

The Game in Central Asia - Russia part 5

If Russia strives to become a global superpower it must first achieve its regional supremacy in the post-American world

First diplomatic routes between Russia and Central Asia can be traced back to the fifteenth and sixteenth century. Diplomatic relations were established between Moscow and the Kazakh Khanate primarily for securing trade routes which were crossing the region of the Khanate and Central Asia. With this, naturally came the expansion of the Russian Empire into Central Asia searching for cotton and possible access to the Indian Ocean. At the beginning of the nineteenth century came the "Great Game" and the rivalry with the British Empire. In that period of time the region of Central Asia represented a vast landmass which great powers perceived as a potential trophy that has yet to be conquered. Russian influence from the north and British presence on the Indian subcontinent naturally converged in Central Asia. Back then (and even today but in a different form) great World Powers were battling for their sphere of influence on a very important geostrategic field rich with resources, which has also served as a ground link between East and South Asia and Europe. With the coming of the twentieth century the rivalry gradually subsided whereas the peoples of Central Asia were integrated in the Russian Empire and later into the Soviet Union.¹

The Soviet hold over Central Asian states lasted more than seventy years, today even after their independence many countries of the region are still bound to Russia in terms of politics, economy, culture while large parts of populace who are Russian are still present in these lands. However in the Republics the Soviet legacy was carried on mainly by the political elites who remained in power even after the dissolution of the USSR, best examples of this are the former President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev and the former President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov who have continuously held the reins of power from the later era of the USSR and onto the newly independent Republics. Despite this the Russian interest for its former Republics in the nineties immediately after gaining their independence was rather low or non-existent, some even argued that China at that period of time began to penetrate the region and establish its economic presence. One of the reasons why Russia neglected its backyard in the nineties was mostly due to the beliefs of the first-wave democrats who deemed important to get rid of the authoritarian Communist legacy in total, which was at that time still present within the political elites of the Central Asian Republics.² Nevertheless Russia is still a natural powerhouse

¹ R. Kulnazarov, 2015. New Geopolitical Role of Central Asia within Foreign Policy Interests of World Powers, *Asian Social Science*, Vol.11, No. 12, pp.125-126 (file:///E:/downloads/42171-166321-1-PB%20(1).pdf)

² W. Gorecki, 2014, Ever further from Moscow - Russia's stance on Central Asia, *OSW Centre for Eastern Studies*, No. 48, pp. 15, (http://aei.pitt.edu/58022/1/prace_48_ever_further_from_moscow_net.pdf)

of the region which was also confirmed by Putin's inauguration to power in the 2000 and its proactive Central Asian policies.

The Russian Central Asian policy was defined in the nineties, ironically enough in the same period in which Russia showed the least interest for the region, with the Primakov doctrine and Andrey Kozyrev's "*near abroad*" approach. The Primakov doctrine, although focused on a global geopolitical plain and the so called *zero-sum* game with the United States, played an important role in re-establishing Russia as a major factor in the CIS political field. The main design of the doctrine was to create a stable block of countries which could potentially challenge the power of the United States in the Middle East and Eurasia. The doctrine was focused on establishing close relations between Russia and China as well as Russia and Iran which is also evident in today's global politics.³ Although this partnership is dangerous for the US global aspirations it is still early to say if it can actually limit Washington's global reach. However the doctrine did manage to push Russia towards its former Republics or its *backyard* in Central Asia. In addition to his cunning governing Primakov also managed to establish Russia as the main security factor in the region. The second aspect of the Russian Central Asian policy is defined by the term or strategy of the "*near abroad*". The "*near abroad*" also signifies the territory of Russian former Republics or colonies which have gained independence after the dissolution of the USSR. During Andrey Kozyrev term as a foreign minister Russia took its first steps towards gaining the leverage in the energy and security sector in Central Asia. The "*near abroad*" is also very important because it forms an outer belt or a buffer zone around Russian territory. This is especially significant when looking at Russia's southern border with Central Asia or the so called Russian underbelly. Establishing a strong security presence in the region was and will be one of Russia's top strategic priorities. Furthermore, consolidating its power in its *backyard* Russia is also trying to preserve its place as the main energy exporter to Europe while also controlling the vast energy infrastructure in Central Asia left by the Soviet regime.

