



ORTA ASYA: REKABETTEN İŞ BİRLİĞİNE ÇİN-RUSYA İLİŞKİLERİ

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RUSSIA - CHINA RELATIONS IN CENTRAL ASIA: FROM COMPETITION TO COOPERATION

ÖZ Sovyetler Birliğinin dağılmasından sonra iki kutuplu sistemin de sona ermesi Orta Asya'nın içinde olduğu Sovyet dönemindeki Büyük Oyunu yeniden gündeme getirdi. Bu Yeni Büyük Oyun, uluslararası politikada oldukça sıradanlaştığı halde yeni aktörler de tarafları arasında yer almaya başladı. Bu bölgede, 1990'lı yıllardan itibaren ABD, Rusya ve Çin ile zaman zaman devreye giren diğer bir aktör ile bölge ülkeler arasında oyun sürmektedir. Söz konusu oyuncular, güçlerini ve etkilerini olabildiğince en üst düzeye çıkarmaya çalışırlar ve diğer oyuncuların daha etkili olmalarını engellemek için her şeyi yaparlar. Her oyuncunun kendisine göre avantajları/dezavantajları bulunmakta olup iş birliğini ilerletmek veya şartlara göre diğer oyuncular arasındaki çatışmayı teşvik etmek için çeşitli araçlar kullanırlar. Bu makale, Orta Asya'da Rusya ve Çin arasındaki ilişkilere odaklanmakta ve bu konudaki manevralarını tartışmaktadır. İlk bölümde Rusya ve Çin'in bölgesel rekabetteki konumlarını güçlendirmeye çalıştıkları politikalar tahlil edilmekte, daha sonra iki ülkeyi bir araya getirerek iş birliğine yönlendiren motivasyonlar ele alınmaktadır. Son olarak Rusya ile Çin için söz konusu iş birliğinin sürdürülebilir olup olmadığı analiz edilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Orta Asya, Rusya, Çin, Rekabet, İş birliği, Büyük Oyun

ABSTRACT The disintegration of the Soviet Union followed by the demise of the bi-polar world system appeared to revive the Great Game in ex-Soviet space including Central Asia. This new Great Game has taken a very recognizable feature but now it seems that it is being played out with the expanded set of actors. Starting from the 1990s, we have been witnessing game within games taking place in the region. The first game is played between the USA, Russia and China while the other one is played among the regional countries. The players try to maximize their power and influence and they do everything possible to prevent other players to become more influential. Each player has its own strengths/weaknesses and each one uses various tools in both furthering the cooperation or provoking competition with other actors according to the merits of the issue concerned. This article focuses on the relations between Russia and China and will discuss their objectives and maneuvering in Central Asia. In the first part, the policies whereby Russia and China seek to strengthen their positions in the regional competition will be analyzed, then the motivations that bring Russia and China together in their relations and led them to cooperate will be explained. Finally, the sustainability of cooperation between Russia and China will be explored. Here, the historical and geopolitical infrastructure of this competition and cooperation policies are discussed.

Keywords: Central Asia, Russia, China, Cooperation, Competition, Great Game



INTRODUCTION

Between two big powers, Russia and China, which are neighbors for the last two centuries in Asia, there are both many political and economic issues on which they cooperate and compromise and some other areas where they conflict and compete. After the invasion of Turkestan Khanates by Tsarist Russia, the neighborhood between Russia and China has expanded but the conflicting interests came into the agenda as well. Due to their geographic outlook most part composed of mountains and deserts, it was not only the drawing of the borders but also the spheres of influence issues became a very hot issue and even brought the two into the edge of a conflict. The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, brought both new opportunities and challenges.

The Russian Federation, which is the successor of the USSR wants to maintain its old status in many international issues. As it is well-known, bi-polar system, in terms of equilibrium, includes many games, deep compromises and it is regarded as a period where 'super-power interests' partnerships prevail. Although the conditions have changed now, the 'game' part of the international relations more or less remains and will remain the same. The structural, administrative and economical deadlocks of the Soviets brought the end of that superpower in the swamp of Afghanistan.

