Russia and China in Central Asia: growing geopolitical competition (*)

The First Phase of Sino-Russian relations in Central Asia (1991-2001)

In the first ten years after the independence of ex Soviet Central Asia, Russia’s strategic goal was to maintain the “near abroad” under its political, economic, military influence by means of bilateral relations and the involvement of Central Asian states in the Moscow-backed regional multilateral organizations in the economic field (Central Asian Cooperation Organization, CACO)¹, in the military field (Collective Security Treaty Organization, CSTO) and the political field (Community of Independent States, CSI)². If Russian foreign policy was initially aimed at strengthening relations with the West, leaving post Soviet Central Asia – conceived as an untenable economic and political burden³ – to its fate, the following concerns about threats to regional security and stability (such as the Tajik civil war 1992-1997, Afghan instability, and a potential Islamist insurrection) and the political strategy to maintain its traditional influence over the new independent states have in «Le courrier de pays de l’Est», no. 1055, May-June 2006, pp. 14-17.

¹ Until 2006 there were two different multilateral economic organizations which both pursued regional economic integration: the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (composed of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Russia and Belarus) and the Central Asian Economic Cooperation (composed of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), renamed EurAsEC in 2002. Following the Russian adhesion to EurAsEC in 2004 and the Uzbek adhesion to CACO in 2006, this latter organizations was merged into the EurAsEC in order to avoid a duplication of organizations with the same strategic goals. Cfr. M. LIGHT, La galaxie CEI 1991-2006, in YONGJIN ZHANG - ROUBEN AZIZIAN (eds.), Ethnic challenges beyond borders: Chinese and Russian perspectives of the Central Asia conundrum, London, MacMillan Press, 1998, pp. 20-26.


(*) The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISP.
pushed Moscow to implement an integrationist strategy towards Central Asia. With regard to these Russian attempts, the Central Asian states have shown a different approach, strictly linked to economic and political issues. On the one hand Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have always participated in the supranational organizations promoted by Moscow, while Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan were profoundly mistrustful of Russia’s integrationist policy, Uzbekistan for its ambition to play the role of regional leader, while Turkmenistan did not participate coherently with its neutrality policy adopted in international relations.

When President Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000, this orientation of Russian foreign policy was enhanced: the armed attacks of Islamic militants in Uzbekistan and the Ferghana Valley in 1999 and 2000 – which stressed the existence of dangerous threats to regional and internal security and stability – and the U.S. geopolitical success in the Kazakh energy sector (after the important concessions obtained by American and Western energy companies for the exploitation of the Tengiz and Kashagan oil fields) required a strengthening of the Russian presence in Central Asia.

Chinese strategy towards Central Asia in the first ten years of independence of the new republics was mainly aimed at three key goals:

1. To guarantee and reinforce national security and regional stability, since China feared that the creation of independent states closer to its Western border could push the Uighur population of the Xinxiang region to support separatist tendencies and claim independence from China, considering their religious, ethnic and cultural affinities with the Central Asian populations.

2. To develop political and economic relations with the Central Asian republics, in order to improve relations with the new border states and develop economic and commercial relations with them, as a kind of “geo-economic strategy” to ensure stability and security in the region. China developed bilateral relations mainly with neighbouring Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and solved with them the border issues inherited after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which allowed China to control the Uighur diaspora better, developing cooperation in the security field and enhancing reciprocal trust. Moreover, the development of deeper economic relations proved relatively easy because the Chinese and Central Asian economies are complementary: China imports raw materials (energy, ferrous and non-ferrous metals, and minerals) and represents a wide and alternative market for the Central Asia land-locked economies which import consumer goods and finished products from China.

3. Moreover, the Xinjiang Autonomous republic is rich in energy and mineral resources which will become necessary to support Chinese economic growth and development.


5 Kyrgyz economic weakness and the absence of natural resources such as gas and oil to export obliged the first president Askar Akayev to maintain strong dependence links with Russia. Concerning Kazakhstan, the presence of a consistent Russian minority in its territory posed a serious risk to internal instability during the first years of independence as the national institutions were still weak. Moreover, this oil-rich nation was entirely dependent on Russian pipelines for its exports, thus President Nazarbayev preferred to deal with Moscow in order to implement a regional cooperation framework.


