indeed, eight years ago the United States was the only superpower with a dominating position on the international arena and unclaimed geopolitical initiative both in Central Asia and Afghanistan. Today, there are at least two other centers of power—Russia and China—which have become strong enough to snatch the initiative. This means that NATO's wider logistics in the region will be confronted by more active geopolitical rivals than ever encouraged by the weaker position of the "world hegemon." The Central Asian neighbors will not let this chance slip away from them either.

Those who object to NATO bases in Central Asia suggest the following solutions.

- First: if foreign bases in the region are inevitable their distribution should not give any of the leading geopolitical forces domination over others. This can be described as establishing a "direct balance of forces." Until recently, Kyrgyzstan with two bases (an American in Manas and a Russian in Kant) was pursuing this policy in an attempt to reduce the pressure of the geopolitical rivalry and obtain real political and financial dividends.
- There is another option: no foreign bases in the region, active foreign policy balancing with a full awareness that a stable balance is impossible by definition. This requires virtuosic diplomatic skills, otherwise the results might be highly negative. Ukraine is a recent and pertinent example. President Kuchma, at one time, tried to balance between Russia and the United States, blundered and failed. Washington won that round but the situation might change. So far Ukraine with its shaky political and economic systems remains a field for open geopolitical confrontation.

If Central Asia opts for the second alternative it must combine two different aspects. On the one hand, it must take care not to become a zone of direct geopolitical conflicts (which can be done by stationing foreign bases in its territory); on the other, it must preserve partner relations with the world's leading actors involved, in one way or another, in the stabilization efforts in Afghanistan.

This is possible only if a three-element geopolitical structure appears to the north of Afghanistan: the U.S./NATO (directly involved in the stabilization efforts and serving as a counterweight to Russia); Central Asia (logistics and transport support), and Russia (logistics and transport support as well as a counterweight to the West). The relative stability of such a system is possible only when all the states of the region will become a single geopolitical macrosubject.

So far the region remains disunited: it is a mixture of several actors with different levels of geopolitical subjectivity which cannot compete, in many respects, with the Russian Federation and the United States. The local states' different potentials and their diverging goals and interests in the geopolitical games underway in the region create the most favorable conditions for external actors pushing into the region and developing it into a Great Game field.

Conclusion

We can say that in the short-term perspective Afghanistan will remain the Great Game axis; in fact its role is extremely important for the future of the Eurasian policies of the United States and NATO, Russia, the Central Asian countries, Pakistan, and Iran. In the new round of the Afghan-Central Asian game, which began when Barack Obama was elected president, Russia has already passed the ball into America's court. This has strongly affected the entire range of their bilateral relations. It is for the United States to continue the game.

On the whole, the Great Game around Central Asia and Afghanistan will go on; the stakes are high and rising while the resource base of practically all the large external and regional actors is rapidly contracting under the pressure of the exacerbating world economic crisis. This makes the situation even less predictable than before with forecasting becoming a much more challenging task. Surprises cannot be excluded, nor can new and baffling temporary or more or less durable geopolitical alliances and cooperation alternatives.