Although Russia, throughout 1990s strived to maintain its existence, with ascendance of Vladimir Putin to power on New Year's Eve 1999 (Trenin, 2005a), started to follow a more assertive foreign policy with the aspiration to regain Russia's super power status during the Cold War. Furthermore, the bad economic situation that the Russian Federation inherited from the USSR, declined even further. Russia experienced economic hardship in every aspect life. Russian Federation, after the demise of the USSR, had a difficult time in production, administration, education, health, transportation, in fact in economy in general. Much of the bad economic performance was the result of declining gas and oil prices up on which almost the entire economy relied. During 1990s. This created a life and death battle for Russia.

At the beginning of 2000s, not only Putin's personal success but also increase in oil and gas prices helped Russia to win the battle. And the sustainability of oil and gas prices more or less over 100 dollar's at least until recently, made Russia not only to re-stand its own feet again, but also to re-create its former relations, including Central Asia, with ex-Soviet Republics and spend more effort and energy to its near abroad policy.

However, the recent changes in the oil and gas prices, the sanctions put forward by the Western countries following the Ukrainian crisis and the dependence of Russian economy on the exportation of its sole commodity made the politicians in Kremlin to feel uneasy. The existing danger has two dimensions: First of all, as in anywhere in the world, there will be an end to these fossil fuels in Russia as well. This will need a few generations more to pass. The more alarming issue in this respect is the future of the prices of oil and gas. New energy producing actors have appeared on the scene. The USA is turning into a top energy exporting country with the discovery of large shale oil reserves. Furthermore, technological progress in shale gas exploration and extraction has made many countries to become less dependent on external energy supplies. From Canada to China, many countries have started to explore shale gas in their own countries and found some important reserves, and some even began producing it. Here it is important to note that shale gas is also a type of fossil fuel, different form of natural gas. Although it is expensive to explore and drill the shale gas, the concerned countries by bearing the expenses began to build the

necessary infrastructures. Again, the discovery of potential and proved resources in the East Mediterranean can also be regarded as an important recent development for the overall energy market.

All the above-mentioned developments make the Russia-China relations in Central Asia even more important topic for discussion. Central Asia is a natural sphere of influence area for both Russia and China and the existence and the discussions about the future of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, where both Russia and China are members, make the topic more interesting for both the academicians and policy-makers.

This article analyzes Russia and China relations in Central Asia. While dealing with the issue, although in some cases there will be some references to Russia-China relations in general, but definitely Russia-China relations in a border way will be out of the limits of that article. In order to analyze today's economic, political and military policies in the Central Asian geography, it is necessary to evaluate the historical and geopolitical framework correctly. In this sense, the geopolitical infrastructure of China, which is the counterpart of Russia's Eurasianism strategy, becomes Russia's strategic partner by 2010s is important. Although the US economic and energy policies have played an important role in the Russian Chinese convergence, historical and geopolitical dynamics are the main drivers of the relations.

THE GEOPOLITICS OF CENTRAL ASIA AND RUSSIA-CHINA RELATIONS FROM HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the second half 19th century, in the geopolitics of Turkestan, the main strategy should be the non-existence of any independent Turkish state in the region. That strategy was necessary for the sake of colonization and it was used against Kashgar state that stayed independent very shortly in Eastern Turkestan. On the other hand, Russia was tired of establishing its administration in Western Turkestan just after invading Khanates of Bukhara, Khiva and Khokand, and Turkmenistan, the region where Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan exist today.

During the same period in the Eastern Turkestan, Yakup Khan created an independent Kashgar state. China, due to its internal problems, could not deal with Kashgar. Therefore, Great Britain involved and applied its colonial cooperation strategy. In general, we can see one version of a 'Great Game' back in that period over Kashgar. Although Great Britain during the establishment of the Kashgar state, appeared to be supporting the Kashgar leaders, it soon became clear that Great Britain was actually cooperating with the abolishment of the first Muslim Turkish state. The more so that it gave credit to China. While Yakup Khan tried hard to have an alliance with Great Britain. However, Great Britain, despite sending committees, officials and merchants to Kashgar and signing many agreements always followed a diversion strategy. When the relations with Great Britain remained limited only in commercial issues and the initiatives of establishing cordial relations with Russia did not materialize (Russia even constructed a castle over the river of Naryn and started to threaten Eastern Turkestan) Yakup Khan turned to Ottoman Empire for obedience and for some military experts and weapons. The commercial relations with the Great Britain reached its peak in 1876 (Saray, 1984). The faith of Kashgar state was drawn by the strategy that was explained by Lord Lytton as "In the definition of our (Great Britain) political influence area, the line that we would adopt should be in one way or another compatible with the geographical lines that we have" (Henze, 1998: 25-32).

