RUSSIA'S POLICY IN CENTRAL EURASIA: SPECIFICS AND PROSPECTS

RUSSIA IN CENTRAL ASIA: RETREAT, RETENTION, OR RETURN?

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THE YEAR 1991: RUSSIA'S RESPONSIBILITY (*Yeltsin vs. Gorbachev*)

On 18 October, 2004, the Russian Federation joined the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) and so can be called a Central Asian state. This distorted the region's geography and changed its political composition. On 13 December, 1991, five Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) set up this integration structure in response to the Soviet Union's breakup and the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which was, at first, purely Slavic.

The events of 1991 are directly related to the present and provide answers to many of the questions raised by the transformations going on in the newly independent states (NIS) and their foreign policy. It is often—and correctly—said that the former Soviet republics were not ready for independence; in fact, it seems that Russia itself was not ready for it. Yet it was Russia that sent the ball of breakup rolling in June 1991: it declared independence and challenged the results of the all-Union referendum that took place earlier, on 17 March and formalized the will of the people to preserve the Union. Russia's political step was absolutely senseless: all the republics that united around it in the 1920s completely depended on it. In this context, Russia's present attempts at "gathering in the lands" it itself scattered look paradoxical. To succeed it must revise two major issues:

(1) the principles of the 1991 disintegration and

(2) the principles of 21st century reintegration.

Stephen Cohen, professor of Russian history at New York University, has correctly pointed out that those who want to understand Putin's Russia would do best to put it in the context of a national collapse that followed the Soviet Union's breakup. He says: "It is hard to imagine a political act more extreme than abolishing what was still, for all its crises, a nuclear superpower state of 286 million citizens. And yet Yeltsin did it, as even his sympathisers acknowledged, in a way that was 'neither legitimate nor democratic.' ...Political and economic alternatives still existed in Russia after 1991, and none of the factors contributing to the end of the Soviet Union were inexorable."[1] This goes contrary to the more or less commonly accepted opinion (mainly in Russia and the Soviet successor states) that the Soviet Union was doomed because its political system was in a deep crisis. The West never expected, and did not want, this tragedy. Much was done to help President Mikhail Gorbachev to keep his country afloat.[2]

Today, Russia, when dealing with the former Soviet republics, works hard to pretend that the year 1991 can be dismissed as an ordinary event to be rectified through reunification. The laws of history and international relations (which we, the political scientists, discover and study) will not allow Russia to succeed in its integration contrivance (so far this is a contrivance and nothing more), which will remain half-backed and will look suspicious and even provocative. All integration processes develop along certain patterns and are based on certain principles and values. This much has already been proven by the theoreticians of integration.

This means that to remain within strictly academic limits, we should investigate the sources, driving forces, principles, aims, effects and even the moral fundamentals of the policies the CIS countries are pursuing in their mutual relations. This primarily applies to Russia's policy toward its CIS colleagues. We would do best to start from the very beginning and look back at the events of 1991. The type of relations still prevailing among the NIS was imposed by Russia on the eve of the Soviet Union's breakup. I am inclined to call it Yeltsin's heritage. It destroyed or pushed away the type of relations born by the perestroika (a period that is almost forgotten), which I prefer to describe as Gorbachev's approach.

As time goes on I become more and more convinced that Russia should abandon Yeltsin's heritage for political and moral reasons. As a scholar I find it hard to fathom why the blame for the Soviet Union's demise was shifted onto Mikhail Gorbachev, who would have died in the last ditch to keep the U.S.S.R. alive, and why, in Russia's recent history, Boris Yeltsin is lauded as a great reformer. The facts point to the contrary. I have to say here that when talking about the need to condemn the

[1] S. Cohen, "The Breakup of the Soviet Union Ended Russia's March to Democracy," *The Guardian*, 13 December, 2006.

[2] See, for example, a book written by Anatoly Chernyaev, former advisor to the U.S.S.R. President Gorbachev, *My Six Years with Gorbachev: Notes from a Diary*, Transl. and ed. by R. English and E. Tucker, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, 2000.

decision that put an end to the Soviet Union, I am not driven by nostalgia over the now dead state. The past cannot be revived: my only desire is to remove the disfiguring black spots, falsifications, and ideological speculations from our ideas, opinions and historical memory in order to shape the right ideas about the past and the future.

The international dimension of 1991 calls for dotting the "i's"—a task of primary importance for Russia. In 1991, it not only destroyed the superpower, but also put an end (thanks to Gorbachev, not Yeltsin) to the era of the bi-polar world and the Cold War. We are tempted to ask: Did it end? The relations of the Cold War era are being revived. Why did Russia abandon the policy of rapprochement with the West and particularly the United States it started in the 1980s? Why is another Big Game underway in Central Asia?