Russian political *modus operandi* throughout history was usually defined by "sticks and carrots", namely coercion was the main tool for the Russian political leadership to achieve its domestic or foreign agenda. However in the 21st century looking at Central Asia, although Russia is still the dominant security factor, Moscow cannot rely solely on the aspects of hard power to achieve its goals in the Heartland; simply because it's engagement is hampered by other players who are also dedicated to the region. To re-establish its presence in the area of Central Asia Russia needs to consider a different approach which can beside military and economic power also offer other values which come from a different aspects of political power. As Joseph Nye defines it "soft power rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others, or getting others to want the outcomes that you want".⁴ Soft power has never been a strong characteristic of the

³ A. Cohen Ph.D, 1997, The "Primakov Doctrine" Russia's Zero Sum Game with the United States, The Heritage Foundation, No. 167, pp. 1-6 (file:///E:/downloads/fyi167.pdf)

⁴ Joseph S. Nye, 2004, Soft Power - The Means to Success in World Politics, *Public Affairs First Ed.*, pp. 5 (<https://webfiles.uci.edu/schofer/classes/2010soc2/readings/8%20Nye%20Soft%20Power%20Ch%201.pdf>)

Russian foreign policy, maybe with the exception of the early Soviet period. Collapse of the USSR, mangled economy and a difficult period of re-positioning itself as a world power Russia mostly followed the hard power narrative. Liberal values, civil society, free market, democracy and mass media which have helped the westerners to build their soft power foundations have been largely absent in the Russian society. Nevertheless in the past decade Moscow acknowledged the importance of soft power as a crucial tool in the international relations for influencing and accomplishing political and strategic interests. After the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the USSR a certain kind of ideological emptiness or ideological vacuum can be seen in some of the former Soviet Republics. During the nineties the world was caught up with the growing globalization or the so called McDonaldization which was prompted by the US success after the Cold War. However, at that time Russia had many internal problems and simply couldn't manage to propagate any kind of soft power, not even to its *near abroad*. Luckily enough landlocked nature of Central Asian territory and the lack of information technology made the five 'stans mostly immune to this western trend. With the Putin establishment the rhetoric towards Central Asia and the whole CiS community quickly changed. With the new Kremlin the soft power became an important aspect of the Russian politics. Although much of the Russian perforation to the region is based on hard power (security, economy and energy) the soft power approach is ever more present. Russian conservative values are being welcomed by some parts of the populace, RT is a strong media machinery with impressive results and most importantly the ruling elite is still bound to Russia and has a tendency to take the characteristics of the Russian oligarchs. The elite factor is very important. Although many things have changed since the five 'stans became independent states terms such as civil society, political pluralism and developed democratic institutions are still somewhat absent in these countries. Further developing these pillars of a democratic society will directly endanger political elites of the five Republics, though western standard is tempting maintaining governmental power is apparently more important. Therefore the Russian model of democratic society or "*sovereign democracy*"⁵ represents a viable alternative for the political elites of Central Asia. These factors combined with strong military presence and active role of *Rossotrudnichestvo*⁶ allows Russia to position itself as one of the dominant powers in the Heartland.

Although at the moment we can observe that Russia is currently more interested and dedicated towards Syria and the problems in the Middle East as well as engaged in the Ukrainian turbulent state affairs the Central Asian arena is no more a backwater political matter for the Kremlin. One of the most important things which drives Russian interests in Central Asia is that the region still represents a pivot area of the Eurasian landmass and therefore it is crucial for

⁵ Sovereign democracy is a political term formulated in 2006-2007 as to counter and at the same time defend the conservative and to a certain extent authoritarian nature of the Russian political system from the Western model of liberal democracy and its pressure on the global society. The true nature of the term is somewhat vague and it lingers mostly among various Russian politicians.

⁶ A governmental agency that works within the frame of Ministry of Foreign Affairs which is dedicated for establishing and strengthening mainly cultural relations with the CiS countries. It was formed in 2008.