The main concern in the "Great Power" game? was not the direct enemies of Kashgar, namely Russia and China because the state could be protected from them through military instruments. The main problem

instead was how to deal with the policies and strategies of the Great Britain. Great Britain was seemingly very friendly with good commercial relations and many friendship and trade agreements including deployment of a trade attached and many merchants. However, British officials were also keeping records of strategic and weak points of both the state and its leaders. Yakup Khan tried very hard to change the British policy that was very friendly in appearance but hostile in reality. At the end, he realized that Great Britain with a firm bias against Turks would support the Chinese forces that were impatient to attack Kashgar. On the other hand, Russia was convinced that the extinction of the Kashgar state and eventually the Chinese control of the region would better serve the Russian interests. That was explained by the ambassador of USA in St. Petersburg as follows:

“For the last couple of years, in Russia, there was an idea of supporting the Chinese invasion of Kashgar, or even invading Kasghar and giving it to China. Instead of a small Uzbek state of Yakup Khan, it would be more advantageous to have China at their border that could be, in accordance with the articles of the agreement, talked easily. The ones who thought like that was also thinking that Russia should not go beyond the Tian Shan Mountains which are the natural and perfect barriers. The main point of all those objections were the belief that it would not be politically correct to give the region under the Chinese administration. After Kashgar was taken, if there was not any strong Chinese army just nearby, then most probably, the region would stay under Russian control” (Schuyler, 1966: 29).

Great Britain had Muslims in India just in the south of Turkestan and Russia had Muslims in the Western Turkestan. Under the light of those realities, they had to increase their influence in the region.

General Tso Tsung-tang who was responsible for the Chinese attacks to Kashgar got the control of the state to make all the necessary preparations. He got the necessary credit from British banks in Beijing. The Russian provided food and some materials like cereals and grains the most needed elements. While doing all those preparations, General Tso also continued discussing the future of Kashgar in capitals of Great Britain, Russia and China. General Tso, who attacked at the end of 1876, first took Urumqi, then in the summer of 1877 he got Dungan. Yakup Khan had died while the war was going on and at the beginning of 1878, Eastern Turkestan was taken under Chinese control (Yalçinkaya, 2006)

Eventually, with British credit, Russian military support and Chinese army, Kashgar state was left to Chinese domination. In 1871, Russian troops annexed the Ili Valley in Eastern Turkestan to support Chinese annexation of the region. Later that region became the border between Russia and China, and it did not change even during world wars (Caroe, 1953, 18). Now that border became the Chinese border with Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.

The British policy towards the region in the 19th century was entirely dictated by pragmatism. Togan describes pragmatism underlining British policy as follows:

“It is obvious that Great Britain does not want a modern Turkish-Islam state in Central Asia, however this is not a rule for them. If such a state established, even if they do not want, they accept *fait accompli*, accept the state and they even try to get advantage from it. Because Great Britain is a trading state, and their politics is also the politics of traders. In any case the Great Britain’s Central Asia policy is not an active policy in itself but because of their historical baggage, it is the policy of containment of the wealth, colonies by taking maximum advantage from various complicated situations” (Togan, 1942: 598-599).



In the second half of 19th century, with the enforcement of Great Britain, eastern Turkestan was left to the control of China. Today, that region is called as Xinjiang, is an autonomous region in China. The five republics in western Turkestan got their independence but they are still under the political, military and economical influence of two big powers namely Russia and China. Currently as an external actor Great Britain is replaced by the USA (Amanov, 2007).

On the other hand, if we delve back into history a little deeper, we may also find some areas of confrontation between Russia (Soviet Union) and China easily. For example, we can argue that despite the fact that they share a communist ideology, the Sino-Soviet relationship during the Cold War era, rather than being cooperative, was marred by suspicion and confrontation.

Since the late 1950s, China and the Soviet Union have engaged in fierce mudslinging, and in 1969, Sino-Soviet disputes developed into armed conflict. Although the Sino-Soviet confrontation came to a critical point in 1970s, China felt threatened by Soviet nuclear capabilities, and hence sought improvement in its relationship with the US leading to Nixon's historic visit in 1972.

