

A move away from geopolitics in Central Asia: A call for a move to institutions

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GARNET PHD SEMINAR-6, Brussels, June 2008

Domination of geopolitics in Central Asia

Efforts of constructing and organizing regions have become an important part of world politics.¹ Regionalism is one of the terms used to denote these processes. Among them EU and ASEAN are outstanding examples. However, despite the calls of International community and the early efforts to build regional system in Central Asia, regional integration projects failed until now. The domination of geopolitics in Central Asia have had constraining effect on Central Asian regionalism. The source of this geopolitical domination is twofold. Regional processes in Central Asia are strongly influenced by the behavior of foreign actors involved there. Russia, China and USA are the most important among them. They see each other's behavior and relationships through the prism of traditional "Great game" analysis. According to the Great Game narrative, Central Asia is an important piece in a strategic confrontation among great powers for regional and global domination. Hence it is important to prevent other powers from dominating Central Asia.² In its modern version, the control of Central Asia will also offer to controlling side unique opportunities to define the transportation of oil and gas resources of the region.³ Secondly, Central Asian states themselves adopted old balance of power politics as the main instrument of their foreign policy. Not only do they try to play major powers involved in Central Asia against each other, they also see themselves in obligation to balance among themselves.⁴

Part I. Contending Political Rationalities of Central Asian Regionalism

Due to dominance of traditional balance of power considerations, Central Asian states haven't been

¹ Acharya, 2007.

² Torbakov, 2004.

³ Buzan and Waever, 2004:422.

⁴ Tolipov, 2004b.

able to produce working regionalism until now.⁵ However, this doesn't mean that there are no attempts at producing certain regional order. The framework of Political Rationalities Theory (PRT) helps us to distinguish at least three different approaches for influencing the evolution of Central Asian region. The PRT was initially formulated by Rose and Miller to understand the relationships between power and government.⁶ Inspired by this work, IR scholars developed new frameworks for understanding different trajectories of European and Asian regionalisms. They used the term “political rationality” to describe “an approach to the problem of economic and political governance, informed by contingent political forces and economic practices, which reflects and determines norms, directs state purposes, constitutes objects of regulation, and which is mediated by local institutional infrastructure”.⁷ As such, political rationality theory may consider regions as sites of competing political strategies and as instruments of government.⁸ We will use the term political rationality to describe different approaches of powerful States for promoting a particular model of Central Asian regionalism. We will point to some elements of these political rationalities.

Until recently we could observe the presence of exclusively Central Asian approach to regionalism represented, in its last stage, by Central Asian Cooperation Organization. CACO's members consisted of Central Asian countries only and excluded foreign powers. But, CACO ceased to exist after its merger with EEC in 2004.⁹ In the absence of political rationality exclusive to Central Asian states, “American”, “Russian” and “Chinese” political rationalities are at work. One of the important features of these PRs is that they all can be associated with existing or proposed institutional models. Namely, they can be associated with “Greater Central Asia”, “EEC-CSTO” and, more and more, “SCO” initiatives, respectively.

First of all we would stop on Russian political rationality.

Elements of Russian Political Rationalities

⁵ See works of Tolipov.

⁶ Rose and Miller, 1992.

⁷ Beeson and Jayasuriya, 1998.

⁸ Larner and Walters, 2002..

⁹ On reasons which led to extinction of CACO, see: Tolipov, 2005.

In contrast to the 1990s, Russia has been reasserting itself in Central Asia during Vladimir Putin's presidency. For Russia, its presence in Central Asia is of vital importance for economic, geopolitical and increasingly demographic reasons.¹⁰ Russia still shares strong historical and cultural links with Central Asian countries. The presence of an important Russian diaspora in the region is another defining element of Russian Central Asia policy.¹¹

Institutional dimension of Russian Political Rationality in Central Asia has been increasingly centered around EEC and CSTO. Both of these organizations regroup several of CIS countries around Russia. Some observers refer to this situation as Kremlin's new “CSTO for war, EEC for economy” formula.¹² **European Economic Community (EEC)** regroups beside Russia and Belarus, all Central Asian countries except Turkmenistan. With the increasing crisis in the European component of the CIS, most recent examples being problematic Russia-Georgia and Russia-Ukraine relationships, EEC is considered only viable institution for economic cooperation in Post-Soviet space.¹³ All EEC members states, together with Armenia, form also **Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)**, an inter-State organization providing for collective security measures. CSTO operates military bases in Kirghizstan and Tajikistan. CSTO has also set up Regional Anti-Terrorism Center in Bishkek, Kirghizstan. In the last meeting of CSTO members, it was decided to create a peacekeeping batallion of CSTO.¹⁴