Russia and its self-perception as a global superpower.⁷ The Mackinder's idea of Heartland and its phrase "one who rules the Heartland controls the Eurasia" is deeply embedded into the Russian political thought. Also in a more modern global geopolitical concept Russian vision of multi-polar world order is that the United States leads the West, China is a dominant power in the East and for that reason Russia should possess its own geostrategic field which is in Central Asia. Other imperatives which are propelling Moscow to the region are security, economy and energy. Accomplishing these imperatives Russia strives to achieve dominant strategic influence over the Republics. In other words Russia wants to ensure that decision making in the 'stans is done under certain "rules", furthermore though it is impossible to permanently cut out outsiders from the "game" Moscow seeks to control and shape their interaction within the region. Whereas Moscow is keen on using military diplomacy (Crimea most recent example) in order to accomplish its strategic aspirations the use of economic instruments will prove to be a more efficient way to promote its politics in the area while also avoiding unnecessary coercion.

Security...

The political elites of the five 'stans were accustomed to the Soviet planned economy and the protection and security which the Red hegemon was providing. However, after the disintegration of the USSR the five Republics were left without the "caretaker" and were quickly plunged into the New Great Game. The leadership of these states largely lacked the experience to tackle and solve various security challenges which arose at that time and are still present whether they be domestic or external in nature. Brzezinski went even further describing the region as a Balkans of Asia, predicting a very turbulent post-independence period filled with ethnic tensions and possible proliferation of terrorism and Islamist fundamentalism. Although this didn't come to pass various asymmetric security challenges are evident and present in the region and its pretty uncertain if the current governments of the Republics are capable enough to handle them on their own. These security threats include Islamist extremism and fundamentalism, terrorism, organized crime and drug trafficking, ethnic tensions, poverty and general political instability which derives directly or indirectly from the latter. All these security hazards are interchangeably connected with the Russian domestic as well as external security interests.

With the independence came the revival of the faith in Central Asia. Many have voiced fears that the secularist states would succumb to the Islamist tide from Iran and Afghanistan. Strong secularist climate which was left by the USSR managed to smoothly integrate with the upcoming revival of the faith in the Republics, however in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Fergana Valley Islamist extremism and fundamentalism has taken its roots. The extremists in the region are usually portrayed as Wahhabi, although the Deobandi⁸ school of thought and the Taliban from Afghanistan made a large impact on the development of Islamist fundamentalism in the

⁷ Bobo Lo, 2015, Frontiers New and Old: Russia's Policy in Central Asia, *Russie Nei Visions*, No. 82, pp. 6-8 (https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/ifri_rnv_82_central_asia_bobolo_eng_january_2015_0.pdf)

⁸ Radical school of Islam originated from India in 19th century which also complements the Saudi interpretation of the faith.

region as well. The most prominent terrorist group in Central Asia which dwells on fundamentalist principles is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan or IMU. The group is situated in Tajikistan but its operations were mostly concentrated in Ferghana Valley and Kirgizstan. The group gained momentum with the Tajikistan's civil war and broaden its operations in the late nineties. It is believed that IMU heavily relies on drug smuggling, was supported by the Taliban and the Northern Alliance while also having connections with the highest echelons of power in Dushanbe.⁹ Although the group doesn't seem to emit any signs or aspirations towards extending its network and transforming into something like Al Qaeda, Islamic State or even Boko Haram IMU is still treated as a destabilizing factor with a solid growth potential. From the Russian perspective all illegal groups, especially extremist ones are treated both as terrorist threats as well as active participants in organized crime. These groups represent an external security threat for the Russian strategic assets in Central Asia (Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan, various research facilities, military bases and facilities in the region etc.) but also they are a major threat for the domestic Russian security landscape. Large amounts of heroin and other opiates produced in Afghanistan are shipped to Russia, criminal and terrorist groups are most likely smugglers of these illicit goods. Furthermore Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan as the least politically stable states are in the focus of Russian security forces. Tajikistan hosts Russia's 201st Motorized Rifle Division and the *Okno* surveillance space station located in Nurak while there are approximately 7,000 Russian forces deployed in the vicinity of Dushanbe, Kurgan-Tyube and Kulyob. On the other hand in Kyrgyzstan Russia is using the Kant Air Base as part of the CSTO framework. Although these facilities provide security both for the hosting countries and for Russia, there are differences in opinion on how should these facilities pay their rents. While the Kremlin sees this as a classic opportunity to outsource Tajikistan's and Kyrgyzstan's external security, therefore the Russian military is the only viable choice, Dushanbe and Bishkek see this as a rent seeking opportunity. Even though both sides have their arguments Russia as a super-power managed to maintain its presence mostly free of charge or by writing-off debts, hosting labor migrants, subsidizing both of these countries' economies etc; a common "altruistic" attitude of almost every big power. Nevertheless security assets in both of these countries are allowing Moscow to control the Northern Afghan border and flow of terrorist, extremist, drugs, weapons etc. which is headed towards Russia, while also helping maintain security and stability in both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

