

Political Sciences

Sino-Russian Geopolitical Interests in Central Asia and South Caucasus

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ABSTRACT. The aim of this paper is to analyze the increasing geopolitical competition involving the US, Russia and China in Central Asia and South Caucasus in order to consolidate their spheres of influence in political, military, economic and energy fields. Many contemporary strategists believe that Eurasia, which encompasses countries located in Central Asia and South Caucasus, is of great importance in the geo-strategy of the 21st century, for example because of the region's dominance over important world oil resources in the Caspian Sea, and also because of its control over communication lines between the East and West. Both, Moscow and Beijing support the idea of a strong Sino-Russian partnership to counter the US power, but both have their own specific interests and distinct relationship with the United States. In the geopolitical games of the world's greatest powers, Central Asia and South Caucasus region has been a major battlefield. © 2011 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.

Key words: *Central Asia, South Caucasus, Geopolitics, Competition, the US, Russia, China.*

Common modern political definitions of Central Asia and South Caucasus are limited to the states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (in Central Asia) and Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia (in South Caucasus). The geographical scope of Central Asia and South Caucasus after the collapse of the Soviet Union has retained the elements of competition and bargaining between the United States of America, Russia and China. This paper will analyze the interests, objectives and strategies of the main three competing powers in Central Asia and South Caucasus: Russia, China and the United States. It will attempt to understand the growing cooperation between Russia and China and how that affects the United States. As for these three studied powers, two of them, Russia and China, are in a way partially Central Asian states. The United States is therefore the only outside power with considerable political and economic leverage in the region.

It should also be noted that geopolitics in Central

Asia and South Caucasus often includes secondary or peripheral state actors such as Afghanistan and Mongolia. There are also some geographically linked regional powers that have geopolitical interests in Central Asia and South Caucasus, like Turkey, who has cultural and linguistic ties to the region; Iran, who wants to regain influence in the historic backyard of the Persian Empire; or India and Pakistan, who are willing to transport their rivalry to new grounds.

The most pressing American goal in Eurasia is related to security and counter-terrorism. The US presence in the region was increased by its invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, where Central Asia and South Caucasus played a key logistical role. The United States are especially concerned about potential political instability that can be caused by terrorism and radical Islamic groups in the region. On the basis of that, it can be stated that the Black Sea-Caspian Sea region (South Caucasus and Central Asia particularly), which is one of the central parts in

the American concept of 'Greater Middle East', bears a special implication. The US actively supports the expansion of NATO into Georgia. The reality is that Washington hopes to incorporate Georgia as a vital link in the proposed NATO supply chain leading to Afghanistan from Europe, which will bypass Russian territory. The matter is about expansion of the US influence not only into South Caucasus, but Central Asia and whole Eurasia as well (long-term prospects). In this context, the US regards Central Asia and South Caucasus region as a significant transition corridor by means of which it will be possible to influence such powerful states as Russia and China.

In regard to the Caspian energy resources transportation, the US policy can be characterized as a 'multiple pipelines' strategy, the purpose of which is to diversify the sources of energy carriers and to bypass competing routes through Russia and Iran in their transit. From an American point of view, the landlocked dimension of Central Asia and the dependence on Russian-controlled supply routes has been a problem to solve since Western oil majors first arrived in the region. The answer was the 'Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan' (BTC) oil pipeline. Inaugurated in 2005, the BTC is the world's most expensive and second-longest pipeline. It runs through Azerbaijan and American-ally Georgia (both South Caucasian states), proceeds around Russian-ally Armenia, passes near ongoing and potential conflict zones, before ending at the Turkish port of Ceyhan. From the beginning, the BTC pipeline was designed to challenge Russian hegemony over energy in the Black Sea-Caspian Sea region. For that reason, the 'Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan' is a perfect example of where the line between economics, security and geopolitics begin to blur in Central Asia and South Caucasus.

