

The Foreign Policy Orientations of Central Asian States: Positive and Negative Diversification

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The Problem of Diversification and Geopolitical Stability

Many explain the attractiveness of this region with reference to its richness in natural resources (e.g., oil and gas, gold, cotton, uranium, and other non-mineral resources). Conventional wisdom, at first glance, dictates that world powers prioritize these natural resources to indicate their strategic interests in Central Asia and establish relations with its states. These economically motivated geopolitical activities in Central Asia were reinforced and envisaged by Western and Russian social scientists soon after the collapse of the former Soviet Union. Zbigniew Brzezinski, for instance, in his brilliant book, wrote: “Access to that resource [natural gas and oil] and sharing in its potential wealth represent objectives that stir national ambitions, motivate corporate interests, rekindle historical claims, revive imperial aspirations and fuel international rivalries . . . The geostrategic implications for America are clear: America is too distant to be dominant in this part of Eurasia but too powerful not to be engaged . . . Russia is too weak to regain imperial domination over the region or to exclude others from it, but it is also too

close and too strong to be excluded.”¹

Many began to use the term “diversification” to explain the process of the inevitable multiplication of directions for the transportation of oil, gas and other resources of Central Asia to world markets. But this term is applied not only with respect to the transportation of the mineral resources of the Caspian region to world markets but also to indicate the foreign policy orientations of all five Central Asian countries. Thus, diversification or pluralization (the term applied by Brzezinski) is twofold: economic and geopolitical.

However, all these are just visible manifestations, or forms, of the geopolitical transformation of Central Asia. But its essence consists in the change of geopolitical code or status of the region concerned in the international political system. Post-Soviet Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, for the first time in their history, are acting as independent actors in international relations. This very fact is either ignored by many researchers or even misrepresented in favor of traditional and obsolete perceptions based on consideration of these states only from the viewpoint of which a great power dominates here.

In a very complicated international context, the overall search for local (national) as well as what can be called “external identity” (strategic orientation) by Central Asian countries can take either positive or negative forms and meanings. I call this phenomenon positive and negative diversification. Negative diversification revitalizes the classical balance of power in international relations and the zero-sum game played between great powers usually at the expense of the Central Asian states. Positive diversification avoids the zero-sum approach and is inclusive in character: it means not only the equal involvement of external powers but also, more importantly, a more coordinated policy among the Central Asian states.

The strategic importance of Central Asia not only lies in the economic sphere but is also predetermined from the viewpoint of regional and international security. The ongoing “war on terror” in Afghanistan, a country adjacent to Central Asia (according to some views, even part of Central Asia), is further proof of this region’s importance.

The newly independent countries of Central Asia found themselves, so to speak, doubly confused: by the process of the New World Order

¹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 125, 148.

formation that they have to enter on the one hand, and by the necessity to understand their selfness on the other. In other words, they are in an awkward state of confusion regarding concepts of independence and interdependence.

Moreover, during the Soviet era, there was no question of global orientation, or of their place in the world and among civilizations. Now, such choices as West or East, Asia or Europe or Eurasia, America or Russia are increasingly articulated in Central Asian scholarly and political debate.

Meanwhile, it has become a common view that the September 11 attacks in 2001 constituted a turning point in the process of reshaping the international system in the post-Cold War era. Many also argue that a strategic character of cooperation between the United States and Uzbekistan grew in the context of 9/11. It is true that following this date, international attention towards Central Asia increased considerably. However, it should be emphasized that right after the dismantlement of the former Soviet Union, the Central Asian region suddenly found itself the focus of international attention. The old-fashioned notion of a “Great Game,” which once again has been revitalized, denotes a permanent geopolitical rivalry among global powers over Central Asia.

Today, we can firmly assume that we are witnessing a new, third reincarnation of the Great Game over this part of the world. The first two were held in the format of two actors: the Russian Empire versus the British Empire (late nineteenth–early twentieth century) and the Soviet Union versus the United States (1979–1989 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan).