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9 New treaties were signed with Kazakhstan in 1994 (the zones still in dispute were settled in 1999), with Kyrgyzstan in 1996 (here also, resolutions over disputed areas were settled in 1999) and with Tajikistan in 2002, after the reconciliation process following the end of the civil war.
3. To ensure the control of Central Asian oil and gas in order to strengthen its energy security. In this first phase, China developed energy cooperation with oil-rich Kazakhstan and national energy companies began to invest in Kazakh oil fields, with the clear strategic aim to realize a new pipeline in order to transport Kazakh oil to China, thus allowing diversification in its energy imports.

In this first phase, relations between the two regional geopolitical players improved after the previous mistrust and tensions of the Cold War period. The normalization of their relations led to the signature of a Treaty of Good Neighbourliness, Cooperation and Friendship in July 2001, an equal strategic partnership based on reciprocal trust and aimed at strategic cooperation in international and regional issues.

The creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001 was another sign of this atmosphere of cooperation: in order to fight the so called “three evils” (ethnic separatism, religious extremism and terrorism) and to ensure regional stability, Russia and China agreed to create this regional organization, in which they both participate with the Central Asian states (with the exception of Turkmenistan).

The strategic convergence of geopolitical interests (2001-2005)

In the second phase (2001-2005), United States military presence in the region represented a perceived threat to Chinese and Russian security strategies in Central Asia. Following the 9/11 events and American military intervention in Afghanistan, the U.S. strengthened military cooperation with Uzbekistan, obtaining the use of the Karchi-Khanabad airbase (known also as K2 airbase), and with Kyrgyzstan, obtaining the use of the Manas airbase, in addition to other military facilities from 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 U.S. military forces in the post-Soviet area 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 area. China also distrusted and was concerned about some American goals in the region, considering that Manas airbase and other military facilities in Tajikistan are strategically close to the Chinese border.

At first Russia and China substantially tolerated this U.S. military presence as the convergence of geopolitical interests prevailed over open opposition: the two regional superpowers foreshadowed the opportunity to obtain strategic and political gains, allowing the U.S. to establish a military presence in the post-Soviet area for the first time in history. The main shared goal was to prevent sales and technology transfers and energy and raw materials supply, to undertake the demarcation of the two countries' long-disputed 4,300 km border, to face the rise of militant Islam in Central Asia. Cf. R. MENON, The limits of Chinese-Russian partnership, in “Survival”, vol. 51, no. 3, June-July, 2009, pp. 99-130.

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threats to regional security due to the worsened Afghanistan scenario: the potential spread of instability close to their borders (Xinxiang, Tajikistan, Caucasus, Chechnya) could seriously weaken Sino-Russian internal political stability and also damage regional trade and the energy infrastructures transporting Central Asian oil and gas to Russia and China\textsuperscript{14}, causing interruptions of energy supplies and delays in the realization of the planned new pipelines\textsuperscript{15}.

However, the U.S. military presence weakened Sino-Russian influence in Central Asia, affecting their strategic role in the region. 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. In the security field, the two regional superpowers have increasingly involved the Central Asian republics in their regional multilateral initiatives, such as the implementation of the Russian-backed CSTO (except Turkmenistan, while Uzbekistan refused to join the organization from 1999 to 2006) and the development of counter-terrorism initiatives within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (in which Moscow and Beijing both participate).

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; besides, the U.S. military presence in Central Asia (Manas and K2 airbases) helped Russia to gain strategic military concessions in Kyrgyzstan (the Kant airbase which operates under the CSTO) and in Tajikistan (the establishment of a permanent Russian base in Dushanbe after the eviction of the Russian border army from the Tajik-Afghan border)\textsuperscript{16}.

\textsuperscript{14} The first section of the Sino-Kazakh oil pipeline became operational in 2003.