The US policy with respect to Central Asia and South Caucasus is not limited only to the above-mentioned spheres and involves a wide spectrum of interests, including the formation of a civil society, assistance in democratic management, etc., which represents, according to an outstanding American researcher, Joseph Nice, a 'soft power' phenomenon in the US policy.

After the independence of ex Soviet republics, the strategic goal of Russia was to maintain Central Asia and South Caucasus under its political, economic and military influence. Russia does not wish to lose its position in Central Asia and South Caucasus region, which it labels its 'near abroad', considering it to be a zone of vital interests. To counter American influence, Russia has institutionalized its relations with Central Asia and South Caucasus through several regional organizations: politically-wise with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), militarily-wise with the Collective Security Treaty Organi-

zation (CSTO) and economically-wise with the Organization of Central Asian Cooperation (OCAC) and Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) [1].

Russia also attempts to determine and fix the status of the Caspian Sea with minimal losses for itself. Russia has a negative attitude towards the 'Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan' oil and 'Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum' gas pipelines, finding that these energy roots will weaken its influence over the region. These pipelines break Russia's monopoly over gas and oil resources. The Russia-Georgian war that happened in August 2008 was, in essence, a strong counterattack made by Moscow, responding to the long-term containment policy implemented by Western countries, the US particularly. It intensified the US-Russia conflict [2].

As a co-chair of the OSCE Minsk group, Russia takes various initiatives aimed at settling the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. However, continued strong-arm policies towards Georgia generate doubt as to what Moscow's real intentions are. The foreign policy strategy of Russia appears as one of the main factors of instability in the whole Black Sea-Caspian Sea Region. Because of that kind of strategy it is almost impossible in the foreseeable future to establish a reliable Eurasian security system and promote integration processes in Central Asia and South Caucasus.

China opposes the attempts by some major powers to monopolize and control the international affairs and impose their will on others [3]. China could become the most influential regional Superpower, thus reducing traditional Russian control over the post Soviet area. For China, energy security maybe even more important now than political security. Central Asia is not only a major oil producing region neighboring China, it should also produce oil for a longer time than the Middle East. As a result, Chinese officials are pushing for the development of less-vulnerable, land-based oil and gas pipelines that would direct Caspian energy resources eastward toward China.

In regard to the South Caucasian dimension of China's foreign policy strategy, the reality is that while maintaining the vital strategic interest in Central Asia, China at the same time does not express a similar high interest towards South Caucasus. In contrast to Russia and the US, China pays a less attention to the states of South Caucasus and prefers to concentrate its efforts on strengthening cooperation basically with Central Asian republics. The Central Asian region is of great strategic significance to China. It is not only a barrier for security guarantee in western China, but also a buffer zone between China and Russia and between China and regional powers such as Turkey and Iran.

Chinese strategy towards Central Asia is mainly aimed at three key goals: 1) to guarantee and reinforce national security and regional stability; 2) to develop political and economic relations with Central Asian republics as a kind of geo-economic strategy; 3) to ensure the control of Caspian oil and gas in order to strengthen its energy security. China has developed energy cooperation with oil and gas rich Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan and Chinese national companies began to invest in Central Asian oil and gas fields, with the clear strategic aim to realize new pipelines in order to transport Caspian energy resources to China, thus allowing diversification in its energy imports [4].

Those goals can be a source of geopolitical competition between Russia and China. Because of its highly institutionalized integration with the region, Russia has a clear advantage. However, most experts agree that China is rapidly replacing Russia as the main Asian power. This fact is intensified by the contradictory interests between Russia and China. While the role of China has grown dramatically in the 21st century, Russia seems to have reached the limit of its economic and security power in the region. The Kremlin itself may have difficulty accepting this. The competition between Russia and China in the Central Asian energy sector represents the most evident element of potential tension in their relations. Following the implementation of the Sino-Kazakh oil pipeline and the realization of the Sino-Turkmen gas pipeline (so-called 'China-Central Asia gas pipeline') which also involves Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Russian monopolistic control over Central Asian energy exports has been seriously damaged [5].