The current Great Game is distinguished by several peculiarities. First, it is multilevel, multinational, and multifaceted. Too many actors are playing this game. Second, if there were two actors, as was the case with the previous two major games, then the zero-sum-game rule might be the most relevant and inescapable mode of competition over Central Asia. To date, this is impossible due to the multiplication of actors, and they cannot appeal to the zero-sum modality: those who are involved, and they are either state- and non-state actors, can create alliances and counter-alliances; state interests intermingle with companies’ interests; yesterday’s adversary becomes tomorrow’s partner and vice versa. Third, Central Asians themselves have become players, and in these geopolitical circumstances are indeed entangled. The end result is a “small game” of

Central Asians among themselves against the background of the “Great Game” being played by outside powers.

So the geopolitical situation is ambiguous for all sides. Countries of the region are highly susceptible to any geopolitical influence and change. This is why we can consider the term of geopolitical stability. It is not to say that geopolitical equilibrium should be maintained because it is an element of the obsolete balance of the power mode of international relations that we considered above. Rather, it is to say that the region should be freed from negative diversification, and its outward orientation should not obstruct and undermine its inward orientation. It goes further from the positive diversification concept to a recognition of a higher independent status for the region of Central Asia, which would possess its own system of collective security.

Meanwhile, Central Asian studies in the West are full of controversies and misperceptions. Let us look at two main misperceptions amongst many. One view is that America cannot but keep a low profile in Central Asia. The dominant analytical view about the possible US posture in the region has stemmed so far from the traditional perception that Central Asia is part of the Russian sphere of influence and even dominance. A similar approach is that any American undertaking in Central Asia should definitely be coordinated with Russia.

Another persistent stereotype emanates from the view that Central Asia is a conflict-prone region, and that there is a deep distrust among Central Asians, especially the struggle between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan for domination of the region. An even bigger and more widespread misperception is that of Uzbek expansionism in Central Asia.

Meanwhile, there is one common response to all contemporary challenges, including geopolitical ones, and one way to correct misperceived stereotypes about the region, which is the regional integration of all Central Asian countries.

There is also another reason that integration in Central Asia is very much needed: there is a strong trend toward economic and political regionalization across the world that makes Central Asian regional self-determination vitally important. Central Asian countries are all involved (to different degrees and for different reasons) in all sorts of regional state alliances such as the CIS, GUUAM, the Eurasian Economic Community (EEC), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), the Organization of Islamic Conference

(OIC) and, finally, the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO). It seems that the CIS and the CACO and the processes taking place between them will determine the very near future. Analysis of integration/reintegration processes across the former Soviet territory has demonstrated that their efficiency and prospects will depend less on economic than on security factors. In fact, in the context of varied economic options embraced by the CIS countries and of the growing contradictions between integration within the post-Soviet territory and integration into the world community, the principle allowing different countries to integrate into the CIS at their own pace (the principle used as an excuse for all sorts of alliances among two, four, etc. states) proves to be vulnerable.

In conclusion, the destructive geopolitics of outside powers and mutual mistrust of states within the region serve as a token of negative diversification. But constructive geopolitics, which is equal to inclusion of outside powers in Central Asian affairs and full integration of countries within the region serve as a token of positive diversification. So it is the responsibility of Central Asians to choose a way to better diversify their foreign policies.

Central Asia between the EEC, SCO and GCA

The Central Asian region finds itself locked between three major organizations: the EEC, SCO, and the Greater Central Asia (GCA). The last is not an organization but a conceptual project, which tends to challenge the former two.

The EEC is the latest model in the 15-year-long process of reintegration modeling in the post-Soviet space. There are two-, four-, six- and twelve-state model integrations within the CIS, including the Commonwealth itself. This kind of experimentation looks as if it copied the European different-speed approach to the overall integration process. This means that among the CIS countries, some have decided on so-called deeper integration (reminiscent of a European first echelon), while others are supposed to join later. By the content of the economic agenda, declaration of goals and political character, this organization is not distinctive compared to the CIS itself. Indeed, the EEC just duplicates, to a great extent, what exists in the CIS, namely the custom union, free trade

zone, energy and transport projects. In 2004, the secretary general of the EEC, Grigorii Rapota, stated that “energy and transport, being the basic infrastructure elements, can spur the development of national economies and the integration of member countries in general.”²

Yet, interestingly, the custom union, planned for 2005–2006, remains a project so far. But it is symptomatic that this process goes in parallel with another process: the creation of a Single Economic Space (also duplicating an analogous idea of the CIS, by the way), this time by Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan. I believe that the different patterns of reintegration of former Soviet states discredit the very idea of integration because these states *split from* a single super-state simultaneously and cannot apply a different-speed model; this is in stark contrast to Europeans who are *moving towards* creating such a super-state.