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. It was partially achieved by means of the SCO, exercising strategic pressure on the Central Asian members (in order to establish a departure date for U.S. military forces from Central Asian military airbases) and convincing them that their own national interests and the region’s stability would be best promoted through this regional security organization rather than through a strategic partnership with the U.S.\textsuperscript{17}

The Sino-Russian strategy achieved its goal following the Andijan events in May 2005\textsuperscript{18}, the deterioration of

\textsuperscript{17} Moreover China and Russia also exploited the progressive cooling of the strategic cooperation between the United States and the Central Asian republics, which perceived Western pressures and calls for human rights protection and the adoption of reforms as interference in the management of their internal affairs, while the supposed U.S. longa manus to support the “Coloured Revolutions” in the post-Soviet area (Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan in 2005) enhanced their general mistrust of the real aims of the U.S. geopolitical strategy in the region. Cf. A. COOLEY, U.S. Bases and Democratization in Central Asia, in «Orbis», vol. 52, no. 1, 2008, pp. 66-68.
\textsuperscript{18} Russia and China politically supported Tashkent’s official explanation of the Andijan events, while Western countries condemned Islam Karimov’s regime for its disproportionate use of force and massacring of civilians: according to the Uzbek authorities,
the U.S.-Uzbekistan strategic partnership and the expulsion from the Karchi-Khanabad military airbase represented a clear signal of American geopolitical retreat in Central Asia, with the loss of the strategic partner in the region and its realignment to Russia, confirmed afterwards through the agreement for a Mutual Defence Pact with Russia in November 2005, and with the Uzbek adhesion to the Moscow-led regional organisation CSTO and EurAsEC in 2006.\(^\text{19}\)

The Kyrgyz “Tulip Revolution” in March 2005 – which provoked for the first time

since 1991 the removal of a Central Asian president-- and the Andijan events spread fears in the Central Asian political leaderships over the stability of their power, and consequently the need to strengthen internal security and to maintain their political power pushed them to re-orient their foreign policy towards the two regional superpowers, considered as reliable security partners able to contain these threats and preserve the status quo.

Growing geopolitical rivalry

Following the achievement of their shared goal to expel the U.S. military from the region, Russia and China have consolidated their reciprocal spheres of influence in Central Asia. However, after the geopolitical marginalization of their rival, the different strategic aims of Russia and China towards Central Asia have emerged in the regional scenario, drawing up several elements of tension and rising geopolitical competition between them in the security, energy and economic fields.

As regards regional security, Russia and China still share the strategic goal to ensure stability and security in the region and have enhanced cooperation to achieve this aim within the SCO framework: the Kyrgyz upheaval in April 2010 and the following instability caused by the interethnic clashes between Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbek in June 2010 have highlighted the existence of threats to the status quo and the risk of a “domino effect” spreading instability in Central Asia and also affecting their strategic and energy interests. These fears have recently been confirmed by increased armed incursions of Islamic extremists in the Ferghana Valley, due to the return from Afghanistan and Pakistan of Central Asian Islamic extremists targeted by the U.S. military campaign\(^\text{20}\), their cross-border activities and movements through the Tajik-Afghan border represent a serious destabilizing threat not only for the Central Asian states (mainly Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan which share the Ferghana Valley area) but also for China (which fears instability in the Xinjiang region) and Russia and for U.S. efforts to stabilize Afghanistan.\(^\text{21}\)

At present Russia appears to be the main security provider for Central Asian states, involved in bilateral


\(^{21}\) Another threat to regional stability is represented by the drug traffic from Afghanistan, made easier by the weak controls in Kyrgyzstan and at the Tajik-Afghan borders: this profitable drug flow is fueling corruption in the transit countries and causing growth in drug abuse and related diseases, and in the rate of criminality; all factors which are also affecting the Russian Federation population.
military cooperation and in CSTO activities: Russia considers the Eurasia region as an exclusive sphere of influence to be protected from external interference through CSTO activities, which can be defined as a counter-balance to Western and Chinese influence in the former Soviet area. Among Russian intentions, the CSTO is an effective tool for military and political integration between Moscow and the Central Asian states, in order to maintain its influence in the region by means of joint military exercises, the delivery of modern military equipment at Russian internal prices, and the presence of CSTO military bases in Central Asian republics such as the Anti-Terror Center in Tashkent, the airbase at Kant in Kyrgyzstan, and the Russian 201st Motor Rifle Division at Kulyab in Tajikistan.