It has been written many times that the geopolitical transformations in Central Asia started when the Soviet super-state left the stage and triggered the Big Game in the region. World and regional states, as well as the Central Asian countries, are all involved in the unfolding process. As distinct from the Big Game of the past, it has attracted many more entities. Russia is another important factor: all the players are adjusting their policies, to one degree or another, to its interests. More than that: the geopolitical players are firmly convinced that Central Asia is a zone of Russia's domination (a sphere of Russia's influence). Russian politicians and political scientists are bending over backwards in an effort to confirm this. To my mind, the West/the U.S. has already reconciled itself to this reality, of which the Russian Federation should be fully aware. Why are the ideas about the Western/American conspiracy in Central Asia still alive in Russia, which is convinced that it is being squeezed out? These questions are directly related to the dramatic year of 1991 and Russia's responsibility for it.

From the Central Asian countries' very first days of independence, Russia's policy was far from ambiguous; it was changeable, or even contradictory, and can be best described as "retreat," "retention," and "return."

By "retreat," I mean the shrunken scope, the lower level, and Russia's much diminished presence in the region, something that undermined Russia's economy and geopolitical status. The vacuum left behind was immediately filled with the West's growing presence.

By "retention," I mean Moscow's desire to preserve status quo or the current geopolitical situation without much loss for itself.

By "return," I mean Russia's stronger presence in the region in various forms from cultural and economic to geopolitical and strategic.

Russian expert Dmitry Trenin used the following terms to describe more or less similar realities: "leave and forget," "outpost as placeholders," and "*Reconquista*."[3]

The three elements coexisted; they were alternatively coming to the fore or retreating, depending on the region's changing geopolitical contexts and Russia's position in the world. Recently, we have been watching Russia step up its involvement in the region (more about this below).

Any attempt at analyzing Russia's policies/geopolitics in general and in Central Asia in particular should take into account the fact that the very complicated process of geopolitical transformations in the region has coincided with the emergence of a new world order and a revision of much that was previously accepted by the geopolitical theory. Today, so-called critical geopolitics is coming into being.[4]

For the purpose of this article, I will call the new trend of geopolitical thought democratic geopolitics, while the old practices I call imperial geopolitics (see the table).

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[3] D. Trenin, "Russia and Central Asia: Interests, Policies, and Prospects," in: *Central Asia: Views from Washington, Moscow and Beijing,* ed. by B. Rumer, D. Trenin, H. Zhao, M.E. Sharpe, New York, 2007, p. 121.

[4] About new geopolitics see: *Geopolitics: Global Problems and Regional Concerns,* ed. by L. Tchantouridze, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Center for Defense and Security Studies, 2004 (see also: M.P. Amineh, *Globalization, Geopolitics and Energy Security in Central Eurasia and the Caspian Region*, Clingendael International Energy Program, The Hague, 2003.

Imperial geopolitics are	Democratic geopolitics are
Geopolitics of hatred	Geopolitics of recognition
Geopolitics of alienation	Geopolitics of growing closer
Geopolitics of mistrust	Geopolitics of agreement
Geopolitics of exclusion	Geopolitics of participation
Geopolitics of balancing	Geopolitics of possibilities
Geopolitics of hard force	Geopolitics of soft force
Geopolitics of containment	Geopolitics of involvement
Geopolitics of appropriating resources	Geopolitics of distributing resources
Geopolitics of domination	Geopolitics of cooperation
Geopolitics of spheres of influence	Geopolitics of globalization

In a more concise way, the difference between the two geopolitics can be formulated as follows: **imperial geopolitics is based on the conviction that war is possible, while democratic geopolitics is founded on the conviction that there is no alternative to peace.** An excellent work by well-known expert in geopolitics V. Tsymburskiy, *Geopolitika dlia evraziyskoy Atlantidy* (Geopolitics for Eurasian Atlantis), is logical, historically, and geopolitically relevant, as well as strategically Russia-centered for obvious reasons. It follows along the lines of the old geopolitics and does not exclude war: "It is in the interests of Russia that Uzbekistan, a member of newly-baked GUAM, remain isolated from the Caspian by the Kazakh and Turkmenian lands that can be used for the Indian Ocean route (the trade and pipeline route that connects the Indian Ocean in the south with Russia in the north via Iran, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan.—*F.T.*)."[5] He believes that Russia should oppose all attempts to lay resource routes in Euro-Asia that bypass Russian territory and formulates the slogan "The Urals—Yes, the Caucasus—No!"[6]

Lena Jonson from the Swedish Institute of International Relations has offered a fairly clear definition of Russia's interests in Central Asia: "Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia's interests in Central Asia are mainly related to strategic and security concerns. The strategic interests are two-fold: first, to integrate the Central Asian states into the CIS sphere and make them close allies of Russia; and, second, to deny external powers strategic access to Central Asia."[7] This is what traditional imperial geopolitics is all about.