Side by side with this integrationist experimentation, six CIS states have been engaged in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) that was created on the basis of the 1992 CIS Treaty on Collective Security. Uzbekistan, which was initially a part of the Treaty, did not prolong its participation in the Treaty in 1998. However, recent geopolitical trends in the post-Soviet space and the democratic revolutionary wave that alarmed the current regime in Uzbekistan compelled the president of this state to return to the CSTO. On June 23, 2006, an announcement was made at the CSTO summit in Minsk that Uzbekistan had become a [seventh] full-fledged member of the Organization.³

Meanwhile, during the last summit of the Central Asian Cooperation Organization held in St. Petersburg on October 6, 2005, the member states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Russia—announced that the CACO had merged with the EEC. In fact, this event was the third strike on Central Asian regional unity since their independence. The first strike took place when the Russian Federation became a full-fledged member of CACO in 2004. Russia’s membership distorted the geographical configuration and natural political composition of Central Asia’s attempts at regional organization. The second strike took place with the recent Shanghai Cooperation Organization ultimatum to the

² “Rapota: EvrAzES iavliaetsia deistvuiushei model’iu budushchego Evraziiskogo Soiuza gosudarstv,” RIA Novosti, June 18, 2004.

³ For details of this event, see: <http://www.centrasia.ru>, June 30, 2006.

West, primarily the US, to shut down military bases in Central Asia, followed by Uzbekistan's direct demand for the withdrawal of these contingents. The third strike—merging CACO with the EEC—threatens the self-value and independent existence of Central Asia. It raises the question of whether this third strike on Central Asia represents the genuine end of its newly gained independence.

The SCO is another organization focused in its activity mostly (not to say exclusively) on the region of Central Asia. Analysis of the process of SCO evolution reveals the existence of a certain geopolitical intention. This can be traced to a consideration of two dimensions of the organization: its geographical configuration and political composition. It consists of two global powers and four relatively small, weak Central Asian states. These are not just six states but rather, six unequal states, from the viewpoint of political, economic, military, demographic and social potential. So in reality, the SCO is a politically asymmetric organization.

More important is that another dimension, the geographical dimension, plays a critical role. The appearance of the SCO was possible only after and only in connection with the dissolution of the former Soviet state that brought about the geopolitical transformation of the post-Soviet space. At the same time, its appearance was stipulated by the character of the ongoing formation of the post-Cold War new world order. These two factors of post-Soviet geopolitical transformation and the new world order provide the key to “unraveling the mystery” of the SCO.⁴ As a result, the security problematique that was put on its agenda recently has not been free from geopolitical distortions. The perception prevails nowadays among politicians and analysts that this is something like a Russian-Chinese joint project to establish control over Central Asia and prevent the entrance of the United States. In any case, however, with or without the US presence, Russian-Chinese geopolitical control of this kind is just another form of external dominance of the region's countries and of their falling into a new form of dependence.

Meanwhile, although the SCO is not a military bloc, many believe that the organization pretends to play the role of security provider for the region. They point to the SCO Convention on fighting terrorism, religious

⁴ Farkhod Tolipov, “On the Role of the Central Asian Cooperation Organization within the SCO,” *Central Asia and Caucasus* 27, no. 3 (2004).

extremism and separatism adopted in 2001 and the Regional Anti-terrorist Structure (RATS) created a year later as tools of the organization to provide security. At the same time, one can observe a strange phenomenon: a juxtaposition of multilateral, bilateral and unilateral mechanisms of fighting terrorism in the SCO area.⁵