At the level of military cooperation with the Central Asian republics, China cannot compete with Russia. Beijing has no military bases in the region (partly due to the fierce opposition of Central Asian public opinion which fears potential Chinese expansionism within their national territories) and its military aid is limited and mostly directed to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. According to the Chinese security goals, the Sino-Kazakh strategic cooperation assumes great importance and seems destined to increase in the sector of cross-border security cooperation, in order to contain the perceived separatist threat of the Uighur population.

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 prioritises security issues, while Beijing aims at widening the SCO’s competencies in the economic domain.

In 2007 the CSTO and SCO signed a Memorandum of Understanding in order to enhance cooperation in the military and security field. This agreement can be interpreted as Moscow’s attempt to engage China into a fully-fledged military alliance, even if the real Russian goals appear to limit Chinese freedom of manoeuvre in Central Asia, engaging the regional rival in deepened military cooperation within the framework of a multilateral organization with the aim of better controlling Chinese ambition and demonstrating Russia’s pre-eminence in the regional security field.

China would prefer to develop the SCO as the main instrument of its economic development, to economically integrate Central Asia and not to transform the SCO into a security-oriented organization like the CSTO.

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22 This CSTO role in the regional security sphere has also been affirmed in the new Russian Foreign Policy Concept and the New Defence Law, which substantially recognizes the existence of Russian privileged interests in the post-Soviet area and the possibility for military intervention in other states where there are risks to Russian “minority interest and dignity” (and also to counter an attack or prevent an aggression against Russian forces). President of Russia, “The new Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation President of Russia”. President of Russia-Official web portal, July 12, 2008, http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/text/docs/200807/204750.shtml.


26 Moreover, Moscow’s proposal to create an energy club among SCO members reflects the Russian strategic will to contain and control Chinese expansion in the Central Asian energy sector.

However, the Central Asian republics are against the institution of a common market or free-trade area, mainly because they fear they will become Chinese economic protectorates.

Nevertheless, since 2000 Sino-Central Asian commercial relations have considerably increased and in 2009-2010 for the first time China’s net trade with the Central Asian region exeeded that of Russia.28 China’s economic influence is predominant in the Central Asian states with which it shares borders: Kazakhstan represents China’s most important economic partner in Central Asia and Beijing is also the first trade partner for Kyrgyzstan and the second trade partner for Tajikistan.29 China accounts for 34% of Kyrgyzstan’s foreign trade, 15% of Kazakhstan’s — it is Kazakhstan’s second largest export partner after the EU — and 10% of Tajikistan’s.30

The competition between Russia and China in the Central Asian energy sector represents another 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 — which also involves Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan since these nations are crossed by the pipeline and sell part of their gas — Russian monopolistic control over Central Asian energy exports has been seriously damaged, considering that since these new pipelines have existed, 70% of Kazakh oil exports and 90% of Turkmen gas exports have been transporated through the Russian pipeline network (Central Asia-Centre gas pipeline network and the CPC oil pipeline).31

The Sino-Kazakh pipeline connects the Caspian shores to the Dostyk/Alashankou Chinese border post. The third and last section is to be completed in 2011 and will increase the pipeline’s overall export capacity to twenty million tons per year. The Sino-Turkmen gas pipeline has a capacity of 40 bcm per annum, with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan supplying about a third each.32

Moscow’s reaction has been to promote the Russian-backed Prikaspiiski gas pipeline project which involves Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, though this project is now stalling both politically and economically.33 In this way Moscow is losing its strategc leverage over Central Asian suppliers, which are not obliged to sell their resources only to Russia and can diversify their export routes, maximizing their gains, so this Sino-Russian rivalry allows the Central Asian states to obtain higher prices.34

The Chinese option is more attractive for Central Asian energy suppliers than for

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28 Between 2000 and 2003, Central Asian trade with Russia stagnated at 1990s levels, while trade between China and Central Asia increased by more than 200 percent. In 2007, Russian-Central Asian trade totalled $US 21 billion, with Sino-Central Asian trade between $US 14 and 18 billion. Cf. M. LARUELLE - S. PEYROUSE, op.cit., pp 33-41; p. 120.


