

Russia - China Interplay in Central Asia and the SCO

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Central Asia is a region of growing geopolitical importance. Being a buffer zone, or in the terminology of the Anglo-Saxon school of geopolitics – Rimland – the border area of (Land and Sea) Central Asia is a territory, control over which will provide a springboard for any external actor to secure its position in Eurasia; primarily, the United States (US), China and Russia which are leaders in the scheme of regional balance of powers. However, the relationships within this geopolitical triangle are complex and multifaceted, especially in relation to Central Asia, due to the fact that the region directly borders with China and Russia; and any aggressive actions by any of the external actors will lead to the revitalisation of the others. Therefore, the US sanctions against Uzbekistan after Andijon events were not so stringent as, for example, in the case of Iran. In addition, the region is rich in hydrocarbons, and this fact along with region's central geographic location determine foreign players' specific geo-strategic moves centred around integration initiatives and projects for transcontinental highway construction.

Against this background, there is an inherent potential for conflict in the relationships between Russia and China, the proximate neighbours of the region, but it is latent for two reasons¹:–

- (a) Different tactics of Central Asian countries' involvement in the area of their interests that include different spheres of their major influence in the region;
- (b) Existence of a common enemy in the face of the US.

European experts have metaphorically called Russia a “reluctant soldier”, and China – a “silent merchant”.² In the context of opposition to the US, in these metaphors there can be traced similarity to the US and the European Union (EU) division of zones

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of influence. Being on the opposite sides, the US and Russia are the supporters of 'hard power'; the EU and China are the apologists of 'soft power' instruments.

Since the collapse of the USSR, China had begun to increase its bilateral economic cooperation with the countries of the region and by 2006 it had become the third largest trading partner of the Central Asian countries after Russia and the EU.³ At the same time, the economic potential of the region had not yet been appreciated by either the US or Russia in that period. The latter pursued a pro-western foreign policy and virtually ceased all economic relations with the countries of the region.⁴ The proposed US projects of economic liberalisation of Central Asian countries led only to a protracted crisis against the background of restructuring or total destruction of most of the industrial enterprises of the Soviet period which led to their overwhelming dependence on foreign aid due to lack of an equivalent trading capacity with the Russians. Also, in the early 1990s, intra-regional relations between the republics had deteriorated sharply. This led to the need for finding an external trading partner – a supplier of ready-made products.

The establishment of trade relations by China with the countries of the region has economic, security and geo-political implications. In the sphere of economy, the PRC gets a market for its products in Central Asia region. It also enables China to diversify the sources of its energy imports vital for its dynamically developing economy; which according to experts, would amount to 65 per cent by 2025.⁵ In the field of security, the priority is to prevent external support for the separatist movement in Xinjiang. China's geopolitical ambitions are aimed at countering the US and ensuring for itself a reliable foothold on its western borders.

The US, acting according to its "Anaconda loop" geopolitical strategy, can destabilise the political situation in some countries of the Middle East and North Africa by influencing the oil supplies which make up for 56 per cent and 27 per cent respectively of China's hydrocarbon imports to restrict the resource base of China's economy. In addition, Washington has announced the new initiative of Trans-Pacific Partnership, involving the creation of a free trade area in the Asia-Pacific region. Consequently, supply of oil to China from the region (Indonesia) would be under threat. As

a result, it appears that Beijing would give boost to the dynamics of developing economic relations with the Central Asian countries.

This situation may lead to an increased cooperation between Russia and China, as well as escalation of their rivalry in the region. Externally, in the light of Russian-American relations cooling off in 2012-2013, Beijing and Moscow have demonstrated the capacity of upgrading their cooperation. The first visit of China's President Xi Jinping to Moscow and the recent joint Russian-Chinese military exercises that have taken place in the Far East have caused a visible negative reaction from the US.⁶

However, it is likely that the US would deliberately create conditions for the growth of China's influence in Central Asia, as it would directly affect Russian interests. In the event of collision of interest between the two giants, the winner may be the arbiter and script writer of this rivalry i.e. the US. Thus, in the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), there are some clear contradictions between Beijing and Moscow. The latter insists on strengthening the military capacity of the SCO [through initiatives to establish a centre for combating security threats to the SCO member states under the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS)] and tries to restrain the intensification of economic cooperation (China's initiatives to create a free trade zone and special bank account of the SCO) where China would be the main investor and trading partner of the Central Asian countries. These initiatives would strengthen its credibility both at the organisation level and in the framework of bilateral relations, to which Beijing pays a special attention.

Significant financial resources allow China to build trade and investment links with the region on a bilateral basis without stringent guarantees and commitments. This fact distinguishes it from both the US and Russia. In addition, China, a major trading partner of the EU, is actively involved in the projects of the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC), aimed at creating overland trade routes between Southeast Asia and Europe bypassing Russia which would allow Beijing to settle complex matters connected with Central Asia, such as, ensuring economic growth and stability of the western provinces Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), formation of a commodity market for its products in the region extending from Central Asia to the EU, and access to natural resources of the Central Asian region.