By and large, the SCO geopolitical message to the international community regarding its intention to deal with security is regularly sent each year. In their last summit on June 15, 2006, SCO members adopted a traditional declaration in which they stated that the Organization possesses the potential to play an independent role in maintaining stability and security in its zone of responsibility. In case of extraordinary situations threatening peace, stability and security in the region, the Declaration says, the SCO member states will immediately start contact and consultation regarding joint operational reaction aiming at protecting the interests of the Organization and member states. The Declaration also announced that a mechanism of regional conflict prevention within the SCO would be created.⁶

The GCA is a multifaceted, multipurpose macro-project aimed at bringing Central Asian countries and Afghanistan together for the realization of a huge set of social and economic development objectives as well as tasks involved with democratic transformation. This project was advanced by the Central Asia and Caucasus Institute of Johns Hopkins University in 2005. Frederick Starr in his conceptual article on the GCA argued that it would demonstrate the existence of long-term US interests in Central Asia. It would be a reflection of the fact that for the promotion of peace and development, Central Asia should be regarded as a single region united by common interests and needs. The emergence of such a zone of cooperation that deters extremist forces and manifests itself as an attractive model for other Muslim societies would produce serious benefits both for the region and for the United States.⁷

According to the GCA project, its purpose is multiple by character. It implies: counter-terrorism; security assistance; the fight against extremism

⁵ For details, see: Farkhod Tolipov, "Multilateralism, Bilateralism and Unilateralism in Fighting Terrorism in the SCO Area," *The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 3, no. 5 (2006).

⁶ <http://www.centrasia.org>, June 16, 2006.

⁷ S. Frederick Starr, "A Partnership for Central Asia," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 4 (2005).

and drug trafficking; strengthening the regional economy and state institutions to a level where the region will be able to play the role of political and economic bridge between the Near East and South and East Asia; development of regional trade and transport infrastructure; and support of democratic processes in predominantly Muslim societies at the regional level.

The authors of the project emphasized that GCA will not challenge the interests of Russia or China, although the latter two can voice their objection to it. Indeed, these two great powers seem to go against the idea of a Greater Central Asia. Very recently, after a meeting of SCO parliamentary representatives, Speaker of the Russian Duma Boris Gryzlov stated that Russia would not tolerate the creation of another international organization in Central Asia under the aegis of the US.⁸ This statement, just like the previous 2005 SCO ultimatum to the US regarding its base withdrawal, sounded as if it had been made on behalf of Central Asia.

A Kyrgyz expert on Afghanistan provides the following contemplation on the GCA: “Most of the Western initiatives in the sphere of security (just like in other spheres as well) have an evident anti-Russian, anti-Chinese and in some instances anti-Iranian direction. In this context, any projects implying regional integration within some new space configurations (like ‘Greater Central Asia’) reflect only endeavors to fix by all means American influence in the region.”⁹

In any case, the critics of the GCA project seem to exaggerate the likelihood of an American challenge to Russian and Chinese interests in the region. Indeed, it is unlikely that the US will threaten Russia or China by using the territory of Central Asian countries. This can be easily explained on the basis of “challenge and response theory.” The crux of the matter is that any challenge by America to Russian and Chinese vital interests from this territory will inevitably be assessed by Russia (China) as an action unfriendly with respect to Russia (China) and force Russian (Chinese) counter-measures directed toward Central Asia, not America, in terms of direct response. In turn, it is against not only the strategic

⁸ <http://www.vedomosti.ru/newline/index.shtml?2006/05/30/270917>. See also RIA Novosti, http://www.rian.ru/world/foreign_russia/20060530/48800682.html.

⁹ Aleksandr Kniazev, “Afganskaia situatsiia i proekt ‘Bol’shoi Tsentral’noi Azii,” part 1 and 2, December 20, 2005, December 23, 2005, <http://www.apn.kz/>.

interests of the United States, who has (or can have) allies in this region, but also the vital and strategic interests of Central Asians themselves.

So we see that the ongoing geopolitical competition of external great powers over Central Asia has placed the countries of the region in a symbolic triangle. Following the entrance of Uzbekistan into the SCO in 2001, Central Asia once became, in a sense, a “GCA.” After the merger of the CACO with the EEC in October 2005, Central Asia was once again reborn as a “GCA.” The current GCA project, as it is, of course has a right to exist just like the EEC and SCO. Surprisingly, Central Asian countries are compelled to answer the following question: who is really taking care of the region? These three projects are to a great degree in direct rivalry with each other. Each has its strengths and weaknesses, and in this sense, none of them should be speeded up unless Central Asia creates, consolidates and demonstrates its own historical unity. Central Asia does not need to be Bigger, but rather, Central Asia needs to be Greater. Therefore, any macro-projects will remain incomplete unless the normal project is complete, namely that of “Central Asia.”

