

Geopolitics of Energy in Central Asia: A New Great Game

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Abstract

Central Asia became more important to China as the foreign power system shifted, the economy expanded, industrialization accelerated, and the population grew. China is the world's second largest energy user, while Central Asia has abundant energy and raw materials that complement its economic development. It is involved in Central Asia's energy supplies for protection of supply and a wide demand for its finished products. Prior to the discovery of Central Asian energy supplies, China relied on Middle Eastern oil imports. The oil supply path from the Middle East to China passed via the Malacca Strait, which was under the jurisdiction of the United States, China's alleged competitor in global politics. In the event of a dispute, the US can close this path. This condition alarmed Chinese policymakers, who devised a holistic strategy for the Central Asian region's energy supplies. China's interest in Central Asia is not solely about energy; it is also concerned about the stability of its Xinjiang region, which shares a frontier with several Central Asian republics (CARs). About 60% of Xinjiang's population are Uyghur Muslims. In the other side of the frontier, in the Central Asian Republics, the same ethnic group remains. China is concerned that in the event of regional unrest, terrorist groups may incite the Chinese Uyghur to seek independence. As a result, China is assisting the US in its war against terrorism. Politically, it seeks to mitigate the US's dominance in the area by integrating with the CARs (Central Asian Republics) through the SCO, especially in the aftermath of the US military's invasion of the region in 2001. The paper surveys China's preferences in CARs using a descriptive-analytical method.

Keywords: *New Great Game, Central Asia, China, Power Politics, Geopolitics, Geo-economics.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Central Asia has long been a significant area of the world owing to its peculiar geographic position and abundant energy supplies. It has served as a battleground for power politics between the Russian and British Empires, dubbed the "Great Game." This game came to an end in 1991, when one of the empires, the Soviet Union, disintegrated. The disintegration of the Soviet Union resulted in the liberation of the majority of Central Asian nations. China, together with other major powers such as Russia and the United States, has a chance to benefit from this area. The subsequent power struggle between the great powers is dubbed the "New Great Game." The paper would explore China's interests from a strategic realistic lens. China's participation in Central Asia's "New Great Game" began shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union. China was the first nation to recognise the Central Asian Republics' independence and formed diplomatic ties with them in January 1992. (Liao, 2006). Following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, China reestablished itself as a significant player in Central Asian geopolitics. China's geographic proximity, stability and economic ambitions in the area, as well as the Central Asian states' needs and reliance on China, have brought them together. China and Central Asian Republics established diplomatic ties in 1992, after the resolution of both countries' territorial disputes. To carry out their bilateral ties, they founded the "Shanghai Five" organisation in 1996, which later changed its name to Shanghai cooperation organisation in 2001. (Zhuangzhi, 2004).

2. THE GEOGRAPHICAL DEFINITION OF CENTRAL ASIA

Central Asia is a vast geopolitical area in the centre of Eurasia, a landlocked continental area. Definitions of this area differ since the northern portion of the region lacks definite physical territorial boundaries. Historical criteria and definitions have shown that the area around Central Asia is vast in the Eurasian core – from Southern Siberia to northern Pakistan and Iran and from the Caspian Sea through Inner China, including all the ancient Central Asian countries, but also Afghanistan, northern Pakistan and the Chinese provinces Xizang (Tibet), Xinjiang (Sinkiang)

and Nei Mongol (Inner Mongolia) In the Eurasian core. According to historical conceptions of the area called Turkestan, this huge area will reflect Central Asia's broadest meaning. When we use weather parameters, Central Asia is a predominantly dry (arid and semiarid) region. Environment BWk prevails in most central Asia and is the main zone, with a BSk (cold semi-arid, steppe) climate to the north, supplemented by wet (Dfa) and warm (Dfb) continental summer climates. BWc is the predominant form of climate in central Asia. The mountain climate type is predominant in the higher elevation (mountains and highlands). In general, therefore, Central Asia is a dry and continental region that means low precipitation and hence the priceless nature of fresh water. The dry climate is mostly responsible for the almost total uninhabited large regions of the country. The largest portion of Central Asia corresponds to the Endorheic Basin, which ensures that its rivers don't go into the sea or the ocean. The reason for this is the position of Central Asia within a vast continental mass, well away from the sea. The rivers are primarily flowing through the salt lakes (the Caspian Sea, Aral Sea, Lake Balkhash etc.). Central Asia's landscape consists mostly of deserts and treeless steppes. Southern, South-Eastern and East (or Northern), mountains and mountains are situated, whether Xinjiang, Tibet and Mongolia are considered to be parts of Central Asia).

