

# Rethinking Geopolitics in Central Eurasia

Report >  
Central Asia

19-22 August 2003  
Singapore

By Mehdi Parvizi Amineh

The need to apply neo-geopolitics to CEA stems from the radically changed distribution of control over territory and resources on the Eurasian landmass. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the creation of newly independent states out of former Soviet territory has unleashed a contest among state and non-state actors to penetrate states and societies in this part of the world. Faced with grave economic, financial, social, and political challenges, the internal sovereignty of the region's eight newly independent states remain weak while their societies remain marginalized, lacking the capacity to benefit from ongoing processes of globalization. As a result, a 'fourth world' of impoverished peoples is now living in incompletely formed states, characterized by contested identities and uncertain loyalties.

Traditional geopolitics studies the international order by making a spatial

Geopolitics in Central Eurasia (CEA) is today a more contentious issue than ever.<sup>1</sup> Organized crime, ethno-religious conflict, environmental degradation, civil wars, and border disputes reflect the region's instability. At the same time, Central Eurasia has huge oil and gas resources – the production and export of which could prove crucial to the region's economic and political development. The following key questions were addressed at the ICAS3 panel: (1) How should we conceptualize geopolitics as an approach to studying international relations in the post-Cold War period? (2) What is the nature of geopolitics as practiced by both state and non-state actors in the region? (3) What are the possibilities for and impediments to political stability and sustainable economic development in the countries of Central Eurasia?

map of the earth's productive resources and of the territorial actors that compete for control over resource-bearing locations. This approach to studying inter-state relations had its heyday at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, with Alfred T. Mahan and Halford J. Mackinder as its main proponents.

A new approach, neo-geopolitics, aims to synthesize traditional geopolitics and geo-economic analyses. It looks not only at states but at a variety of actors that operate across borders: national and transnational governmental and non-governmental institutions, organizations, firms, armed forces, terrorist groups, peace movements, human rights activists, and environmental organizations. The neo-geopolitics approach should help us to better understand the rapidly changing geopolitics of post-Soviet CEA.

Its geo-economic position and resource wealth is turning CEA into an arena where the major powers wrestle for control.

Regional state actors (Russia, Iran, Turkey, China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan) meet outsiders (US, EU and its member states) as well as NGOs and radical-fundamentalist Islamic and criminal groups operating across borders. This mixture of actors – and the scope of their activities – suggests that today's Great Game for the influence and control of the region's peoples and resources cannot be analysed through concepts invented during the nineteenth-century, when the region was dominated by the British and Russian Empires.

In her paper, Shirin Akiner (School of Oriental and African Studies) focused on the impact of the Soviet collapse on the level of social provision. She found that the relatively well-educated populations of the region are impoverished and have to cope with deteriorating health care systems. She argued that the states of CEA have low levels of both political awareness and political capacity. Since their independence, they have shifted from one-party to one-man systems. In Kazakhstan, for example, the president and his family control the press and key economic sectors. Akiner recommended regional cooperation as a step towards integrating CEA into the world economy.

Henk Houweling (University of Amsterdam) argued that the post-Cold War interregnum was brought to an

end with the 11 September attacks. In the post-Cold War period, American foreign policy makers draw upon self-conceptions from the nineteenth century, casting itself in the role of world redeemer. This self-concept fits in well with the needs of domestic society. Households, enterprises, and state organization have adapted their internal organization to uninterrupted access to fossil energy. The gradual exhaustion of domestic supply requires power projection beyond the borders of the US. Houweling, however, rejects the hypothesis that domestic energy needs are the direct cause of America's military power projection into the oil-rich region of western Asia and CEA. He argues that the creation of trade, investment, and transportation links between the industrial cores of Western Europe, Russia, and Northeast Asia are unifying these industrialized economies. Linking this integrated industrial complex to energy-rich western Asia and the Caspian would deprive America of its naval control over food and energy supplies to potential challengers in Western Europe, Northeast Asia, and China.

Eva Rakel (Humboldt University Berlin and University of Amsterdam) discussed the major obstacles for Iran-

ian policy makers to cooperate with the CEA countries. Iran's geopolitical position was buffeted by the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the 'disappearance' of the 1,700 kilometre Iran-Soviet Union border. Since then, Iran has been determined to reinforce its regional position. Iran has three main objectives in CEA: to expand its infrastructure (especially its railway network), to gain political and economic influence through the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), and to acquire shares in a number of Caspian oil and gas development and export ventures. Iran has been reasonably successful in the first of these aims, while the latter objectives remain unattained due to obstacles posed by its economic troubles, its divided leadership, and US sanctions. Rivalry between different political factions in Iran frustrates any attempt of developing a coherent long-term foreign policy, and is a potential threat to the survival of the regime itself.

Fully aware of these obstacles, the participants at the panel asserted regional cooperation to be a means not only to support economic development but also to solve existing and prevent potential future internal conflicts through peaceful means. To my mind, it deserves recommendation that this subject is elaborated on in the future. <

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1 Central Eurasia (Central Asia and the South Caucasus) consists of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.