NATO and the OSCE are two other international organizations fulfilling their own missions in Central Asia. To a significant degree, they also can be considered for the role of “security provider” in the region. NATO accomplishes a very important task in Afghanistan by having taken command in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Such a mission in the country, which is out of the NATO zone of responsibility, may seem to be the cause of geopolitical outcomes. However, the Alliance is perhaps the only organization in the world today capable of coping with the Afghan issue as well as with threats to international security spreading from this country’s territory.

All Central Asian countries participate in the NATO “Partnership for Peace” (PfP) Program. This fact could also lead, among other things, to a re-orientation of their security and foreign policy agendas toward adaptation to Western standards. Since 1994 (when the PfP was first announced) until now all Central Asian countries have been engaged in various PfP programs that have been included side by side with military as well as non-military projects. In general, as Roger McDermott rightly argues, “Growing support exists within the Central Asian militaries for deeper engagement with the United States as well as expanded participation within NATO’s PfP. Although the challenges are significant, options for greater levels of successful engagement can be found in

examples from the experiences of the former Warsaw Pact members, and indeed elsewhere within the former Soviet Union.”¹⁰

One can assume that, a “market of security services” alongside a “market of integration models” is emerging in Central Asia. By and large, for the time being, the expansion of these “markets” has just complicated the security environment of the region concerned and has entangled Central Asia’s own efforts in creating a regional collective security system. It is in the sphere of security where the negative diversification of Central Asian states’ foreign policies can be easily observed because this sphere is tied very closely to geopolitics.

We can assume that the countries concerned have, since their independence, been preoccupied with the old-fashioned balance of power mode of international relations. This happened less because they were so narrow-minded as to overlook the advantages of cooperation with developed countries and great powers and more because the external powers’ attitude towards the region has not been in favor of geopolitical stability. Since these powers have seen and now see the region and its geopolitical status differently, their Central Asian policies seem competitive with respect to each other.

Central Asians themselves have contributed to geopolitical instability in the region by neglecting the self-value of regional unification. Four countries’ readiness and consent to sacrifice the CACO for the sake of a bigger and fuzzier EEC reflects their subordinate international self-determination at the expense of what can be called coordinated international self-determination.

Democratization and Integration as Geopolitical Questions

The national and regional self-determination of Central Asians is also at stake. So is the process of democratization. Two processes, democratization and regional integration, vitally depend on the dual nature of nationalism in this region. This phenomenon, the dual nature of nationalism, stems from the common origin and common history of the peoples residing in this region on the one hand, and from the artificial

¹⁰ Roger N. McDermott, *Countering Global Terrorism: Developing the Antiterrorist Capabilities of the Central Asian Militaries* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2004), 27.

(geopolitical) division of their common territory into five quasi-states in the early twenty-first century on the other. This is why both integration and democratization in this part of the world cannot escape geopolitical realities.

Meanwhile, it is not accidental that the democratization process (better to say “expectations of democratization”) in the newly independent states (NIS) of Central Asia passed through three conditionally intermingled stages: universalism, nationalism, and skepticism. At first stage, euphoria over universal democracy prevailed in public opinion and political rhetoric. Democracy was unconditionally recognized as a universal value and the ultimate political goal of reform. At the second stage, the failure of this process, or rather, the reluctance of state leadership to spur democratic motion, led to a substitution of universalism with the concept of national democracy, a concept that was in reality a justification for a delay of democratization. At the third stage, a troublesome tendency began to grow in the society and polity of the Central Asian states. For the most part, the spread of the idea of so-called “enlightened authoritarianism” has become the most adequate model of a political system. That idea stems from the skeptical social mood concerning chances of democracy in the NIS.