3. CENTRAL ASIA 1991-2001: A SLOW OPENING TOWARDS EXTERNAL INFLUENCE

In 1991 the Soviet Union split up leaving as autonomous five ex-Soviet Central Asian republics. Unfortunately, their fiscal, political and social turmoil and degradation continued with freedom. Unfortunately. The whole area became a precarious peace or anarchy, after the Soviet Union's disintegration, with a protection void. Five sovereign nations, governed by totalitarian Presidents, holding onto their seats throughout the Soviet period, experienced a profound economic depression and crisis in their democracies. Against the government and Islamist guerrillas, a civil war broke out in Tajikistan, and the government prevailed with substantial Russian assistance for weapons and citizens. The former Soviet republics now had their own internal frontiers that were created by Stalin in Moscow and had deliberately left big ethnic groups, particularly the Uzbeks, outside their republic's administrative boundaries. This is a major concern for Central Asia's instability because the ethnic minorities seek to include the regions in which they reside in the region that they deem their nation's home country. Another challenge in Central Asia's newly independent countries was that they still faced domestic Russian communities, the main group in Kazakhstan, with Russians nearly 40% of the population at the time of the Soviet Union disintegration. In its 1993 National Security Strategy, Russia declared that its minorities were one of the top targets inside the so-called "near-neighborhood States" (former Soviet Republics). However, since then, there have been substantial decreases in the amount of Russes residing in Central Asian countries, though not as a consequence of crime. Central Asia's natural resources are important: the Central Asian economies are now rising strongly and stepping away from their post-Soviet recession, with a host of oil, coal, cotton, gold, and hydro power. In the post-Soviet period, economic growth has been high, driven by gas and oil reserves in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan; in Kyrgyz Republic gold; in Uzbekistan cotton. The Central Asian nations, however, remain comparatively low and there is a difference between those with and without oil and gas. Per capita incomes (GDPs) were more than double those in the Kyrgyz, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in 2007 among oil producers (Savas, B., 2008). In the first half of the 1990s, GDP per capita declined dramatically in all Central Asian nations. The major causes for this are the break-up of the Soviet Union, the lack of conventional markets and total unpreparedness for a market economic situation. The change to the economy of Central Asia was a major blast. GDP per capita began to increase in the second half of the 1990s (with the exception of Tajikistan, which had a GDP per capita at about half of the value from 1990). The per capita increase in GDP was a hallmark of 2009 too, but only Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan were able to increase GDP per capita above the value of the 1990 level. Kazakhstan alone produced approximately 58% of GDP in the country in 2009, with only a quarter of the population of the area, thanks to oil exportations.

4. CHINA'S ECONOMIC INTERESTS IN CENTRAL ASIA

For many years since independence, China has been self-sufficient in energy. Nevertheless, the need for energy services has grown with the development of the economy and its people. In 1993, demand for energy increased more than domestic supply could sustain, especially oil and natural gas. China thus became an importer of petroleum and natural gas, became the biggest user of resources worldwide in two decades and had to purchase about 57% of oil by 2012. If China maintained this pattern, by 2012, it will be enough to import 66% of its crude. After America, China is the second largest hydrocarbon importer (Xuetang, 2006). In China, demand for energy grew as a result of rapid industrial growth. The market for oil rose between 1985 and 1995 to between 1.7 and 3.4 million barrels a day, reaching 6.8 million barrels a day in 2004. 40% of this requirement is met by external capital (Ionia, 2010). The Chinese authorities have been concerned about this situation and have begun various strategies. On the domestic and

the international scale, China's Government has promoted natural gas and oil development and exploration, energy efficiency and the promotion of renewable energy (Stegen, 2015).