Russia's Responsibility in the 21st Century (*Putin vs. Bush*)

The retention of the **post-Soviet context of reform** is one of the most important results of the sixteen years of development. I have in mind the fact that the Soviet socialist school, revived in its

[5] V. Tsymburskiy, "Geopolotika dlia 'evraziiskoy Atlantidy,'" *Pro et Contra*, No. 4, Vol. 4, 1999.
[6] Ibidem.
[7] R. Allison, L. Jonson, *Central Asian Security: The New International Context,* The Brookings Institution Press, Washington, DC, 2001, pp. 97-101.

entirety (anti-Americanism included), dominates the domestic and foreign policy of the NIS. Russia's retreat, retention, and return are elements of classical and obsolete *Realpolitik*; this is what going on across the CIS.

Any model of post-Soviet integration/disintegration presupposes Russia's domination or at least its political influence as the factor predominating in the relations within the CIS. This probably explains why there is no unity in the CIS, which is in fact the key condition of unification: asymmetry of the Community's political composition is obvious. So it is no wonder that quasi- (or even pseudo-) integration formats are appearing all the time in the post-Soviet expanse.

For some time the analytical community remained optimistic about the future of the integration contrivance within the CIS. They argued: "Together Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan account for up to 94 percent of their common GDP and 88 percent of their trade turnover. Even though their economies differ greatly and their models of economic growth cannot be compared, they can be regarded as mutually complementary."[8] (This approach is used to assess the SCO's strength and prospects.) The "percentage-based arguments" can be countered with:

(1) Are the economies of the other CIS members not mutually complementary? Are the remaining 6 percent of the CIS members' common GDP and 12 percent of their trade turnover worth their commitment to the Community?

(2) The aggregate GDP and the trade turnover of, say, Russia and China, are much larger than the indices of the Central Asian Four, but they are not integrating.

(3) Was the economic complementarity of the given countries only discovered after the Soviet Union disintegrated? If complementarity exists, it also existed in the Soviet state.

Strangely enough, both potential economic complementarity and its absence are against integration across the CIS. Indeed, (a) economic determinism would have never permitted disintegration of the union state, the complete reformation of which was interrupted by the presidents of the three Slavic republics. The economic and political integration of Europe, which was going on at the same time, brought Europe close to forming a "union state." We had a union state we needed to finish reforming, not destroy, if the idea of mutual economic complementarity of the said republics holds water; (b) if we accept the conception of economic inexpediency and political inconsistency of the CIS, then the models of the EurAsEC and the Organization of Regional Integration (ORI) can be described as irrelevant.

Meanwhile, the opening of the post-Soviet expanse to the world, including the West, undermined the prospects for the revival of a certain semblance of the former Union and Russia's status as an integration core. The Russian foreign policy establishment is probably unable to create anything else so far, apart from Cold War rudiments: the processes, and the Soviet Union's withdrawal from the scene, were too fast. Russia retreated, retained its position, and returned to the region at one and the same time.

It is no wonder that S. Markedonov described present-day Russia's strategy in the CIS as a strategy of containment. Today, Moscow has limited its mission in the post-Soviet expanse to efforts to stabilize the situation at any cost. He has written the following, which is worth quoting here in full: "**Stabilization is the key concept of Russia's policy in the CIS, or its quintessence. Such concepts as development, progress, and democracy are absent from Russia's political vocabulary; they have been given over to the United States and the EU countries, which are pursuing their own**

[8] K. Syroezhkin, "Paradoksy integratsii. Edinaia Evrazia," *Pro et contra,* available at [www.centrasia.org], 14 August, 2003.

selfish interests in Central Asia. Instrumentally, this mission can be realized only through supporting the 'parties in power' and the government in general, as well as by refusing to talk to the opposition. Today, Russia is performing these scenarios when dealing with Belarus, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and, to a much lesser extent, with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the unrecognized states. While supporting the ruling regimes, the Kremlin has no contacts with the second and third echelons of the government in these states. This means that it is not protected against surprises if the people at the helm make a sudden about turn.