The other dimension of Russian security interests in Central Asia is perceived through SCO and CSTO as important regional organizations. Both of these organizations have a security/military aspect and both of these organizations are present and very interested in the countries of Central Asia. However, while Russia is the leading state in CSTO in SCO it shares its power with others, primarily with China. The dichotomy of Russian engagement in these regional organizations is also reflected in rivalry with China and Chinese interests in Central

⁹ Svante E. Cornell and Regine A. Spector, 2001, Central Asia: More than Islamic Extremists, *The Centre for International and Strategic Studies*, pp.193-197 (http://isdpr.eu/content/uploads/images/stories/isdpr-main-pdf/2002_cornell-spector_central-asia-more-than-islamic-extremists.pdf)

Asia. The SCO formally unifies half of the planet's population and has a significant portion of the world's GDP, although the organization focuses on economic matters it also has the military aspect which is a very important point; with the addition of four big players (China, Russia, India and Pakistan) which are all nuclear powers and all of them share interests for the region of Central Asia. On the other hand CSTO which is also a regional organization primarily focused on security is composed out of Russia and smaller countries which had formerly been a part of the USSR. Russia as a leader of the CSTO and an important member of the SCO has interests in both of these organizations, however while Russia can exercise its power in CSTO as a dominant state, in SCO its interests over Central Asia are usually conflicting with Indian, Pakistani and especially Chinese aspirations over the region. Russian membership in these organizations is developing a very interesting regional chessboard which is often overlooked from a global perspective.

Members of the CSTO are strongly bound to Russia and are heavily dependent on its security capabilities in order to upgrade, boost or expand their own. States such as Armenia are looking forward to Russia hoping to develop and get better military and support for their conflict with Azerbaijan, however not all members of the organization have such straightforward approach. The Republics of Central Asia have a bit more complicated relations within the CSTO and with Russia. As mentioned earlier certain states of Central Asia are bound to Russia in terms of security, namely the states of Fergana Valley (especially Kirgizstan and Tajikistan) simply cannot rely on their own military capabilities to tackle potential threats of terrorism or organized crime which involves heavy drug trafficking from Afghanistan. The overall political and security climate after the Arab Spring and the US withdrawal of troops in 2014 from Afghanistan also favored the Russians. The security environment further gave incentives for Moscow to spread its military influence over the region while potentially providing legal justification for Russian military interventions.¹⁰ This strategic layout might work for the time being but leaning on a single power, which is also a former hegemon with neo-imperial ambitions for providing security, inevitably deteriorates country's integrity while also limiting its other potential partnerships. The other option for Central Asian Republics is the SCO and its security framework. However the organization's approach towards security issues is much more "reserved", the Chinese non-interference stance towards other countries' internal affairs is also one of the guiding principles of the SCO. Furthermore China as an industrial giant is much more interested for the economic aspect of Central Asian policy which is also somewhat complementary with the Russian politics since Moscow wants to remain the prime security provider for the region. Moreover the lukewarm support which Russia got from the SCO after its interventions in Ukraine and Georgia may change in the future. Russia's preference for interference in its neighborhood is making it harder for China as well as the entire SCO to

¹⁰ R. Weitz, 2014, The Collective Security Treaty Organization: Past Struggles and Future Prospects, *Russian Analytical Digest*, No.152, pp. 2-3 (<http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/RAD-152.pdf>)

