

Rethinking Geopolitics in Post-Soviet Central Eurasia

Research >
Central Asia

'Critical geopolitics' aims at creating a synthesis between orthodox geopolitics and the geo-economic discourse to develop a new understanding of geographic arrangements as social constructions that are changeable over time. This approach challenges how orthodox geopolitics presents the world as 'us' and 'them'. 'National security threats' are no longer defined in terms of military threats from other states and outlaw groups. Critical geopolitics favours a more complex vision of world politics characterized by states which are themselves enmeshed in transnational techno-economic power structures and technological systems that threaten the conditions of habitation and survival on the planet as a whole. The following analyses Central Eurasia (CEA) from this perspective.

By Mehdi Parvizi Amineh

In the early twentieth century Britain's geopolitical theorist Sir Halford J. Mackinder coined Central Eurasia the Eurasian 'Heartland' to underline the region's geopolitical and geo-strategic importance in global politics. He was of the opinion that the one who would control this region could control the whole world. Indeed, with the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the SU, Central Eurasia has developed into an important geo-strategic and geo-economic region in world politics.

Central Eurasia consists of two sub-regions: Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan) and South Caucasus (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia). The region is located at the strategic crossroads between northeastern and Central Europe, the Mediterranean rim, resource-rich countries of the Middle East, and large markets of highly populated states in the Indian Ocean and Asian-Pacific area.

Central Eurasia, however, suffers from localized conflicts, economic distress, and environmental disasters. Ethnic tensions simmer beneath the surface in many of its countries, leaving the region susceptible to instability and threatening its political and economic development. Its location between, Russia, China, Iran, Turkey, and Afghanistan make the region a magnet for foreign powers and potential conflict between them.

The US, the EU, Japan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Israel are all interested in the region. It can thus be said that a new 'Great Game' is underway. Unlike the Great Game of the nineteenth century, which was played out between the British Empire and Czarist Russia, the post-Cold War Great Game involves not only states but also non-state actors: international organizations, transnational oil corporations (TNOCs), criminal groups, and NGOs.

Economic vulnerability and (in)security

The states of CEA appear to be rapidly joining the ranks of the poor countries of the globe. In the years 1991-1998, for example, the level of economic activity plunged catastrophically: dropping by 39 per cent in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, 45 per cent in Turkmenistan, and 66 per cent in Tajikistan. In the same period, the amount of people living on less than 2 USD per day in Kazakhstan was 12.1 per cent, in Turkmenistan 25.8 per cent, and in Kyrgyzstan even 55.3 per cent.

More than 200 violent conflicts have erupted in CEA since 1991, a fact that raises serious questions about security in the region. These conflicts include Abkhazian separatism in Georgia, civil war in Tajikistan, and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Radical political Islam has also become a real threat to the region with several operating groups –



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especially in the Ferghana Valley, one of the poorest areas in CEA: the United Tajik Opposition (UTO); the Islamic Party of Turkestan (IPT), previous Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU); and the Islamic Movement of Tajikistan (IMT). The danger exists that these organizations will coordinate their activities.

Active in the region in military security terms are the US and NATO. For example, NATO supports the GUUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Moldova), a security arrangement outside the CIS. NATO also runs military programmes in CEA in the context of the Partnership for Peace programme. The promotion of the pan-Caucasus Security Organization is based on a proposition of Chechnya and modelled after the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Russia views these developments with suspicion. A possible counterbalance could be the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), set up in August 1996 between Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The agenda of the SCO is based on military and economic cooperation, but also on combating radical Islam.

Furthermore, there is a large-scale underground market of weapons and drugs in the region. Drugs are smuggled from Afghanistan via two different routes: from Pakistan via Iran to Turkey and Europe, and from Badakhshan via Os (Tajikistan) and Kyrgyzstan to Russia and Europe. The combination of the tensions mentioned above could be further aggravated by disparities in military power.