The “wind of color revolution” that recently swept over *some* post-Soviet countries and the “spirit of color revolution” existing today in *all* post-Soviet countries are a clear symptom of the turning point in the post-Soviet history. Interestingly, the current debates about democracy in the NIS again reveal the geopolitical dimension of what classically was a non-geopolitical phenomenon. Contemplations regarding the alleged American involvement in the regime change attempts—the color revolutions—in the NIS dominate current overall discussion about what should have been a natural democratic evolution. Public conviction that the United States inspired the so-called 2003 “Rose Revolution” in Georgia, the 2004 “Orange Revolution in Ukraine,” the March 2005 “Tulip Revolution” in Kyrgyzstan and the May 2005 unrest in Andijan (Uzbekistan) are widespread nowadays. But convincing evidence of an American “democratic plot” has not yet been provided in any of these countries. Allegations about such a conspiracy are mostly based on assertions that US-based organizations provided funds to local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for various seminars, education, training, publications, etc. However, this kind of open activity is a textbook

example of a “mission.” We can safely assume that the dilemma of a “democratic plot *versus* a democratic mission” faces all NIS.

On the other hand, the dominant power in the CIS—Russia—supported these convictions; most Russian officials and analysts believe that America continues to challenge Russian interests in post-Soviet countries by attempting to bring democratic and “pro-American” forces there to power.¹¹ We can assume that Russian geopolitical apprehensions about democracy will compel Russia to try to delay or even obstruct any major progress in democratization in the NIS. The Russian expert Sergei Markedonov rightly points out that Russia chose a strategy of containment with respect to the post-Soviet space. “Containment” or “stabilization” is the quintessence of the Russian policy within the CIS. “Such concepts as development, progress, democracy,” he writes, “in the Russian political lexicon have given way in favor of the US and EU who pursue their own interests. Instrumentally, this mission is being realized through support of existing “parties of power” and rejection of dialogue with opposition. Today, such a scenario is being realized in the Russian relations with Belarus, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and to a lesser degree with Armenia and Azerbaijan . . . thereby, the Kremlin deprives itself of insurance against a sudden change of the leadership [in those countries].”¹²

In this context, three inter-related and fundamental questions need to be resolved by Central Asians both academically and politically, namely:

- Will their nationalism play a centripetal or centrifugal role in the process of regional integration and democratization?
- Will they be able to succeed in regional integration on their own or is this possible only under the aegis of Russia?
- What will be the fate of democracy in the condition of an external “democracy push” from one side and “democracy containment” from

¹¹ In particular, Russia supported Uzbekistan when the Andijan events took place on May 13, 2005. In the aftermath of these events, Uzbekistan blamed the US for its alleged involvement, and Uzbekistan-United States relations worsened dramatically. One of the direct results of this was the withdrawal of the American military base from the territory of Uzbekistan. This, in turn, was fully in Russia’s interests.

¹² Sergei Markedonov, “Kak vernut’ znachenie Strany,” <http://www.prognosis.ru/news/modernization/2006/4/17/markedonov.html>.

the other?

First question. It should be noted that nationalism in Central Asia is a threefold phenomenon. It exists on three levels: micro-, macro- and mega-levels. Micro-nationalism is a permanent identity of local, sub-national communities based on tribal and kinship relationships. Macro-nationalism is an ideology of nation- and state-building that has evolved since the dissolution of the former Soviet Union. Mega-nationalism is an integrationist motion, which was also re-actualized in 1991 but reflects the historical unity of the Central Asian peoples based on their common origin and reflected in the 1991-proclaimed political program. From this point of view, objectively, the process proceeds in its development from the micro-level to the mega-level.

However, subjectively, leadership in Central Asian countries find itself vulnerable to a geopolitical game. The latter cannot but distort nationalism in the direction of negative diversification.

Second question. As a result of distorted nationalism, the genuine integration process in Central Asia also turns into a distorted phenomenon. The above-mentioned artificial division of former Turkestan into five parts can nowadays manifests itself in two possible ways. Since the division, the *ethno-geographical settlement* of peoples of the region does not coincide with their *politico-geographical accommodation*. Huge groups of the Central Asian population are settled in a cross-border manner. This cross-border settlement of populations can either undermine any integrationist undertaking or, on the contrary, serve as a stimulating factor. This depends on the modalities of the ongoing geopolitical “Great Game” and on the strategies Central Asian states choose in this game.