remain impartial to such issues pushing the organization to take a more pro-active approach.¹¹ If Beijing decides to change its policy of non-interference Chinese rapid economic expansion may collide with Russian strategic interests in Central Asia consequently imposing China's forces as potential security providers. Although this might be seen as a viable option for the 'stans to realign their security politics, from the Chinese perspective it would contradict one of the founding principles of the SCO. Namely among four perspectives¹² of the SCO, restoring and normalizing Sino-Russian relations and determining mutual balance between these powers is something Beijing strives from the very beginning of the organization. In fact if China would potentially "directly intrude" in the security sphere of Central Asia it would represent a direct action against the *status quo* in the area and the Russian interests in the region.¹³ Therefore Moscow will remain the key security provider in the region although Beijing may employ some *soft-balancing concepts*¹⁴ in order to bend the *status quo* in Central Asia in their favor. Lastly, the thing that propels Russian skepticism towards the SCO are the Chinese economic ambitions. Namely officials from Beijing are very persistent in their claims of integrating a free trade zone in the SCO while further channeling investments in infrastructure, commodities and energy resources in Central Asian States. These ideas and proposals are rising many eyebrows in the Kremlin. Moscow, despite its obvious partnership with China, is becoming increasingly wary of Beijing's expanding economic and political influence in the five 'stans. Therefore although Moscow wishes to deepen its presence in the SCO in order to forge a stronger cluster that can counter the US influence on the global stage it has no intentions nor desires to further accelerate Chinese economic expansion in Central Asia.¹⁵ Nonetheless as long as Russia and China have a common stance on global issues and perceive the West as the main adversary, both of these powers will try to remain in their framework of political movement thus not aggravating the other over regional issues.

Economy...

The diverse region of Central Asia which shares more than 70 years of common Soviet history with Russia is also a very important market for the Russian modern economy. Due to its landlocked nature and the absence of sea-ports some might think that the Heartland has less importance for Russia, however the Central Asia still keeps two significant characteristics that make the region interesting for Moscow's economy. Firstly the Russia still remains the pivot of

¹¹ *op. cit.* pp. 5-6 (<http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/RAD-152.pdf>)

¹² The other two include combating the three forces of evil (terrorism, separatism and extremism) and counterbalancing the United States.

¹³ V. Mihalache, Cooperation Vs. Competition in Central Asia, pp. 828-833 (file:///E:/downloads/CKS%202015_political_sciences_european_studies_and_international_relations_art.120.pdf)

¹⁴ The soft-balancing concept according to Robert Pape aims at opposing a leading state without involving a direct approach. It includes measures such as imposing a ban on using their territory, diplomatic movements, creating exclusive economic alliances and providing solutions through diplomatic collaboration.

¹⁵ A. Cooley, 2009, The Stagnation of the SCO: Competing Agendas and Divergent Interests in Central Asia, *Bernard Collage Columbia University*, PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 85, pp. 3-4 (http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/pepm_085.pdf)

the post-Soviet economic relations in the region and secondly the Central Asia will represent an important factor for the Chinese One Belt One Road initiative.

The Soviet Union made a decisive impact on the development and the evolution of the region's economy, hence after its dissolution came an evident weakening of economic ties between Russian Federation and the Republics of Central Asia. This trend was very persistent throughout the nineties where trade between the 'stans and Russia decreased more than tenfold culminating with the economic and financial crisis in the country. With the Putin's establishment and rapprochement between the Republics and Moscow the trade expansion naturally followed. While playing an important trading partner Russian economic engagement with each of the Republics varies to a certain degree. One of the heaviest dependents on Russian trade is probably Uzbekistan (gas and energy imports, although Turkmenistan is becoming an important alternative) while Kazakhstan has the largest volume of commodity trade with Russia due to production, transport and processing of hydrocarbons and the electric power industry. On the other hand Kirgizstan and Tajikistan although present still have a rather insignificant role in the overall trade within the region. To Central Asian countries Russia is perceived as a market which has demands for their products. Namely, the region's extracting, manufacturing and agricultural sectors can find buyers on the Russian market. Therefore Central Asian businesses and entrepreneurs have a sustainable interest maintaining and bolstering cooperation with the Russian Federation. The overall trade structure is dominated with energy products whereas Russia usually exports energy products while importing energy resources. This further implicates the Russian interests of controlling and maintaining control over energy resources in the region. Other commodities which fluctuate between Russia and Central Asia include: yarn, fabrics and clothing; iron and steel; various chemical products; ores and metals; food; but the trade is mostly being focused on fuels and machinery needed for energy exploitation.¹⁶ The last category is especially important for Russia. The Russian heavy machinery is welcomed by the states in the Heartland and the Republics represent one of the most important markets for the Russian heavy machinery. With these exports Russia is also paving the way for its own companies and technology in order to seize the markets of Central Asia in this industrial sector which is inevitably intertwined with the energy industry. Central Asian energy products (gas) are probably the most important imports since Russia usually re-exports them to Ukraine and to the rest of the Europe. Other imports include raw materials and intermediate products which are scarce in Russia and finished goods which are supplementing the domestic Russian products. All in all in comparison to the Chinese economic machinery and industrial production Russia is rather limited in terms of exporting and contesting Beijing's expanding trade. However in the energy sector and as a big market Russia will retain respectful position in Central Asian economic sphere.