Energy Security

After China's autonomy was exhausting in the 1990s, Central Asian Republics and Chinese energy interaction have increased. China's the energy demand in the Central Asian Republics raised its interest. Today, China's intake of energy is second and demand worldwide is eighth. It's second to the United States when it comes to electricity demand. This called for rivalry over the world's energy supplies. In the north and northwest regions of Xinjiang, a majority of China's national energy supplies are found. That is why China is of prime concern for its protection and stability in Beijing, and its economic growth and development. China's negotiations on trade and resources for a tight grip on its energy industry preceded the freedom of Central Asian republics. China's overall oil imports is 122,7 million tonnes, 60 percent of them being supplied from M.E. and from Malacca countries in Indonesia (Martin, 2003). She is currently importing about 2/3 of its oil from the Middle East field. China's oil policymakers know that energy supplies in the Middle East are fragile due to insurgency, armed tensions, and other uncertainty causes. China's oil and gas imports mostly (around 80 percent) from Africa and the Middle East move via Malacca, a sea route operated by the rival United States which may block certain sea shipping routes in the event of a dispute between China and the USA or its pacific ally (Lin, 2011). As a result the Malacca Strait has been Beijing's strategic fault. The Malacca problem to deal with this case, China is expanding its naval blue water capability and has also concentrated on pipeline development from Central Asian countries, particularly Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, via Iran, Pakistan and Myanmar (Blumenthal, 2008). China is seeking to diversify its imports of energy supplies and reducing its dependence upon the Middle East due to the above factors. Central Asia may play an important role in this respect (Swanstrom, 2007). China's power policy is to diversify its energy imports, which will make them less reliant on M.E. and African countries, thus strongly dominating the energy routes that lead from Central Asia to China through Xinjiang. In addition to building economic and political ties with CARs, it has launched its plan for the diversification of resources through the signing of energy agreements between the Kazakhstan republic and China's national oil corporation. CNPC acquired 60.3% in 1993 of the Akzubin project in Kazakhstan, which later in 2003 rose to 85.6%. (Hawkins and Robert, 2006).

China is operating commercially in order to secure long-term supply agreements with hydrocarbon-producing countries of the former Soviet Union and has negotiated on new pipelines for oil and gas transportation designed to transport energy supplies through its borders. This performance, initiated by Chinese President Hu Jintao in December 2009, is an indication of the New Turkmenistan China pipeline. The pipeline from Turkmenistan to Beijing in China's national petroleum corporation in 2009 had 7000 kilometres deep. It must be remembered here that Turkmenistan is the largest gas producer in the area of Central Asia, including Kazakhstan, which is the region's largest oil producer. China funded this pipeline initiative. It offers China a chance to even obtain additional gas from other Central Asian republics (Blank, 2010). China has taken all the instruments and steps at its disposal to safeguard its domestic energy supplies from terrorism in the Xinjiang area. In order to protect its national interests in Central Asia it has used economic and diplomatic means.

Politico- Economic Interests

China has concluded a number of multilateral and bilateral agreements on religious extremism, boundary tensions, armed control, terrorists, separatism, drug trafficking and illegal immigration in order to uphold its commercial, security and political rights in the Central Asian region and many other contracts (Chuffrin, 2001). China's significant presence in the Central Asian area is apparently due to an attempt to meet its rising energy needs, its security interests on both the western and Xingjian domestic borders and its ties to China and its neighbours in Central Asia (Nikolas, 2002). For its cheap raw materials and a wide demand for its finished products, China considers Central Asia significant. That is why China joined the 'Great New Game.' She has built trade ties, especially with Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan in Central Asia. She also promoted the growth of the region's oil and gas industry in the pursuit of its energy policy. For its defence, ethnic stability, trade improvement and energy interests, China sees this area as significant. China has constructed an oil and gas pipeline, highways and railways for transport between China and the Central Asian Republics for these reasons (Wong, 2011). With the growth and growth in its industry, China's dependency on imported oil has increased. It is keen on building an Eastern pipeline from Kazakhstan to China in Central Asia. China is hoping to use the vast market in Central Asia as a stimulus to fuel a foreign investment in Xingjian's new growth zone and revive the old Silk Road, and then to transfer the economic activity of China to Central Asia into the Persian Gulf and the Western market. China wishes