Relations with the United States can also be a source of tension. We think it is time for the US to revise its 'multiple pipelines' strategy as far as the newly opened Central Asia-China gas pipeline will significantly help China in meeting its energy demands and strengthening China's political and geo-economic positions in the whole Eurasia.

Following the 9/11 events in 2001 and American military intervention in Afghanistan, the US strengthened military ties with South Caucasian and Central Asian states. Russia and China were obviously worried about a potential long-term American military presence in Central Asia. Moscow was not happy to see the presence of US military forces in the region and feared that the increase of the economic and military cooperation with the Central Asian states could weaken its traditional and strategic influence in the mentioned area [6]. The US military presence weakened Sino-Russian influence in Central Asia, affecting their strategic role in Eurasia. Russia and China therefore rapidly reversed their condition of geopolitical

weakness and since 2003 have developed a strategy to restore and extend their influence in the region by means of bilateral and multilateral cooperation [7]. As regards their bilateral relations, China's strategy was mainly oriented to deepen cooperation in the economic and energy fields with the Central Asian republics, while Russia's policy was focused on the strengthening of military cooperation.

The expulsion of American military forces from Central Asia and the containment of Western influence in the region represented the Sino-Russian shared strategic goal. To accomplish that goal, China and Russia have institutionalized their regional cooperation by creating the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001. China agreed to create this regional organization with Russia and Central Asian states (with the exception of Turkmenistan) in order to fight the so-called 'three evils' (separatism, extremism and terrorism) and to ensure regional stability. In 2003, the SCO held its first joint military exercises, which then became a biyearly event. In 2004, the organization created the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure. This nascent Sino-Russian partnership, the growing importance of the SCO and its consolidating control over Central Asian energy policy is deeply worrying political leaders in Washington. The SCO has strengthened China and Russia's control over Central Asian republics. Nevertheless, the United States of America have still exerted significant impact on Central Asian geopolitics. The current presence of American military forces in Central Asia has injected a new dynamic into regional politics. It has highlighted the blunt dominance of Sino-Russian interests within the SCO framework, as well as the weakness of the framework itself as both a security mechanism and a forum to combat the growing American influence in the region. Due to SCO's internal structural problems, Russia and China can hardly reach unanimity against the United States because of individual interests.

At the level of military cooperation with the Central Asian and South Caucasian states, China cannot compete with Russia and the US. Beijing has no military bases in the region. Seen from a multilateral perspective, the SCO is the only tool that China has at its disposal to influence the military stances and domestic policy choices of the Central Asian states. Within the SCO, Sino-Russian geopolitical rivalry on the future development of the regional organization is evident. Moscow privileges military cooperation and security issues, while Beijing aims at widening the competencies of SCO in the economic domain.

Geopolitical competition between the US, Russia and China to influence Eurasia is destined to continue in the coming years, considering the importance of their strate-

gic goals in the region. As regards Russia's economic weakness and geopolitical difficulties, the Central Asian and South Caucasian presidents are implementing a profitable multi-vector policy aimed at strengthening economic, political and energy relations with other geopolitical players (the United States, China, European Union, etc.) and reducing their traditional links with Moscow in order to maximize their economic and strategic benefits.

Besides the financial aspects, the South Caucasian and Central Asian states are worried about Russia's aggressive strategy in the post-Soviet sphere of influence, which was clearly shown during the 2008 war in Georgia which reinforced their wary attitude to Russian initiatives and its policy. The Eurasian states were concerned about Russia's use of force against sovereign Georgia. One of the most important signs of the shy attempt to oppose Moscow's policy was during the SCO summit in Dushanbe in September 2008, when the Central Asian Republics and China did not support Moscow's desire to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Tskhinvali region). The Russia-Georgian military conflict and the world financial crisis had a substantial impact on Russia's foreign policy in 2008. After the Russia-Georgian war, neither its strength nor its sense of being a big power improved Russia's international environment and, in fact, there is deterioration in both the surrounding and the international environment that Rus-

sia faces [8]. The aggressive strategy of Moscow has harmed Russian efforts to promote itself as a pole of power in Central Asia and South Caucasus, with the consequence that the US and China appear to protect Eurasian states better than Russia.