Russian leadership has been calling for closer cooperation between EEC and CSTO. According to Vladimir Putin, “ under contemporary conditions, it is impossible to provide for stable growth of economy without providing for its security. Under these circumstances, the issue of closer interaction between EEC and CSTO is one the most acute tasks which will guarantee protection of integration processes from different threats”.¹⁵ Recently, the General Secretary of CSTO, Russian himself, announced the intention of member states to transform CSTO from simply politico-military

¹⁰ Trenin cited by Flikke and Wilhelmsen, 2008.

¹¹ Laruelle, 2008a.

¹² Regnum News, 2006.

¹³ Melikova and Sardovski, 2006.

¹⁴ Mihailov, 2008.

¹⁵ Pravda, 2006.

structure into a general international security organization.¹⁶ CSTO is working on another interesting project concerning the creation of Eurasian “Shengen Zone” jointly with EEC.¹⁷

Another important element of Russian political rationality in Central Asia is its increasing use of soft power. Not only does Russia use its financial and economic resources to promote its interests in the region, but also Russian leadership calls for making better use of its strong historical and cultural links with Central Asia.¹⁸

Russian general vision is seemingly to make of EEC and CSTO the basis of regional order regrouping Central Asian states around Russia. At the same time, Russia was resisting calls for promoting other regional organizations like SCO as a leading regional instrument in Central Asia.¹⁹

SCO brings us to Chinese Political Rationality.

Elements of Chinese Political Rationalities

Chinese policy in Central Asia is mainly motivated by security issues as well as geopolitical and economic factors. Chinese security interest concerns the links between its province Xinjiang and Central Asia. Xinjiang is home to large turkic minorities and China watches closely the evolution in the region in order to prevent Central Asia becoming field for activities of Xinjiang separatists. Geopolitically, China's policy in post soviet Central Asia pursues the objectives of preventing Russia from reconverting Central Asia into its backyard as well as avoiding the use of Central Asia by the US for strategic encirclement of China. Global economic power, Chinese needs for energy are increasing rapidly. From this perspective as well, China can't ignore large opportunities provided by Central Asian energy resources.²⁰

Institutional dimension of Chinese political rationality is increasingly embodied by **Shanghai Cooperation Organization(SCO)**. SCO came into existence as a continuation of Shanghai Five structure which brought together China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kirghiztan and Tadjikistan to settle

¹⁶ Litovkin, 2008.

¹⁷ Litovkin, 2008.

¹⁸ Hill, 2006.

¹⁹ Flikke and Wilhelmsen, 2008; SIPRI, 2007.

²⁰ Khojaev, 2007.

border issues of China with each of them. In 2001, with particularly active involvement of China, Shanghai Five was transformed into Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Later, Uzbekistan became the sixth member of this organization. Office of the SCO General Secretary is located in Beijing while RATS is based in Tashkent.

Even if Russia is a cofounder of SCO, this organization is being associated more and more with China. The reason of this association is twofold. Firstly, China seemingly wants to rely on SCO as general framework for cooperation in Central Asia. Chinese president Jiang Zemin was the first to highlight, in 2001, the Shanghai Spirit composed of 'mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect to different civilizations and common prosperity'.²¹ Since then, China has been actively promoting the idea of transforming SCO into general regional organization by establishing, in particular, a SCO free trade area.²² The general vision and strategy of China for SCO is resumed as an effort to construct 'a harmonious region of lasting peace and common prosperity'.²³ The Chinese active presence in SCO is seen as the first successful Chinese attempt of international leadership.²⁴ On the other hand, the difficulties of Russia's accommodation of China's overwhelming influence within SCO is being discussed by Russian authors more often. For many of them, SCO is increasingly seen as "China in Central Asia".²⁵

The third important Political Rationality that could shape Central Asian regionalism is that of the USA.

Elements of US Political Rationalities

Main reasons of US presence in Central Asia

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the US have been active in Central Asia. They have been directly or indirectly involved in general development issues in Central Asia. US interest in Central Asia is guided by geopolitical considerations as well. The initial involvement of US in Central Asia, after

²¹ Bailes and al., 2007.

²² Cohen, 2006.