to establish political and economic relations with Central Asian regional countries on the political/economic side. A kind of geo-economic approach has been introduced to ensure protection and stability in the area in order to improve economic and commercial ties with them. By solving border problems with China, China enabled it to manage the Uyghur community in Central Asia more effectively, strengthen security cooperation, and build confidence mutually. It also helped China to boost its bilateral ties to the three neighbouring Central Asian Republics in Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. New agreements have been concluded with Kasachstan in 1994, the left over contested areas have been settled in 1999, and the left over disputed areas have been solved here in 1996, and peace proceedings in 1999 at the conclusion of the Civil War in 2002. The Left over disputed areas were settled. Comparative simple tasks have been the establishment of bilateral economic ties between China and the Central Asian Republics, since their economies are complementary. China required commodities from Central Asian republics, or Central Asian republics needed finished consumer products, which would offer a chance for China to expand and prosper economically. The Central Asian Republics, especially in its north-west zone, have a large potential for economic growth in China. Central Asia is rightly in the centre of the continent of Eurasia. It was the main big trading path between West and East, regarded as the 'silk road.' The restoration of this conventional path from west to east will address infrastructure shortcomings of the north-west locked province of China. In 1992, the traffic between the NWR China and Central Asia rose 130 per cent after the fall of the Soviet Union (Dorian and Wigdortz, 1997). The Xinxiang province of China now serves as a connection between China and the Republic of Central Asia.

Security Interests

Following Soviet Union decay and subsequent decrease in its dominance in the area, China saw an opportunity to establish ties with Central Asian Republics. The following points decide China's Foreign Policy in central Asia: its role in the current strategic world following 1991, trade needs, improved domestic economic performance, peace and stability on the western frontier of its three Central Asian Republics, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan (Pelham, 2007). In the first decade, China sought to achieve its three objectives, namely defence of its west frontier, safety of energy supply, and a wide demand for finished products in Central Asia. The incorporation of Xinxiang into Central Asia and China is the pillar of China's policy in central Asia after the Soviet Union's disintegration in 1991. Their policy was revealed by increased investments in infrastructure development and the management and regulation of ethnic cultural and religious traditions, especially in its energy sector. China's foreign policy on the Central Asian Republic reflected the priority given to integrating its province in Xinxiang by stressing its relation to Central Asian Republics, notably Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, in the fields of economic, political and infrastructure. The objective of this process was state efforts to improve Xinxiang's integration and safety and take advantage of expanded political and economic opportunities provided by the Soviet Union's void in 1991. (Clarke, 2005). Protection of supplies of oil is not China's only problem in Central Asia, but its western frontier, Xinjiang, is one of the fundamental explanations for China's drag-out to Central Asia soon after the Soviet Union disintegration and eventual independence of the Central Asian Republics. Chinese and Central Asian Republics have focused on security and stability. The three Central Asian Republics of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are the primary foreign policy focuses of China. For the safety and prosperity of Yinjiang, Beijing realised that containing Islamic radicalism, terrorism and fundamentalism, and Pan-Turkish practises by favouring lay governments in the Central Asian area would be the highest priority in its foreign policy (Rummer, 2003) The three Central Asian countries, Tajikistan, Kirgistan, and Kazakhstan have a 3300kg boundary in China. China is sharing the 3300kg border. Because of this common frontier, there are safety issues over border stability (Liao, 2006). The stability of the Central Asian Republics has been tied to the defence of Xinjiang province. Until now, it has been the foundation for all five Central Asian Republics. In order to achieve security goals, China's initial move was to resolve frontier conflicts with all three Central Asian Republics sharing boundaries with China, such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tadjikistan in the years 1994-1999 by concluding multiple bilateral agreements with Kyrgyzstan to resolve all long-standing disputes (Allison and Johnson, 2001). In accordance with the 2002 deal, it resolved borders with Tajikistan whereby China returned 28,000 square km of land to Tajikistan (Peterson, 2005).