¹⁶ I. Sinitsina, 2012, Economic Cooperation Between Russia and Central Asian Countries: Trends and Outlook , *University of Central Asia*, No. 5, pp. 6-17 (<http://www.ucentralasia.org/Content/Downloads/UCA-IPPA-WP5-RussiaInfluence-Eng.pdf>)

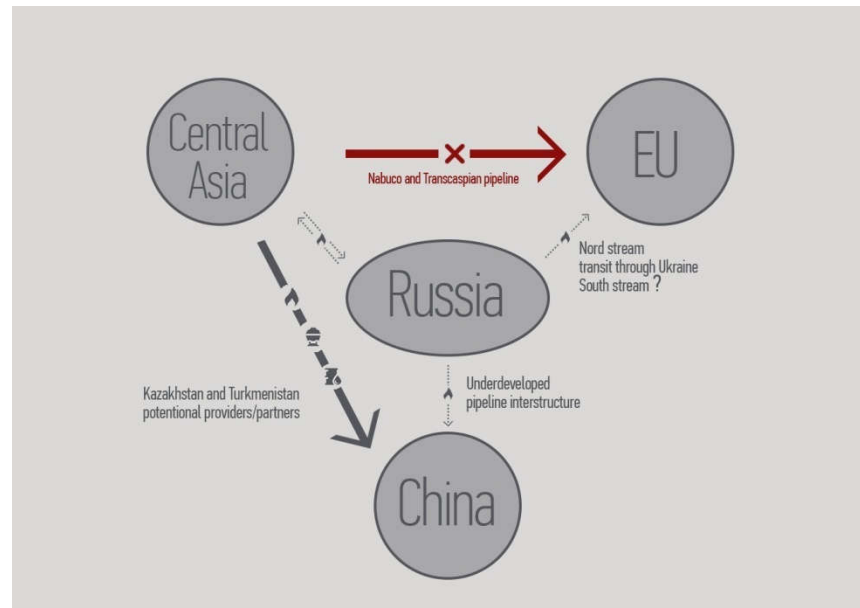
The second dimension of the Russian economic engagement in Central Asia is its position in the One Belt One Road Initiative, more precisely in the Chinese concept of the New Silk Road. The New Silk Road is primarily aimed at establishing a strong transport infrastructure (railways and seaports) and energy infrastructure in South and Central Asia thus expanding China's economic reach. The main goal that Beijing is trying to achieve with this initiative is to enhance Chinese economic expansion but also to keep the external markets open for the Chinese investments, although the vague nature of the principles on which this initiative is propelled further suggests that the Chinese officials also have other designs or intentions for this endeavor. It is also expected that The New Silk Road will help Chinese economy to bypass certain regional initiatives such as the Russian Eurasian Economic Union and potentially surpass any kind of customs union which can potentially make it harder or create an obstacle for the Chinese economy. Inevitably Chinese and Russian economic interests will collide in Asia, more precisely in Central Asia. Though from a first glance this might seem as a cause for a conflict between them since Beijing is challenging Russian hegemony in the region, it can also lead to cooperation between these powers in order to secure this area from the outsider's influence. The steps towards cooperation have been taken by the Russian government. After various summits and meetings during 2014 President Putin came with the vision of unified economic front which should be based on bi-polar and multi-polar trade agreements between Eurasian Economic Union, China, SCO, ASEAN as well as the EU also referred to as the "great Eurasian partnership". This venture which is intended to develop closer ties between Russia and regional organizations (primarily the EU) also has another, more subtle aim. The project of "great Eurasian partnership" or "Greater Eurasia" is trying to conceal the growing asymmetry in bilateral relations between Beijing and Moscow which is reflected mainly through economy and trade.¹⁷ The strategic goal of these projects would be to avoid geopolitical rivalry between Russia and China in Central Asia and to create a mechanism of a "non zero-sum game", as mentioned earlier both powers will try to maintain the *status quo* and eliminate any potential intrusion of the outside players, mainly the US. Although this will be hard to achieve in the economic sphere. China as an industrial giant will need to follow the natural laws of the market and trade. Even unintentionally China will slowly impose its self as the prime trading partner and supplier of commodities in Central Asia.