²³ Bailes and al., 2007.

²⁴ Jia, 2007.

²⁵ Trenin, 2005

the demise of the Soviet Union concerned mostly keeping Russia and other powers from dominating the region.²⁶ Since afterwards of 9/11 events in 2001, US have been operating military bases in Central Asia.

Institutional and normative elements of US Political Rationality

Lately, US is at the origin of a new initiative which can take the form of multilateral institutional cooperation. In fact, US have been trying to elaborate a regional project referred to as Partnership for **Greater Central Asia**. Encouraged by their successful activities in reforming Afghanistan, the US should propose a general framework for regional cooperation regrouping Afghanistan and Central Asian states. This framework will help to break isolation of Central Asian states and contribute to developing economic and political links with greater Asian area.²⁷ The current US projects in Central Asia like USAID's Regional Energy Markets Assistance Program intended to help Central Asian states deliver better service and prepare the institutional and regulatory framework for new regional trading arrangements are conducted within Greater Central Asia agenda. The interest shown by USA to the ADB financed project "Central Asian Economic Cooperation" (CAREC) may signify an important role it can play for the purposes of their strategy.²⁸ The Greater Central Asia project will enable transforming Central Asia into zone of "secure sovereignties sharing viable market economies, enjoying secular and open systems of government". "Development of parliamentary institutions and political parties as well as the rule of law and free speech" will occupy high priority in GCA project.

Part II. Perspectives on the future of Central Asian Regionalism

Thus, three major foreign powers have been promoting a certain vision of regional framework for Central Asia. From their strategic relationships will depend the future and nature of Central Asian regionalism. Initial observations point to existence of a logic of competition and exclusion between them. As processes in this region are evolving unexpectedly, we can not say which Political

²⁶ Maine, 2003.

²⁷ Starr, 2005.

²⁸ Feigenbaum, 2006.

rationality will prevail and what turn will take Central Asian regionalism. But, regardless of which political rationality will prevail, one aspect of Central Asian regionalism seems to be certain. Unless exclusive Central Asian regionalism develops, any regionalism in Central Asia will be that of a set of bilateral relationships.

Contending relationships between PRs

Speaking about interactions and relationships between Russian, Chinese and US approaches, we should highlight, at first, the fact that their respective PRs are influenced by the image they have of themselves and of others.

How do they see themselves and each other?

US involvement in Central Asia confirms their intention of capitalizing on their victory in Cold War to become a truly global hegemon by establishing itself as Eurasian land power²⁹ and to avoid the emergence of new global powers.³⁰ The US approach in Central Asia may be defined mainly as an approach of a global power assuming its status and resolved to defend it. Also, for US, Chinese and Russian interests in Central Asia are inherently imperial in nature and will influence negatively the sovereignty of Central Asian countries.³¹

Beside an important security factor stemming from Xinjiang factor, Chinese involvement in the region is conditioned by its emergence as global actor capitalizing on its economic and financial achievements. For observers, China is involved in Central Asia as an emerging global economic power.³² China's regional approach to Central Asia is indeed described by most of Chinese authors as one of the first successful attempts of China to act as great power contributing institutionally to international ordering.³³

Russian reassertion in Central Asia³⁴ is realized within the framework of its post-imperial project. This means that Russia has left the Western orbit and wants to become once again an “indispensable

²⁹ Kerr, 2008.

³⁰ Brezinski, 1997.

³¹ Blank, 2007.

³² Zvyagelskaya, 2007.

³³ Jia, 2007.

³⁴ Roy, 2004.

country” of world politics.³⁵ . In its endeavors, Russia is comforted by its “great energy power”, Whether this grand project will take the form of a liberal empire³⁶ or that of postimperial project based on pragmatic principles³⁷, Central Asian is an important part of it. Great power needs its client states.³⁸ It is also important to note the growing influence of Eurasian thought in Russian political circles which prones that Russia by its nature is destined to be a Great power with a special moral mission.³⁹

Contending relationships

First impressions are that the mutual relationships between a global power, an emerging global economic power and an indispensable country with special Eurasian mission are rather conflictual than harmonious. The US see the foreign policies of Russia and China in the region as inherently imperial and watches regional evolutions with concern. For Russia and China, US involvement in the region is an attempt to weaken their positions and to encircle them strategically. The recent call for Greater Central Asia was also perceived in the same spirit. The recent article by CACI⁴⁰ affiliated authors affirms that in order to put an end to Russian prevailing influence, linking Central Asia to South Asia and thus moving it away from Russian orbit is essential.⁴¹ Greater Central Asia Project can also be seen as a reactionary move in geopolitical game. In fact, the other major powers such as China and Russia have both been promoting certain regional institutions in Central Asia. Despite initial scepticisms, SCO has been able to consolidate and to attract interest of other important actors like India and Iran who currently enjoy status of observer States. Russia, at its turn, succeeded in strengthening its integration projects within the frameworks of EEC and CSTO. In this perspective, Greater Central Asia project points to US efforts of developing alternative regional projects for Central Asia.