5. RIVAL STRATEGIES IN CENTRAL ASIA: IS THE NEW GREAT GAME A REALITY?

No major progress has been achieved in all attempts to control the internal circumstances in Central Asian countries outside the area. The countries of Asia Central are still "impossible task" by working democracy, rule of law, market economy, fighting force monitoring and effective civil-military ties. The means to accomplish these competitive objectives are clearly not good for Central Asia in Central and portions of Eastern and Southeastern Europe until

joining EU and Nato. The Western world never took Central Asian countries seriously into consideration as prospective applicants for inclusion in the EuroAtlantic safety and political organisations, as they cannot and do not want to satisfy the requirements. The West seem almost unlikely to seek to overcome any of Central Asia's instabilities and rivalries without Russia's participation. As Russia in bilateral ties may not depend on these conditions, Russia is back in Central Asia, being more influential every day. The key objective is to monitor the transport of oil and gas in geopolitics of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Some are concerned in themselves with energy in China, others mostly with the economic ramifications, and some with energy in particular (the countries in the field and also Turkey and Iran, and oil companies) (the USA and Russia, in particular). The fight is primarily about the policy and economic issues of competitive pipeline projects linking the Caspian Basin with global markets, via Russia and the Black Sea, via the Caucasus and Turkey, via Iran, through Afghanistan and through Kazakhstan to China (Buzan, Waever, 2003).

The Western strategy for Central Asia is therefore oriented towards fulfillment of these primary strategic objectives of the West:

1. Keep the flow of oil and gas from Central Asia and the Caspian Sea to the USA and Europe permanent and unobstructed;
2. Build an infrastructure of pipelines that would completely skirt Russia (and Iran), and open up the Central Asian energy reserves to the world markets, reducing the possibility of obstruction and blockade of pipelines that Russia could impose;
3. Keep Russian and Chinese influence as weak and distant as possible. This is a very difficult task now, and in the future it will not be much easier;
4. Reduce security challenges to the most minimal possible level. By this, we consider the fight against terrorism, drug trafficking, and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

The efforts of Washington to decrease Russian hegemony were part of a strategy that would seek to wrench Central Asia and Caucasus out of its sphere of influence in all respects, including the building of oil pipelines and gas pipelines, pressures of NATO allies, financial resources for docile city politicians and alignment of US media toward Russian alliances. Co-ordinated by the United States National Security Council, the latest strategy was aimed at breaking Russian control of exports from Central Asian crude. The aim was both to assure sustainability and protection of the American corporate interests of independent countries in the area (Yazdani, 2006). Russia needs Central Asia to remain in its own region. Therefore Russia could do something to resist the penetration of Washington. In Central Asia the Russian geostrategy is also being established to achieve geo-strategic and geoeconomic goals. The Western geostrategy is directly opposed, but currently ambivalent to the Chinese approach. Its basic objectives are dictated by Russian historical relations and power, as well as Russia's powerful geography and export infrastructure, which still mostly flows across Russia's territories. Russia therefore has several political and economic advantages due to its geographical position. Russia's main objective is to maintain western power away from Central Asia and to contain Chinese influence as far as possible unless it is helpful to keep west influence out of Central Asia. The strongest diplomatic approach to accomplish the strategic goals, since this is a zero-sum game, is clearly to reinforce its own impact on the Western power. If required, China may be used to stand up to the influence of the United States. There are also the Iranian and Turkish plans for Central Asia and the Caspian Sea area on the lower level in terms of the capability of these countries to operate. They are paired with the Caucasus Strategy for Central Asia and the Caspian Sea area, which is adjacent and very political. The Caucasus represents a transportation field for oil and gas from Central Asia and the Caspian Sea zone that transmits oil and gas to Western markets via the pipelines circumventing Russia and Iran. Both countries would like to be interregional forces and to widen their presence in the surrounding regions. Their fields of concern and power differ considerably, but their emphasis is very much opposed. Turkey is a Western partner, and in this section of the world Iran is the main US enemy.