# Dealing with Socio-Genetic Marginalization in Asia

Report >  
General

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By Margaret Sleeboom

During our ICAS3 meeting we explored the ways in which government/state policies affect the fate of the socio-genetically marginal, and the role that researchers play in the process of developing and applying the fruits of genomics. According to TSAI Dujian (National Yang Ming University, Taiwan), consensus building can have a mediating role in Taiwanese genomic policy. So-called 'organic intellectuals' (Gramsci) ought to provide a challenge to the one-dimensional logic of technological progress by developing narratives and group ethics at various levels of society, especially among the socio-genetically marginal. Mediation of new social and ethical views, argues Tsai, is an important way of coping with the biases and stereotypes generated through the use of genetic technologies.

Some reactions to this proposal were sceptical. One member of the audience wondered, who then, are those organic intellectuals, and how could they acquire the power to steer processes that are so obviously part of an unfair

Few will dispute that new genetic technologies will become very useful in the prediction of disease and diagnostics. Nonetheless, the health and position of some social groups and individuals may be adversely affected when genetic information is applied in any social context. The concept of socio-genetic marginalization draws attention to the practice of relating the social to the (assumed) genetic make-up of people and brings out its consequences. Certain groups and individuals may find themselves isolated as a consequence of discrimination on the basis of genetic information, and suffer the psychological burden of the knowledge, feelings of social inaptitude, and a sense of financial uncertainty.

global economic and political system? Tsai nimbly handled these rather challenging questions by pointing out the need for a proactive attitude to play a positive role in the government's consensus policy on all socio-economic groups, rather than just pharmaceutical companies and researchers. If academics are going to say something about genomics, argued Tsai, they might as well use their position and skills to voice the views of the socio-genetically marginal, and articulate them with an eye on socio-economic improvement for the weak.

Margaret Sleeboom discussed this issue regarding genetic sampling in Mainland China and in Taiwan. Her comparison of political and socio-economic interest groups involved in public discussion on genetic sampling and the definitions of targeted groups in both states showed that their different cultural and political composition leads to different research regulation and practices. This was demonstrated by the clearly distinguishable ways in which scientists in these two states define their research population, collect their

genetic samples, and conduct their research. Thus, different political and cultural views on the 'ethnic' nature of the Chinese and Taiwanese populations not only affected the treatment of sampling populations, which often occupy weak socio-economic positions, but also the scientific outcome of genetic research.

The relevance of the attitude of intellectuals towards the application of new genetic technologies, such as genetic screening, was seconded by NIE Jingbao (Otago University, New Zealand). Nie characterized the Chinese birth-control programme as 'probably unprecedented and unrivalled regarding its massive scale and profound impact'. In its twofold aim to control the 'quantity of the population' and to improve the 'quality of the population', the latter has received increasing emphasis in the 1990s. The ideological underpinning for this socio-genetic engineering programme, argues Nie, draws on various forms of social Darwinism, biological determinism, statism, scientism, utopianism, and reductionism in the sense that it addresses

complex social problems in which bureaucracy, controlled by scientists and technicians, plays a considerable role.

## Genetic citizenship?

Analogous to 'queer citizenship', in the United States a coalition between patient families, politicians, and scientists has been forged, leading to political activism for 'genetic citizenship' – defending the rights of the genetically disadvantaged – and against genetic discrimination by insurance companies and employers. Kaori MUTO (Shinshu University, Japan) discussed the form that genetic citizenship will take in Asia at the dawn of the 'era of molecular epidemiology': the latter attempts to explain social behaviour through the biological make-up of people. Muto illustrated this by her study on Japanese families with Huntington's Disease, ten years after the identification of the responsible gene. For, also in Asia, molecular epidemiology leads to new forms of health promotion, preventive medicine, and increasingly 'individualized' therapies.

Drawing on interviews with clinicians, excerpts from clinic-based ethnographic observations in India, and narratives of infertile couples from differing social-economic backgrounds, Aditya Bharadwaj (Cardiff University, Wales) showed how couples are caught between societal disapproval of infertility and protracted, financially debilitating medical interventions. Their

reproductive agency often takes the form of resisting (seemingly) unending cycles of medical treatment, while, at the same time, they demonstrate an interest in pursuing such treatment so as to alleviate intense familial and societal pressures.

Jyotsna Gupta (LUMC, Leiden) also noticed that genetic diseases in the reproductive field receive great attention. She weighed its benefits against the money that could be allocated to the genetic diagnoses of common diseases such as of thalassaemia and sickle-cell anaemia. More investment in the diagnosis of communicable diseases, such as tuberculosis, would even prevent certain cases of infertility and sub-fertility in both males and females. Nearly all members of our panel agreed that the 'organic intellectual' may be failing to give a voice to the narratives of the socio-genetically marginal. Thus Gupta asked rhetorically, 'in whose interest is a genetic horoscope if a vast Indian majority strongly believes in an astrological horoscope cast at a child's birth?' Disagreement remained, however, as to whether researchers should have a mediating role between the various political and economic interest groups, or try to take distance from the compromising field of genetic politics. <

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