If both China and Russia are both concerned by the US presence in the region, this doesn't mean

³⁵ Trenin, 2006.

³⁶ Chubays, 2003.

³⁷ Trenin, 2006.

³⁸ Trenin, 2006.

³⁹ Laruelle, 2008b.

⁴⁰ Frederick Starr, the author of « A new Partnership for Central Asia », is director of Central Asia and Caucasus Institute of John Hopkins University.

⁴¹ Norling and Swanstörn, 2007.

that they have harmonious position on all other aspects as well. In fact, Russian observers have increasing worries about Chinese preponderance in many areas including economy. These worries may lead to increasingly diverging positions between China and Russia concerning regional order in Central Asia. If China wants to make the SCO a foremost regional cooperation organization, Russia, realizing that it will become a subordinate partner in this kind of organization, tries to promote EEC/CSTO as a general framework for cooperation between Russia and Central Asia.

Central Asian Regionalism as a Set of bilateral relationships

If contending character of relationships between these PRs is apparent, it is difficult for now to answer what will be the nature of Central Asian regionalism. If Greater Central Asia project prevails, Central Asian regionalism will at least include Afghanistan and will be more integrated to Southern Asia. This can also lead to further fragmentation of Central Asia. Recent treaty on Persian-Speaking Union between Afghanistan, Iran and Tajikistan⁴² as well as one tajik author's observation about temporality of Tajikistan's dependence on Russia and that it should orient towards Persian speaking world shows the presence of centrifugal elements in Central Asia.⁴³ If Russian and Chinese positions prevail, Central Asian status as a bloc stuck between two giants will be strengthened. In either case, as long as genuine Central Asian regionalism will not develop, geopolitical pressure and its constraining effects on the development of the region will continue.

However, one point can be elaborated concerning the nature of Central Asian regionalism, regardless of which PR will prevail. All of them promote a regionalism based on bilateral principles. Neither of them truly promotes genuine multilateralism, essential for good regionalism.

Nominally, multilateralism stands for the practice of coordinating national policies in groups of three or more states. From this perspective, EEC or SCO can be considered as multilateral organizations. But, in practice, current regionalism in Central Asia involves bilateral behavior more than multilateral one. It lacks qualitative multilateralism essential for constructing regional

⁴² Medrea, 2008.

⁴³ Abdullo, 2007.

integration. Qualitative multilateralism is about more than a mere number of participating states. Its distinguishing feature is that it is based on certain principles of ordering relations among concerned states. It requires, on the one hand indivisibility among the members of a collectivity with respect to the range of behavior in question. The attitude of one state against any one of group members will be identical to its attitude to other states of the group. On the other hand, multilateralism generates among concerned states expectations of diffuse reciprocity. In other words, the behavior of individual states will not be commanded by quid-pro-quo considerations.⁴⁴

If we apply this framework to the case of regionalism in Central Asia, we will see that the ordering principle is rather bilateral than multilateral. CSTO is perceived as extending Russian umbrella to its members. The military structures Kirghizstan and Tajikistan operating under CSTO mandat are in fact operated bu Russia.⁴⁵ Moreover, Central Asian states join CSTO not for providing together for their collective security, but for profiting from Russian guarantees and also cheap prices for Russian arms. According to institutional arrangements, Russia holds most of the voting rights. As one Russian observer put it straightly, “ talk in the CSTO and EAEC is not so much about multilateral relations as about several pairs of bilateral relations with Russia”.⁴⁶ When Uzbekistan joined European Economic Community in 2004, this fact was described as a simple bilateral issue of Uzbekistan rapproachment with Russia.⁴⁷ The fact confirmed by contribution of big contracts by Uzbekistan to Russian companies Gazprom and Lukoil, following the signature of protocol of Uzbekistan's adhesion to EEC.⁴⁸ Bilateral relationships prevail within SCO as well. For some, SCO is not a multilateral organization with six member structure. Due to great differences among its members, the structure of SCO can only be presented as 2+4 or as 1+1+4.⁴⁹ When China pledged 900 millions US dollars for developing economic relations within SCO, this was interpreted as a Chinese gesture towards Uzbekistan.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Ruggie, 1992.