Objectively, the geopolitical processes can predetermine Central Asia’s unification efforts as a form of their response to geopolitical pressure from external great powers. However, subjectively, a misunderstanding by leaders of their countries’ national interests can push them into dependence on a particular external power. It is obvious that any external security umbrella for Central Asia will mean dependence, but it is also evident that the creation of a regional collective security system is being suspended by old-fashioned divide-and-rule geopolitics.

By and large, integration in the region is a self-value for the peoples residing here and it should not be under the aegis of any external power. However, people often confuse the essence of post-Soviet integration in

the frameworks of the CIS (which is now unavoidably under the Russian aegis) and the restoration of pre-Soviet Central Asian regional integration. Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev emphasized that Post-Soviet countries need a “new development ideology of society, based not only on economic pragmatism but also on unique common historical and cultural roots, and close interaction of our peoples.”¹³ Although this was expressed with respect to CIS countries, it should be noted that it could be applied, above all, to Central Asian peoples. This new development ideology should be non-Soviet by nature, whereas today’s regional evolution reflects only the Soviet tradition of anti-Americanism, anti-democratism and geopolitical conformism.

Third question. I believe there is one way out of this dilemma: the “democracy push” will only increase and “democracy containment” will fade. This statement stems from the view that the former is a long-term strategy while the latter is a short-term strategy. In turn, the former stems from the idea that modernization and democratization of any NIS is not a “one-moment” task and cannot be realized over night, but the latter stems from the perception that an allegedly Western geopolitical plot is behind any “democracy push.” This perception, however, cannot live long if the state pursuing a containment strategy itself democratizes one way or another.¹⁴

On the other hand, just as in the case of nationalism and as a natural extension of that nationalism, micro-democracy, macro-democracy and mega-democracy can be revealed in Central Asian historical and modern socio-political development. All three levels are mutually dependent. To the extent that democracy means allegiance to the common will of the corresponding population, such allegiance of the same people in Central Asian-specific conditions develops from the micro-level of local

¹³ Nursultan Nazarbaev’s speech at the international forum in Astana on “Eurasian Integration: Tendencies of Contemporary Development and Challenges of Globalization,” June 18, 2004, <http://www.kisi.kz/>.

¹⁴ Surprisingly, however, one can also observe some tendency away from the “push for democracy” policy. For example, in the wake of Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev’s visit to the United States, US President George W. Bush downplayed concerns about Kazakhstan’s recent democratization record, emphasizing that the Central Asian nation appears committed to building institutions “that will enable liberty to flourish.” Bush characterized Kazakhstan as a “free nation.” See: Joshua Kucera, “Bush: Kazakhstan Is A ‘Free Nation,’” *Eurasia Insight*, September 29, 2006, <http://www.eurasianet.org>.

communities to the national and regional levels. The latter—the regional dimension of democracy—is often overlooked in much contemplation about democratization in this part of the world. In this sense, one can talk not only about nation- and state-building but also about region-building. However, the current leadership has been too preoccupied since independence by the so-called national modeling of democracy and has thereby not only overlooked universal standards but also neglected the regional content of democracy.

There is one common answer to all three of the above questions: the will of the leaders of Central Asia. This is a subjective factor, and it has played a crucial role throughout the whole period of independence since 1991. Over-personification of political processes in Central Asia cannot but distort and suspend natural regional identification, regional integration and regional democracy in this part of the world. Due to over-personification of policy in all these countries, democracy has failed, nationalism has been exaggerated and regionalism suspended.

Once, when three presidents decided on their own at Belovezhskaja Pusha (near Minsk, the capital of Belarus) to shut down the USSR and create the CIS, they stated: “From now on, the Soviet Union no longer exists as a state or as a geopolitical reality.” This meant that the geopolitical integrity of the post-Soviet states had officially disappeared, and that was the subjective will of certain people, not an objective historical law. This statement is still in force, and unless Russia, the creator of the CIS, denounces that geopolitical reality, the CIS will remain all but genuinely integrated. Any pro-unification experiment within the CIS will depend primarily on two factors: Russia’s foreign policy, and the development of the newly independent states as independent political actors in the international system.¹⁵

In this context, it often seems that Russia, or at least certain political circles in Russia, have not rid themselves of the remnants of empirical stereotypes and prejudices about the former Soviet area, especially Central Asia. In particular, this can be seen in how Russia reacted to the recent “wave of democracy” in this area.