During this period, China and the US sustained strategic cooperative relation as a countermeasure to Soviet expansionism. With the beginning of reform and liberalization of China, however, the triangular relations were reshuffled.

Strating from 1980s, China and the Soviet Union have been trying to overcome tensions of the past and seek normalization in their relationship. The dialogue for normalization of Sino-Soviet relations commenced afer 1979, when China soften its position, expanding the scope of negotiations with the Soviet Union on matters beyond territorial conflicts. The first stage in this process was Mikhail Gorbachev's visit to China in May 1989.

Since Gorbachev's visit to Beijing in 1989, Russia and China have continued to deepen mutual relations. In 2001, this culminated into the conclusion of the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness, Friendship and Co-operation. A "strategic partnership" was given a concrete basis (Cohen, 2001). China has set as its main long-term goal the development of the economy and rise of its status in the international arena. This was an external challenge to Russia. Russia needed to come to terms with a China that is much stronger and more dynamic than it was.

As in late 1990s, China and Russia are pursuing rapprochement in various areas. They share the need for plurality in global governance and confront similar security concerns over developments in Central Asia and the Asia-Pacific region. Again, since the beginning of 1990s, Central Asia has also once again become an area for the "new great game" between the U.S., Russia and China (Trenin, 2005b). The game was thought to be finished with the victory of the U.S. when Washington was able to get a strategic foothold in Central Asia by opening military bases in the aftermath of September 11 events. However, it soon became clear that the political and economic complexity of the region could not allow any great power to declare its victory that easily.

Under the light of above-mentioned historical facts, it is then very important today to understand the main dynamics of the region and the relations between Russia and China for having some prospects for the future.



RUSSIA'S VISION OF CURRENT CENTRAL ASIA

Russia still possesses a number of important advantages in Central Asia. As a direct successor of the Romanov and Soviet empires that ruled over these lands in the 19th and 20th century, Russia appears to have a clear edge over China. This fact arguably makes it the main actor in the region (Kimmage, 2005).

In first place, Moscow knows the region and regional countries (especially their weak points) much better than China. Secondly, as a former imperial center, it still largely controls the infrastructure which survived even after the disintegration of the Soviet Union that ties up the entire post-Soviet space together. Thirdly, it has the leverage of the Russian *diaspora* (even the Russian-speaking population) residing in all the ex-Soviet republics. Under certain circumstances, Russia chooses to use this leverage in order to achieve its strategic goals.

Furthermore, Moscow still retains the main elements of the Soviet “hard power” (especially military) capabilities -- security pacts, arms sales capacity, most of the former Soviet military bases as well as military presence in the region. By using this hard power capacity to manipulate the existing political, ethnic and religious conflicts in a number of the ex-Soviet republics, Russia is still able to easily destabilize the region. In addition, it is important to note that Russia can enhance its influence in the region not only through direct intervention but also through peacekeeping and mediation activities.

Besides, the hard (military) power, Russia can also employ various “soft power” tools. The main element in this respect is obviously its growing economic power. Thanks to the windfall energy profits, Russia has displayed an impressive economic recovery until recently. The high prices for hydrocarbons prompted Russia to play energy card to expand its economic and political influence in the region. Dependence of the regional countries on Russia in the energy sector (particularly in drilling and transportation) makes it easier for Russia to use its economic/energy leverage to advance political goals (Blagov, 2007). Differentiation of prices of the oil according to the closeness of the concerned importing country to Russia, penetration of Russian oil and gas monopoly Gazprom and electricity utility company Unified Energy System (UES) into Central Asia through privatization of the national sectors and expansion of the market are the main and most effective tools that are used by Russian state (Schlapentokh, 2005).

The other component of Russian economic power/leverage is the presence of the millions of people from the Central Asia in Russia who came there for work and who thus got an opportunity to support families left in their home countries. The “guest workers’ factor” actually reveals the ex-Soviet republics’ dual dependence on Moscow. While Russia’s economic boom creates an almost insatiable market for the excessive labor resources of its poorer neighbors, the remittances sent home by the guest workers make up a large chunk of their countries’ revenues. But Moscow can also cut this lifeline if it believes the move is consistent with its strategic interests. Besides, the Central Asian republics are wary of the social consequences of the large numbers of labor migrants returning to the region from Russia. Such a development would inevitably aggravate the unemployment problem that already exists in those states.