Energy...

Today energy is a tool of geopolitical competition as nuclear weapons were during the Cold War. Controlling the energy sector or being able to supply vast amounts of energy to other areas can determine national security, project power and even influence certain political decisions. The energy sector is vital to Russia, to a larger extent the energy exploitation allowed Moscow to re-emerge as a great power in the 21st century. Growing world's demand for oil but

¹⁷ Marcin Kaczmarek and Witold Rodkiewicz, 2016, Russia's Greater Eurasia and China's New Silk Road: adaptation instead of competition, *Centre for Eastern Studies*, No. 219, pp. 1-3 (http://aei.pitt.edu/78376/1/commentary_219.pdf)

especially gas allowed Kremlin to reposition itself on the global theatre using gas pipeline infrastructure to penetrate the energy markets of Europe, China and Central Asia. Energy dealings between these regions and Russia form a very interesting scheme of buyer-seller relations and a sophisticated mechanism of the one which exploits the energy and the others which are in a inferior position.



Russia as the energy superpower tries to maintain its position as a sole energy provider for the world's biggest consumers, China and Europe that is. However both of these regions are trying to lessen their dependence on the Russian gas and potentially find a new supplier of this commodity, Central Asian countries would be the most suitable providers. Nevertheless Russia won't easily allow a new competitor on the market which can potentially threaten its exclusive monopoly over energy supply. Here we come to the crucible of this conundrum:

- How can Europe and Central Asia bypass Russia?
- How can China establish suitable energy relations with the 'stans but not aggravate Moscow and its role as the main energy provider and an important partner?
- And finally how can Russia maintain its position as the main energy supplier?

More or less all these questions are mutually interconnected and cannot be fully disclosed since all these players are also dependant on one another not only in the energy sector. Europe's dependency on Russian energy is something that has been bothering western leaders for a long time. The EU is actively working on diversifying its gas imports and liberalizing its market, especially since the Russian-Ukrainian gas disputes and the Ukrainian crisis in 2014. For Russia these are not good news since it would disrupt Russian goals which are aimed at long-term

bilateral contracts, stable prices and captive markets.¹⁸ So far any attempts made by the Central Asian states to reach the European markets and design a suitable pipeline infrastructure to transport gas are on a shaky grounds. The Trans-Caspian (30 billion cubic meters of gas every year) pipeline and Nabucco (10-23 billion cubic meters of gas every year) pipeline which should transfer Turkmenistan's gas directly to Europe across Turkey are still far from completion. Instead Russia is again pressing for the revival of the South-Stream (estimated 63 billion cubic meters of gas every year), which is economically unfeasible, that can counter and replace the above mentioned gas pipelines. Evidently this is a political move, however this way Russia can preserve its status as a sole gas provider for the EU. As mentioned in the previous article about Central Asia and Europe (<http://strelok-analysis.com/analysis/game-central-asia-u-s-eu-part-2>), the EU as a marginal player in the region with geographical problems of accessing Central Asia can do little to influence or change the energy layout. Europe will remain dependant on Russian gas delivered via Ukrainian corridor or the Nord Stream, while Turkmenistan as the biggest Central Asian gas producer should look for partners in the East.

China's current and future energy needs are enormous, although it has significant coal reserves its consumption and expanding industry will devour it rather quickly. Similarly to other countries main suppliers of energy for Beijing are in the Gulf, however these energy routes are becoming costly and insecure. Recently Russia and Central Asia as providers of energy security are being welcomed by the Chinese officials as viable alternatives. Russia as an energy powerhouse (estimated 10% of world's crude oil and 30% of natural gas) sees China as an important opportunity to diversify its energy exports since most of the Russian gas is directed towards Europe. On the other hand there is a great deal of skepticism in both Moscow and Beijing if these energy endeavors will ever work. Beijing's skepticism grows because there is no developed gas-pipeline infrastructure in the East Siberia which could run directly southward to China and the ones that do exist are supplying Japan and South Korea, Chinese direct economical adversaries. However Moscow fears that China will use Russian energy potential to rapidly expand its economic growth while also moving in on the Central Asian oil and gas fields. Like with all great powers mutual cooperation is followed by envy and fear that the other might become superior. Nevertheless Moscow's fears are not unfounded, Chinese giant industry and its growing attention towards Central Asian States can threaten Russian pre-eminence in its "near abroad". Kazakhstan is already witnessing a substantial amount of Chinese investments in the energy sector and will probably become a key player in Beijing energy security mechanism. Turkmenistan, another gas-rich country, will engage Chinese petroleum firms via SCO or other bilateral or regional platforms.¹⁹ This regional energy integration, which seems that Beijing is striving for, can slowly push out Russia from the Central Asian energy market. However this