The main focus of Iran's strategies is the expansion of its presence in neighbouring countries: Turkmenistan (in which there is an abundance of gas reserves) and Azerbaijan (in which the majority of the population is Shia) (the Azeri are Shiite, as are the Iranians, and more Azeri live in Iran than in independent Azerbaijan). Therefore, Iran uses these relations to build momentum in Azerbaijan, but faces the American influence that runs counter to any conception of Iranian influence and the prospect of Caspian oil flowing through the pipelines. Azerbaijan is a nation

at the entrance to the area of the Caucasus, and Turkmenistan is a country at the entrance to Central Asia from an Iranian point of view. Iran wishes to flow from its Caspian pipelines to the ports of Bandar Abbas, Abadan, and Bandar Khomeini (from Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan), from where it is being shipped into international markets by sea. The progress of Iranian policy in the area will be determined by influencing both Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. But the involvement of the US in Azerbaijan and Turkey in the Caucasus and the Central Asian states has hitherto limited Iran's influence. Turkey, a nation with a western component, NATO member state and US ally, is keen to become an interregional force by involvement in Caucasus, the Caspian Sea and Central Asia and by reinforcing its position as a key American ally in the strategically significant part of the world. Turkey as a land bridge, including a conduit, is a nation that links the Middle East, the Gulf, South-East Europe, the Caucassia and the Caspian Sea. Furthermore, Turkey is a country which imports power, oil and gas and wants to have influence and diversification of its supply in the oil and gas-producing countries of the area. Turkey is a transport nation for modern pipelines which have crossed the Caucasus from the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean Sea, through the Turkey, and which, in line with the desires of the West, bypass Russia and Iran. Turkey is powerful and most significant - a prosperous nation - a faithful and precious friend of the west, with its own priorities in its surroundings and which are not conflicting with western interests, contrary to the majority of the region's countries. Turkey has developed connections to the countries of Central Asia, and the secular, turkish kind of Islam may be even more acceptable to the fact that Turkish peoples constitute the majority of the population both in central Asia (except in Tajikistan) and in Azerbaijan. The Turkish culture is followed by economic and political influence. This is understandable, since Sunni and not Shiite citizens in Central Asia are heavy secular influences in the Russian and Soviet cultures and are not readily overridden.

6. CONCLUSION

Economic development and internal defence against three separatist, extremist and terrorist fatalities are the essence of Chinese historical involvement in the Central Asian zone. With the decaying Soviet Union in 1991 and Russia's subsequent collapse in Central Asia, China developed bilateral ties with Central Asia founded on five principles of peaceful coexistence in order to strengthen its position in that area. China established bilateral relations with central Asian countries. In settling the longstanding boundary problems, she gave substantial compromises to build trust in their minds. This culminated in the development, in the Western World observers' attention to the area, of regional security organisations, such as SCO and the promotion of China's "Grand Strategy." In the Central Asian countries, Chinese national priorities include the defence of the regime, economic prosperity, growth and energy security. She needs to reduce the power of the US, politically, to give her a geo-strategic advantage. However, with the change in power sharing in the global energy system, its economic development and rapid industrialisation, Central Asia's importance for Peking grew. China is known as the world's second most powerful consumer, and China's economical growth, production and progress and prosperity have rich energy supplies and other raw materials. The region's energy supplies are of concern to its manufacturers for the preservation of its production of energy and its finished products on the big market. In the USSR time, China imported oil more from the Middle East before Central Asian energy supplies. In the case of war and controversy between the Chinese and the United States the road to oil supply from the Mexico to China was passed, under the jurisdiction of the United States Maritime Powers and is vulnerable to anarchy as a result of terrorism and sea pirates, a perceived world politics competitor of China. The Chinese decision makers were concerned about this circumstance and developed a detailed energy strategy for the Central Asian zone. In Central Asia, energy is not China's only concern; the safety of its Xinjiang sharing borders with several Central Asian republics is also concerned. About 60% of the Xinjiang community consisted of Uyghur Muslims. On the other side of the border of CARs there is still the same minority group. China is concerned that terrorist groups will encourage the Uyghurs to become independent in the event of anarchy in the country. Thus, in the war against extremism, China supports the United States. Politically, it wants to reduce US presence in the area, especially after the United States' warfare infiltration into the region in 2001, by integration with CARs through bilateral and multilateral organisations.

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