On the other hand, no one can deny the importance of the cultural aspect of Russia’s influence in the region. Russian language is still playing a role of the regional *lingua franca* in many aspects of life ranging from trade to education. Finally, being an authoritarian regime itself, Russia is not very uncomfortable with the clearly undemocratic and at times outright repressive regimes in the region; indeed, Moscow

cannot worry less about the “democratic deficit” or the existence of human rights abuses in the regional countries (Hill, 2004).

There is a need to mention yet another very important aspect that affects the Russian role in the region. And that is the geopolitical mentality of the Russian state largely shaped during the Cold War. This mentality’s key feature is a zero-sum approach to foreign policy: it makes Russia perceive the former Soviet lands as its exclusive sphere of influence and regard all Western or European aspirations in this sphere as a threat to Russia’s vital national interests. Moscow strategists believe, all the components of the Russian power and all the tools in its possession should be used in all possible ways as a means to alter the behavior of those regional states that have opted to leave Russia’s orbit and side with the West. The earlier attempts at regime change in Kyrgyzstan and the upheaval in Uzbekistan -- have confirmed Russian anxieties about the region’s possible direction (Aris, 2012).

Russia has also some problems in the region. Being a former imperial power and wanting to keep its dominant position, Russia cannot help but engender constant apprehension on the part of its neighbors: most of the post-Soviet states always harbor certain doubts about Russian strategic interests and behavior. It would appear that Russia’s strategy is a two-pronged one. Globally, Russia wants to retain a leadership position in one of the world’s strategically important regions; it used to be the main hegemon in these lands and wants to perpetuate its hegemony. As the world’s leading energy producer and exporter, Moscow tries to prevent China and the USA as the world’s leading energy consumers to establish a significant foothold in this energy-rich region. Of all other energy-rich regions of the world including the Middle East, Africa and Latin America, Russia’s positions are particularly strong in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, and Moscow is adamant to preserve its relative strategic advantage.

CHINA’S VISION OF CURRENT CENTRAL ASIA

Being one of the players in the region, China has its own set of interests there. China’s activism in the region is guided by historical, economic and political reasons. Historically, China has traditionally viewed Central Asia as its trading area and a region heavily influenced by Chinese culture.

The collapse of Moscow’s direct control over the region in the aftermath of the Soviet Union’s unraveling created a window of opportunity for Beijing to reassert itself in what it regards as its historical patrimony. There were basically two main economic reasons that motivated China to expand its influence in the region (Blank, 2006).

The first is energy security and the second is the desire to expand the trade ties with the regional countries. With its continuous economic growth over the past ten years, China became one of the main economic power houses of the world. Naturally, this development was accompanied by an enormous increase in the demand for new energy resources. Within this context, then, one of the main reasons of Chinese presence in the region is securing China’s growing need for oil and natural gas (Jiang, 2006).

Taking into consideration Chinese ambition of quadrupling its economy again by 2020, it is easy to predict that China’s dependency on imported energy will continue to grow necessitating China to treat the energy security problem as one of its highest strategic priorities.

In China’s case, energy security is understood not just as an ability to have enough energy to sustain its high economic growth rate but, above all, as a vital necessity to secure the continuity of supplies. That’s



why it is not enough for China to have only a foothold in these countries' energy sectors. China that needs to secure its interests in the competition with the USA and Russia in another energy-rich region – the Middle East -- uses Central Asia to establish a link with the Middle East through a network of pipelines. Through this way, China hopes to gain control over the oil that is transported to Asia from the Middle East. In this sense, the logical strategic partner for China is Iran. A Sino-Iranian network of oil pipelines, which have already been launched, would be a substitute for the currently existing Russian and American-backed networks, giving the Central Asian states an alternative route for oil trade, and ultimately would decrease their dependence on Russia.

China also wants to increase its trade relations with Central Asian states. It has important advantages in the region, as the Russian goods do not have the same quality as the Chinese goods. Furthermore, Chinese products have lower prices than the goods coming from the US and Japan. In addition, Chinese investments in Central Asia --both through commercial deals and via the aid programs -- have significantly improved the local infrastructure. Remarkably, the transportation links – mainly the roads and railways -- have been the key focus of the Chinese investments.