¹⁸ Alexandros Petersen and Katinka Barysch, 2011, Russia, China and the geopolitics of energy in Central Asia, *Centre for European Reform*, pp. 10-11 (http://www.cer.eu/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/pdf/2011/rp_010-4118.pdf)

¹⁹ Mehmet Öğütçü and Xin Ma, Growing links in energy and geopolitics China, Russia, and Central Asia, pp. 3-22 (<http://www.eisourcebook.org/cms/Links%20between%20energy%20&%20geopolitics,%20China,%20Russia,%20&%20Central%20Asia.pdf>)

would contradict SCO's and Chinese main objectives of stabilizing and developing good relations with Russia which would probably echo on their joint approach towards certain global issues. Therefore it is reasonable to expect that the Chinese petroleum corporations will maintain a more reserved approach when penetrating the Central Asian energy market, creating a healthy competition for the Russians but at the same time not usurping their dominance.

Concluding remarks...

Russian aspirations towards Central Asia are easily distinguishable, they are designed by geography, history, culture, economics which translate into a powerful rationale for Russia to keep a close watch over the region. Looking at a global geopolitical theatre Russia, as a country which is heavily restricted in terms of sea access, is naturally forced to expand onto the former USSR landscape or its "near abroad". However if it wishes to successfully expand it must put aside its traditional method of coercion and present itself not as a hegemon or a tyrant but rather as a guarantor of civil rights, democracy and economic prosperity. Not an easy task for Moscow, especially taking into consideration its history in Central Asia. India, Pakistan, Iran and Turkey as regional powers also have their interests set for the Heartland, although present their threat towards Russian supremacy is more or less marginal. On the other hand China as the rising global power and an industrial giant, not only threatens but can also change the status quo in the region and completely shift the balance of power in the five Republics. Relationship between Moscow and Beijing is very typical, while trying to be pragmatic and cooperate on as many fields as possible there are also deep rooted suspicions coming from various disputes in history. Russia is wary of Chinese economic and strategic superiority and it fears that further fueling Chinese economic ascent with raw materials, Moscow will become an "accessory" of Beijing's global rivalry with the US. This fear is also rooted in the one-sided nature of trade which these countries have. Although China is importing vast amounts of Russian raw materials, it does little to modernize and thoroughly develop Russian economic landscape.²⁰ This is further reflected on the Central Asian theatre. Chinese persistent and expected economic expansion is viewed as a threat from the Moscow's *zero-sum* mindset. Despite this, Beijing is thus far being consistent on creating a workable climate since it evidently has an interest in keeping Central Asia under Russian political and security umbrella.

Russia regards itself as a member of three geopolitical spaces: Eurasia, Euro-Atlantic and Asia-Pacific. All these geopolitical plains have a distinctive role in the Russian foreign policy agenda while also creating a rather flexible identity. Since Russia is heavily contained in two of these three geopolitical spaces, Moscow will focus its resources and interests on the Eurasian field and especially to the Russian *near abroad*. Russia strives to be recognized as a great power, therefore being a member of these geopolitical landscapes influences Moscow's foreign policy perceptions and its quest for the great power status as well as the country's place in the global

²⁰ Alexandros Petersen and Katinka Barysch, 2011, Russia, China and the geopolitics of energy in Central Asia, *Centre for European Reform*, pp. 14-16 (http://www.cer.eu/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/pdf/2011/rp_010-4118.pdf)

political arena. The Russian foreign policy discourse is heavily pressured by the regional geopolitical context, thus before achieving its great power status Moscow needs to secure its regional dominance first.

Part six coming soon...

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