⁴⁵ Flikke and Wilhelmsen, 2008.

⁴⁶ Trenin, 2006.

⁴⁷ Tolipov, 2005; Fumageolli, 2007.

⁴⁸ Melikova and Sardovski, 2006.

⁴⁹ Tolipov, 2004a.

⁵⁰ Panfilova, 2006.

US policy in the region was criticized for its bilateral nature.⁵¹ Greater Central Asia idea may be perceived as a response to these critics. But close scrutiny of GCA as well as recent signals coming from American establishment points to the contrary. US still see bilateral relationships as a key to their regional policy success in Central Asia. For example, a recent study reaffirms the centrality of Uzbekistan for USA and the weakness of relying on Kazakhstan as principal US partner in the region.⁵² Moreover, in case of GCA project development, this project will have to hold in coherent framework such traditional bilateral relationships like US-Pakistan or US-India.

Conclusions

Due to the lack of genuine Central Asian political rationality, Central Asian countries will be embedded increasingly in current regionalism projects promoted by foreign powers. The contending relationships between these PRs as well as prevailing of bilateral logic can lead to the emergence of a negative kind of regionalism in Central Asia. Further development of institutional and normative constraints within the framework of these competing regionalism projects will diminish the chances of genuine Central Asian regionalism. On the contrary, if Central Asian states could reactivate and develop regional project among themselves, it will help them to avoid perpetual repetition of geopolitical confrontation in the region. After David Kennedy's words, the transformation of international social life into an institutional process sets the regime against the repetition of history. European countries have been able to overcome centuries long logics of competition and exclusion, which led to devastating wars in the continent, by developing working multilateral institutions.⁵³ Working regionalism is also an important factor for the development of States and it will also help them participate in the life of international community for the benefit of all.

The examples of EU as well as ASEAN show the importance of international institutions based on qualitative multilateralism. The development of working regionalisms were not spontaneous in Europe and Asia either. If war and chaos played the role of "break" in Europe facilitating the move

⁵¹ Macfarlane, 2004.

⁵² Blank, 2007.

⁵³ Kennedy, 1987.

to institutions⁵⁴, the observers trace the genuine development of regional institutions in Asia to the Asian Financial Crisis in late nineties. If ASEAN was already moving in the direction of consolidating the regional order after the end of Cold War⁵⁵, Asian Financial crisis played an important role for accelerating this movement. Today, ASEAN is increasingly gaining prominent place in Asian as well as global order. Not only it has consolidated, but it is also at the center of growing institutional relationships going beyond Asia.

Foreign Political Rationalities were not absent during the formation of European and Asian regionalisms either. But, local Political Rationalities succeeded to become central ones. And, they could turn the presence of foreign Political Rationalities into supporting element for the development of their own regional projects.⁵⁶ Europe used the US involvement for developing regional institutions. The specter of negative consequences of foreign powers' involvement in the region led to the formation of ASEAN. Now, their regionalism permits them involve major powers like China and USA positively. In contrast, the distinguishing feature of Central Asian regionalism can be said the absence of coherent local Political Rationality. They are trying to engage major powers like Russia and China without first developing their own regionalism. This is leading to perpetuation of “Great Game” considerations. For overcoming this geopolitical trap, they should go beyond geopolitics by creating a genuine multilateralism between themselves. Indeed, newly emerging EU Political Rationality could help this happen. The EU has recently adopted new strategy for cooperation with Central Asia.⁵⁷ We know that EU is now the leading example of working regionalism as well as promoter of regionalism in other parts of the world. It supports and cooperates with regional institutions in Asia, Africa and Americas. If European Union would involve in Central Asia, in its status of normative power⁵⁸, this could play favorable role for reactivating and developing genuinely Central Asian regionalism.

⁵⁴ Kennedy, 1987.; Laffan, 1998.

⁵⁵ Acharya, 2003/2004.

⁵⁶ Laffan, 1998.

⁵⁷ Lobjakas, 2005.

⁵⁸ Laiji, 2005.

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