China's political interest in the region is driven by the tense situation in the Chinese province of Xinjiang that is home to Uighur people -- Muslims of Turkic origin. Ethnic and cultural ties between the population in Xinjiang and the Central Asian states are strong and there has traditionally not been a clear border between the kindred populations in Central Asia and Xinjiang. China would like to use the improved relations with the Central Asian governments to resolve the conflict with the Uighurs in Xinjiang, or to crush the rebels.

The other political reason has a broader context and is much related with the content of this article – namely, the Central Asia as a strategic “theatre” where the complex geopolitical game being played out among both regional and extra regional powers. It would seem that the position of China in the region is different from that of Russia.

A COMPARISON BETWEEN CHINESE AND RUSSIAN POLICIES IN CENTRAL ASIA

From the Russian perspective, the nature of the Game is mainly a protection of the traditional sphere of influence while in the Chinese case it is rather a penetration into the Russian sphere of influence for gaining a foothold in the post-Soviet space, particularly in Central Asia, which has long been considered as the Russian empire's “soft underbelly.”

Russia's strategic concerns pertain to all the ex-Soviet republics whereas China's interests lie mainly in Central Asia, including Afghanistan and Iran due to its geographic proximity. Russia is the number one oil-producing country while China is the number one oil-consuming country. Russia tries to perpetuate its hegemony in the region while China seeks to position itself as a strategic alternative to Russia for the regional countries.

Russia has the legacy of the USSR, China does not. At the same time, there are certain similarities in Moscow and Beijing's approaches to the region. Like Russia, China also pursues its strategic interests in Central Asia mainly disregarding democracy issues or human rights concerns. China casts itself as an advocate of the policy of non-interference in domestic affairs of the regional countries and argues that all its activities is a



win-win situation both for it and the region. No wonder, this Chinese approach is mostly welcomed by the authoritarian regimes in the region.

In this respect, Chinese and Russian policies present a stark contrast to the US posture in the region, which over the last couple of years have been mainly guided by the democracy-promotion ideology. Being the permanent members of the UN Security Council with veto power, Russia and China can provide invaluable support to the region's authoritarian regimes. This support props up their otherwise shaky international legitimacy and provides a counterbalance to pressures from the West that preaches the necessity for the local countries to liberalize through implementing political and economic reforms.

Similar to Russia, China pursues the interconnected aims at two strategic levels. Globally, Central Asia has been identified by Beijing as one of the four major regions key to its energy supplies (the others being the Middle East, Africa and Latin America). Since China is a relative newcomer to the Middle East and Latin America -- which are traditionally regarded as the US geopolitical playgrounds -- relations with Central Asia and Russia are more important for China than other regions (Weitz, 2012a).

Regionally, it wants to penetrate -- either unilaterally or in cooperation with Russia -- into the region that has traditionally been regarded as Russian sphere of influence and to prevent the USA from having a foothold in the region. China also aims to expand its influence in the region through various bilateral and multilateral deals with the regional countries (Nam-ju, L. 2001).

In Central Asia, Kazakhstan from day one has been the main supporter of the Central Asian integration -- a policy through which it can project its leadership role in the region. By spearheading such integration, Astana seeks to thwart Tashkent's geopolitical ambitions, as there is a fierce competition between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan for regional leadership. Today, Kazakhstan remains the principal initiator and supporter of regional cooperation and integration. At the same time, the Kazakh leadership strategy appears to be well-balanced. On the one hand, due to its special relations with Russia, Kazakhstan tends to support all Russia-led integration efforts. However, this doesn't mean that Kazakhstan isn't seeking good relations with the EU and the USA or with China. At the heart of Kazakhstan's foreign-policy strategy is desire to pursue a multi-vector policy.

Not every Central Asian country can calibrate its relations with the powerful neighbors as well as Kazakhstan does. Geopolitically, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are firmly under Moscow's sway and can be found in almost all the regional initiatives or organizations supported by Russia. Uzbekistan, for its part, appears to be still struggling with charting its course between Russia and the USA. Joining and then abandoning GU(U)AM, flirting with the membership in the Russia-led EEC and CSTO and at the same time keeping its association with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization are illustrative of Uzbekistan's geopolitical zigzagging (Weitz, 2012b).