Russia, because Chinese investments are focused on building new infrastructures, developing and exploiting new energy fields which will guarantee increased oil and gas production for Central Asian suppliers.

Conclusions

Although the Sino-Russian strategic cooperation partnership has recently evolved — boosting bilateral trade and economic cooperation and enhancing cooperation in the oil and gas sectors — geopolitical competition between Russia and China to influence Central Asia is destined to continue in the coming years, considering the importance of their strategic goals in the region. Moscow aims to preserve its traditional influence in the “near abroad” as well as to control Central Asian energy exports, while Beijing aims to become the leader of a greater economic area as well as to strengthen its energy cooperation with Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan (and Uzbekistan in a future perspective) in order to enhance Chinese energy security and diversification of supplies.

However, over recent years we can observe the substantially reduced power of Russia in Central Asia, this having been progressively replaced by the growing influence of China which could become the most influential regional leader, thus reducing traditional Russian control over the post Soviet area. If we consider Russian security goals in the post Soviet area — to position Moscow as a pole of power and influence in the region, maintain the pro-Moscow regimes of the region, and exclude or limit American and Chinese influence in the region — Moscow’s actual geopolitical difficulties appear evident.

The loss of Russian influence has been shown by several elements: the global economic crisis of recent years has severely damaged Russia’s domestic economy and consequently weakened its geopolitical weight in Central Asia, slackening the implementation of several projects due to the lack of money to invest, such as the planned expansion of the Prikaspiiskii gas pipeline project, the envisaged investments to develop the Uzbek energy sector, and also the delays in Russia’s strategy to forge a broad customs union, mainly due to Central Asian reluctance to join it and the Uzbek decision to withdraw from the EurAsEC. In addition, Russia has recently faced some significant “geopolitical defeats” in the Central Asian scenario, such as Turkmenistan’s refusal to be involved in regional multilateral organizations (SCO, EurAsEC, CSTO) and the worsening of their relations especially in the energy field (while Ashgabat has strongly enhanced its energy cooperation with China), as well as the Kyrgyz government’s failure to obtain the expulsion of U.S. military forces from the Manas airbase in 2009.

As regards Russian’s economic weakness and geopolitical difficulties, the Central Asian presidents are implementing a profitable “multi-vector” policy aimed at strengthening commercial, political and energy relations with other geopolitical players (China, the United States, and to a lesser extent India, the European Union and South Korea) and reducing their traditional links with Moscow in order to maximize their economic and strategic benefits.

Besides the financial aspects, the 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 integrationist policy.


37 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. Indeed one of the main strategic goals of both the
This aggressive strategy has harmed Russian efforts to promote itself as a pole of power in Central Asia, with the consequence that China appears to protect the Central Asian states better than Russia. Moreover, the Central Asian presidents are strengthening their military cooperation with the U.S. within the framework of the Northern Distribution Network - allowing the U.S. to strengthen its military cooperation with the Central Asian republics, obtain some military facilities in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan and also maintain the Manas airbase in Kyrgyzstan.

Central Asian states and China is to prevent separatism aspirations, while the Russian invasion represented a clear violation of the key SCO principles on separatism and non-intervention. The Northern Distribution Network (NDN) is a commercial logistical corridor connecting Baltic and Black Sea ports with Afghanistan via Russia, Central Asia and the Caucasus, with the goal of ensuring resupply operations with Afghanistan. The creation of the NDN was necessary in order to create an alternative web of resupply routes – compared to the traditional Pakistan-Afghanistan route, which suffered serious disruptions after becoming a target for Taliban attacks since 2008 – in order to help with combat operations facilitating the surge of supplies associated with an increase of 21,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan in 2009 and an additional 30,000 troops in 2010. For more information on the Northern Distribution Network, see A.C. KUCHINS, T.M. SANDERSON, The Northern Distribution Network and Afghanistan Geopolitical Challenges and Opportunities, Washington D.C., Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 2010.

which represents a serious new challenge to traditional Russian influence in the Central Asian security field.