Geopolitics of oil and gas in CEA

The region's oil and gas reserves could be a major contribution to socio-economic development and transition of CEA. The newly Caspian littoral states (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan) together with Russia and Iran have one of the world's largest oil and gas reserves, which makes them very significant to global markets. Estimates of proven and possible oil reserves across the whole Caspian area, except Russia and Iran, run to about 190 billion barrels of oil. Its proven gas reserves are estimated at 196 trillion cubic feet (tcf), comparable to North American reserves (300tcf). At today's market prices, the

potential oil reserves of the Caspian Sea zone alone have an estimated value of between USD 2 to 4 trillion. However, because the former Soviet states lack the capital and technology for exploitation and export of the energy resources, they are trying to attract investment from Western countries and TNOCs. However, as mentioned above, they lack a stable political environment and do not have the necessary infrastructure.

The two main obstacles to development of CEA's energy resources are the legal status of the Caspian Sea – still disputed between the five Caspian littoral states – and the question of export routes. Until now Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan have been relying exclusively on the Soviet/Russian pipeline system to export their oil and gas. They hope to distance themselves from Russia and gain access to different markets and consumers in Europe, the US, and Asia. The problem with pipeline politics is that it must combine often-opposing economic and political interests: Whereas TNOCs want the cheapest route to the best market, Iran hopes for the construction of oil and gas pipelines through its own territory, while Russia fears losing control of the region's oil business and only supports pipelines through Russia. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan strives for a western route to decrease dependence on Russia and Georgia because it is a transit country. China wants to secure its great demand for oil and gas by pushing for the construction of pipelines to the East and Turkey supports a western route to obtain access to oil and gas from CEA. It also has to be taken into account that existing and proposed pipelines go through such confidence-inspiring places as Chechnya, Afghanistan, Abkhazia, and Kurdish-dominated eastern Turkey.

Countries and TNOCs with an interest in the region are adopting various forms of strategic cooperation to reach their goals. For example, the US sees Turkey as a representative of its interests in the region and promotes Turkey as a political model for the countries of CEA. Both pledge for a western route and oppose pipelines through Iranian or Russian territory.

Over the last decade, since national independence, a number of efforts have been made to simultaneously strengthen the national independence of the Eurasian states while facilitating greater

trans-border cooperation. Regional cooperation and integration is the best way to solve the problems of economic development they face. Besides the Russian-initiated Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), there are other major attempts at regional cooperation such as the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization (BSEC) and the Economic Cooperation Organization. Another ambitious undertaking is the recently established Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC) and the Common Market Transcaucasus Eurasia (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Chechnya, and Turkmenistan). For example, the BSEC aims to encourage multilateral cooperation among its members and also with the EU in the energy sector.

Of course there have been obvious impediments to the process of regional cooperation due to a variety of factors: the legacy from past; contradictions in the transition period between a planned economy and an economy based on market principles; difference in each country's development strategy; and the impact of various exogenous factors. The regions are confronted with great environmental problems especially in regard with the Aral Sea and the Caspian Sea. The water of the Aral Sea has shrunk to a minimum and the Caspian Sea suffers from immense pollution. All countries there wish to rid themselves of the legacy of almost two hundred years of Russian and Soviet rule over the

region, while to a great extent they still depend economically on Russia.


Nonetheless, Central Eurasia's geo-strategic and geo-economic significance is bound to increase substantially in the coming decades. All actors involved would rather benefit from converting Central Eurasia from a zone for geopolitical competition and confrontation to a zone of cooperation. This has especially become obvious since 11 September, the extending engagement of the US in CEA and Afghanistan, and a possible war in Iraq. We believe that there is a causal relationship between ethnic conflict, political unrest, and religious radicalism and/or terrorism, on the one hand, and socio-economic underdevelopment, on the other. The impact of these developments both on the immediate neighbourhood and on the wider world involves a complex and interwoven conglomeration of regional factors that we in the West are only just beginning to understand. <



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