I agree with Russian analyst Sergei Markedonov who argues that

¹⁵ Farkhod Tolipov, “CACO Merges with EEC: The Third Strike on Central Asia’s Independence,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, October 19, 2005, <http://www.cacianalyst.org>.

“revolutions in the CIS countries are the second step of the overall revolutionary process in the ‘world socialist system.’ In the first stage, there was a collapse of the external Soviet empire. Nowadays, a final liquidation of the internal empire of the USSR is ongoing. Initially, leaders of the former Soviet republics used European and democratic rhetoric but in practice, they had been creating a model of controlled democracy. As a result, the CIS countries are stuck on their transition path from socialism to a market economy and democracy. ‘The middle model’ of development seemed too inefficient. Controlled democracy appeared to be poorly managed and poorly democratic. In fact, ‘color revolutions’ are a reaction to half-measure reforms.”¹⁶

I also agree with Markedonov’s view that in perspective, the realization of a national-democratic project in the CIS will cause a chain of new revolutions, those of cadres. The current leaders of the old regimes will soon leave the political scene. A new generation of politicians and managers will come into power. I believe that Markedonov is right in saying that the Soviet project that is being inserted on a Eurasian scale today will not be accepted. The post-Soviet space as a politico-geographic symbol is likely to at last disappear. Each country that chooses national-democratic self-determination will identify itself without a historical connection to the fallen Soviet Union.¹⁷

Conclusion

Central Asia needs not only to complete the process of national self-determination, but also to create an adequate collective security identity. In fact, the latter stems from the former.

However, the Central Asian region has constantly since its independence suffered from strong external geopolitical pressure. This pressure implies that Central Asians could not and cannot accomplish post-Soviet reintegration on their own, as was originally announced in 1991.

In other words, geopolitical reasoning prevails in almost all regional and CIS-wide political discourse on the mode, direction and ends

¹⁶ Sergei Markedonov, “SNG kak sovetskii proekt s treskom provalilisa,” *TsentrAzia*, April 11, 2005, <http://www.centrasia.org>.

¹⁷ Markedonov, “SNG.”

of the overall post-Soviet transformation, thereby obscuring what can be called “the independent choice” of newly independent countries. It seems that the former Soviet republics, which were suddenly given *de jure independence* in 1991, remain unready for *de facto independence*.

It is clear today that Central Asian countries cannot escape the Great Game being played out in the region. But the problem here is that external powers can be obsessed with the illusion that they are able to manage regional conflicts.¹⁸ These powers themselves should find the “magic formula” of constellation of their interests in Central Asia. On the other hand, Central Asian states themselves should plan by all means a real integration process. But it is also clear that the current leadership of the countries of the region is unable to pursue such a policy. In this context, I agree with Kazakh analyst Sanat Kushkumbaev when he stated: “Optimal transparency in different spheres of political, social, economic and cultural life of Central Asian societies is impossible with the conservation of existing political systems, which make these processes, to a great degree, subjective.”¹⁹

The countries of the region need to develop a “Central Asia first” strategy to be able to overcome archaization and self-isolation of the region from the outside world, and to avoid negative diversification in their foreign policy orientations. But it seems for this to come true that the independence, democratization and modernization of newly independent countries, which split from the former Soviet superstate, need large-scale international support. It would be interesting to consider the applicability of an international “Marshall Plan” model to the countries of Central Asia in their undertaking of regional cooperation efforts. This would be a means and a form of positive diversification of the foreign policies of Central Asian states.

¹⁸ Sanat Kushkumbaev, *Tsentral'naia Aziia na putiakh integratsii: geopolitika, etnichnost', bezopasnost'* (Almaty: “Qazaqstan,” 2002), 115.

¹⁹ Kushkumbaev, *Tsentral'naia Aziia*, 141.