Of all the Central Asian republics, Turkmenistan -- due to its permanent neutral status, approved by a special resolution unanimously adopted by all 185 members of the United Nations at a session of the General Assembly on December 12, 1999 -- has been able to establish more or less balanced partnership relations with the all the great powers -- the U.S.-- Russia and China. However, precisely because of its neutrality, Ashgabat cannot participate in multilateral military or military-political groupings and blocs. That's why Turkmenistan is virtually absent from all these regional organizations and initiatives (Erol, 2003).

As far as the powers' rivalry is concerned, Russia seems to be particularly successful in reasserting its influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. For the time being, Russia is clearly an ascendant power in Eurasia that seeks to marginalize the influence of its major competitors -- China and the USA (Nogayeva, 2011). But Moscow's ultimate success remains uncertain as Russia's current international posture rests mainly on the energy export revenues. However, energy markets, as is well known, can be pretty volatile.

Russia was instrumental in the formation and manipulation of the CIS/ CSTO+ EEC (CACO) and SCO. In the CIS, it enjoys almost a free hand, while in the SCO it has to share power with China. Russia views the CIS as a loose grouping of states with a highly integrated core of key states. The Union of Russia and Belarus, the CSTO, EEC and the Anti-Terror Centre are the main components of the CIS (Indeo, 2014). Within the CIS, the closest relation is between Russia and Belarus, while Moscow's most problematic partners are Azerbaijan, Georgia and Uzbekistan that tend to continuously change sides between the West and Russia depending on the shifts in the political and economic environment. Within the CIS, Russia seeks to project the image of a traditional and a reliable ally to the South Caucasus and Central Asian states. Certain post-Soviet states see the CIS as a sort of counter-balance to the West and support Russia's desire to keep it as both an economic and security umbrella under which they can gather when they feel their national security is at risk.

In contrast to its dominant position in the CIS, Russia has to share its influence and power with China in the SCO. However, the SCO has another mission that brings China and Russia closer together -- the prevention of US penetration into their geopolitical backyard. It is exactly because of this reason that Russia and China seem to act harmoniously within this organization. But under the surface, there definitely lurk competing interests and diverging perceptions of the SCO's future role which creates a potential for future frictions between Moscow and Beijing – particularly in the absence of any overarching common strategic interest.

China, like Russia, also prefers to pursue its main interests through bilateral relations with the countries in the region. However, China values its participation in the SCO as this forum facilitates its further involvement into the region and helps curtail the US presence in Central Asia. For its part, the USA warily views the SCO as an organization that potentially might evolve into something resembling the "Eastern NATO," which would be inimical to America's interests in the region (Weir, 2005). To prevent this from happening, Washington seeks – working through some SCO's smaller members -- to obtain an observer status within the organization. Naturally, the USA is also interested in preventing the SCO's further enlargement – particularly to Iran.

CONCLUSION

As all these shifting policies, changing environments and ad hoc alliances suggest, it is not easy to talk about the stability of any type of rapprochement between the great powers in the volatile region of Central Asia. Today, as some of the elements of the old great game appear to persist, the nature of the new great game is much more different and by far more complicated. To correctly interpret the Belt-Road project or the discussion on military cooperation in Asia at the 2019 Dushanbe Summit (Xinhua, 2019), firstly it is necessary to understand the geopolitical and historical infrastructure of the region. The Central Asian countries themselves now are independent actors who are able to make their own choices according to their wishes and interests, and they tend to pursue a rather balanced policy vis-à-vis the great powers.

Furthermore, the new game involves a greater number of actors. Turkey and Iran may well be considered as the active players and balancing powers even if they may not be as big as Russia, China and the U.S.

All these variables related with the region will continue to affect and condition the power relations between the U.S., Russia and China in the near future. Thus, it is likely that today's rapprochement between Russia and China that was conditioned mainly by the current realities (above all, by the U.S. military presence in the region) will not last long (Swanström, 2005). Since the power game is no longer independent from the Central Asian countries' own interests, their ability to manipulate the game will continue to play an important role. The bilateral relations between the great powers will also have the potential to affect the overall geopolitical equation.

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