Moreover, the Central Asian and South Caucasian republics are strengthening their military cooperation with the US, inter alia, within the framework of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), allowing the US to strengthen its military cooperation with the Eurasian states (Latvia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan), obtain some military facilities in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan and also maintain the Manas airbase in Kyrgyzstan. The development of the Northern Distribution Network into Afghanistan by the US government had considerable impact on regional geopolitics in Eurasia. Washington is engaging these partners on an issue of utmost priority to US security interests, which represents a serious challenge to traditional Russian influence in the Eurasian security field.

The balance of power in Central Asia and South Caucasus shows that multipolarity is a reality in this region of the world. Russia and China, because of their several mutual interests, have chosen to collaborate in this new reality. In spite of this fact, the US still has enough capacity to exert its influence in Central Asia and South Caucasus.

პოლიტიკური მეცნიერებები

ჩინეთ-რუსეთის გეოპოლიტიკური ინტერესები ცენტრალურ აზიასა და სამხრეთ კავკასიაში

დ. პიპინაშვილი

საქართველოს საგარეო საქმეთა სამინისტრო, ჩინეთში საქართველოს საელჩო

(წარმოდგინა აკადემიის წევრმა რ. გაჩეჩილაძემ)

თანამედროვე მკვლევართა დიდი უმრავლესობა თანხმდება იმაზე, რომ ევრაზიას, რომელიც ასევე მოიცავს ცენტრალური აზიასა და სამხრეთ კავკასიის რეგიონს, გააჩნია უდიდესი სტრატეგიული მნიშვნელობა 21-ე საუკუნეში. აღნიშნული გარემოების გამო, შავი ზღვა-კასპისპირეთის რეგიონი, უფრო კონკრეტულად კი

ცენტრალური აზია და სამხრეთ კავკასია, გადაიქცა მეტოქეობის ერთ-ერთ ყველაზე მიმზიდველ სივრცედ რუსეთს, ჩინეთსა და ამერიკის შეერთებულ შტატებს შორის. ამ მეტოქეობას მნიშვნელოვნად შეუწყო ხელი რეგიონის გეოპოლიტიკურმა განზომილებამ და ენერგორესურსების სოლიდურმა მარაგმა. რეგიონის ენერგორესურსების კონტროლისა და, განსაკუთრებით, მათი ტრანსპორტირების საკითხი წარმოადგენს გეოპოლიტიკური მეტოქეობის ძირითად საგანს. ვაშინგტონი ახერხებს ერთმანეთს შეუთავსოს ენერგეტიკასთან და უსაფრთხოებასთან დაკავშირებული ინტერესები იმისათვის, რათა მიაღწიოს ყოვლისმომცველ რეგიონულ სტაბილურობას ვერაზიაში. ჩინეთი, აფიქსირებს რა სულ უფრო მზარდ ამბიციას ცენტრალური აზიისადმი, ამავე დროს, ავლენს შედარებით ნაკლებ აქტიურობას სამხრეთ კავკასიის მიმართ, უთმობს რა პირველობას რუსეთის ინტერესებს ამ მიმართულებით. რაც შეეხება მოსკოვს, ის კვლავ იმპერიული პოლიტიკის ერთგული რჩება და რეგიონში თავისი ჰეგემონური გავლენის აღდგენას ცდილობს როგორც სამხედრო-პოლიტიკურ, ისე ეკონომიკურ და ენერგეტიკულ სფეროებში.

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