In its turn, Russia, firstly seeks to strengthen its military presence in Central Asia through the mechanism of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) (military bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and rearmament of both republics). On one hand, these measures allow Russia to constrain the US in the region and on the other, they also seek to create a counterweight to China's economic influence. Initiated by Moscow, Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC, Customs Union, Common Free Market Zone) is currently in the early stages of its development, whereas the bilateral relations between the PRC and the countries of Central Asia have a twenty-year history that is reflected in the economic indicators. Thus, the volume of commodity turnover between the members of the Customs Union – Kazakhstan and Russia increased by only 6.8 per cent, and between Kazakhstan and China by 25 per cent in 2012.⁷

At the same time Russian Federation, in response to the American project "New Silk Road" and European - Chinese CAREC, provides the foundation for the Eurasian overland transit schemes. In particular, after the Bishkek summit of the SCO states heads of governments in December 2012, where Kyrgyzstan lobbied for the idea of the SCO member states' financing of "China – Kyrgyzstan – Uzbekistan" railway, the initiative of "Russia – Kazakhstan – Kyrgyzstan – Tajikistan" railway's construction was announced at the informal summit of heads of the CSTO member states. The type of organisations within which these initiatives were announced reflects the tactics of involving the Central Asian countries in the respective zones of interest of Russia and China – the "reluctant soldier" and the "silent merchant".

On one hand, Beijing and Russia maintain a common position on a number of major geopolitical issues which do not allow the West to ignore them; whereas, the task of ensuring the military security of the region is administered by Russia. This fact creates conditions for China's increasing economic presence in Central Asia and for avoiding accusations of a planned expansion against the background of cooperation with Russia. At the same time, China gets the opportunity to focus on the Asia - Pacific region where differences with Japan—the main US ally in the region are growing.

In their turn the Central Asian countries, firstly, get guarantees of support for their security in case they do not cooperate with the

US; and secondly, massive financial and economic assistance. In this regard, only Uzbekistan occupies a special position, because its participation in the Organisation is determined by the economic prospects of cooperation with China. This fact is evident from its refusal to participate in military exercises of the SCO in 2012, and absence of its experts at the discussion for the upcoming "Element – 2013" exercises in Kyrgyzstan in September 2013.

Thus, at present, the relations between China and Russia are twofold in the geopolitical space of Central Asia. On one hand, both states aim at cooperation, although both use different spheres to spread their influence in the region due to the presence of the third player – the US – which clearly shows its hegemonic aspirations. On the other hand, China's growing economic influence in Central Asia affects the regional interests of Russia. Its dominance in the military field, against the background of socio-economic crisis being faced by the countries of the region, cannot be the only basis for a long-term presence of Russia in the region. However, it is difficult for Russia to compete with China in the economic sphere. The strategy of the PRC, of binding the region based on bilateral cooperation looks more attractive rather than the economic integration projects connected with commitments and guarantees of the participating countries proposed by Russia, because Moscow does not have the financial clout of China. It is also necessary to take into account the "lost decade" of the 1990s, when Russia virtually broke off all the trade and economic ties with Central Asian countries as also its lack of experience in using soft power instruments – the need for which was indicated only in 2013, in the 'Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation.'

Meanwhile, it appears that this game of 'interests' in Russia - China relations, could go on for a long period; as, long term cooperation and compromise between them would lead to the achievement of mutually beneficial goals. However, this development is contrary to the US interests in the region. Given the complexity of the geostrategic position of Central Asia (proximity to China and Russia) which is often compared to the Balkan Peninsula (a "powder keg" of Europe) the USA cannot use direct force measures, as it did in the case of Yugoslavia. Instruments of soft power (democratisation of political systems and economic liberalisation) proved their overall effectiveness only in Kyrgyzstan. In this situation, the best scenario (from the point of view of Central Asian Republics) is a clash between two potential rivals.

The US deliberately backs China to strengthen its position in Central Asia which is the area of traditional interest of the Russian Federation by destabilising the situation in the Middle East and North Africa (which provide over 80 per cent of China's imports of hydrocarbons) and also supporting it through the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank projects under the CAREC. The latter helps to promote economic development of the US transatlantic ally – the EU – and on the other hand turns China towards Central Asia, to become a stumbling block in the way of energy imports from Russia to China against the background of the initiation of the Trans-Pacific Partnership programme.

Thus, the prospects for development of Chinese - Russian relations in the Central Asia region, in the spirit of cooperation, depend on the space for manoeuvre that still exists between them. This outlook enables them to find compromise solutions to safeguard their own interests in a way that intersection of such interests does not affect their overall geo-strategic goals.

Endnotes

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