"Moscow's orientation toward 'stagnation' and the unlimited support of the people in power deprives it, and has already deprived it, of promising and potential allies among those who tend toward modernization and change.

"First, Russia's foreign policy in the CIS pursues Russia's interests rather than those of the corrupt party nomenklatura. Second, if the Kremlin is working toward the best results, it should not oppose stability and development (read: modernization). This means that Russia should not limit itself to 'freezing' and 'containment.' It should encourage modernization, which might become the main prerequisite of stability and democracy."[9]

In the 21st century, the future of the post-Soviet expanse, and of Central Asia as its part, will depend on the outcome of the struggle between what can be described very conventionally as *the Bush-style and Putin-style approaches*. Let me explain: the American president represents democratic expansion and development, while his Russian colleague rejects this under the pretext that this is an imposition of democracy rather than its expansion.

George W. Bush's approach: "We are led, by events and common sense, to one conclusion. The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands… The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world" (Bush's Inauguration, 20 January, 2005) and "Democratic societies are peaceful societies—which is why, for the sake of peace, the world's established democracies must help the world's newest democracies succeed… In these countries, and across the world, those who claim their liberty will have an unwavering ally in the United States"(President Attends International Republican Institute Dinner, Renaissance Hotel, Washington, D.C.).

Vladimir Putin's approach: "We are seeing a greater and greater disdain for the basic principles of international law. And independent legal norms are, as a matter of fact, coming increasingly closer to one state's legal system. One state and, of course, first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is visible in the economic, political, cultural, and educational policies it imposes on other nations. Well, who likes this? Who is happy about this? ...The involvement of so-called nongovernmental organizations is tailored for this task. These organizations are formally independent but they are purposefully financed and are, therefore, under control [of foreign countries]."[10]

The phenomenon of the so-called Color Revolutions in some of the CIS countries marked a watershed between the American and Russian approaches to the future of the post-Soviet states, which was brought into bolder relief *by the way* the United States and Russia correlate democracy and security in Central Asia: while the Russian Federation remains convinced that the Ukrainian and the Georgian versions of "accelerated democratization" may cause destabilization and bring the radical opposition and radical Islamic forces together, and therefore the advance to democracy should be slow, the United States is convinced that procrastination may increase protest potential

[9] S. Markedonov, "Kak vernut znachenie Rossii. Nuzhna 'konservativnaia model razvitia'," *Prognosis.ru,* 18 April, 2006.

[10] *Speech and the Following Discussion at the Münich Conference on Security Policy*, 10 February, 2007, available at [http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/02/10/0138_type82912type82914type82917type84779_118123.shtml].

and *also* bring the radical opposition and the radical Islamic forces together. Which of the two approaches is correct?

As time goes on, I become more and more convinced that the answer to this and other questions related to transformations of the NIS (in Central Asia and beyond it) lies in geopolitics, or rather in the geopolitical ideas of scholars and politicians. We have seen many times how Moscow regarded a more or less clear step toward, or even a sign of the Central Asian NIS's independent foreign policy or cooperation with the United States as a signal of their imminent (or accomplished) withdrawal from the Russia's zone of influence. To keep them within it, Moscow is prepared to deprive them of their democratic choice.

D. Trenin has written that "the civil war in Tajikistan sent a message to Moscow that democracy and Islamism were unacceptable alternatives to secular authoritarianism." He warned that "Islamism was intensely destabilizing, and threatening not only to end Russia's role in Central Asia, but to spread to Russia's own Muslim-populated regions, undermining the Russian Federation itself. As for democracy," he writes further, "that was not deemed a viable alternative in Central Asia: it could either pave the way for increased Western presence and pro-American policies at the expense of Russian interests, or, more likely, open the floodgate to Islamism."[11] Dmitry Trenin revealed not so much Russia's geopolitical concerns as its geopolitical wavering on the Central Asian issue. Let's discuss it in the contemporary context.

Russia's new responsibilities in the 21st century stem from the old geopolitical constant: according to the early 20th century classics of geopolitics, the country occupies a strategically key zone. Any power that gains access to it or controls it will automatically become a world hegemon. Today, Russia is no longer the only state in the zone— after 1991, it acquired several independent neighbors, particularly in Central Asia. The new geopolitical realities have cardinally changed the essence and importance of the so-called Central Asian question. It was formulated as the British-Russian question born by the conflict between the "sea" and the "land"—the strongest island power, the fleet of which dominated the World Ocean, and the largest continental power with territorial and political control over the world's heartland.[12]

Today it is no longer a British-Russian (or even American-Soviet or American-Russian) question of the late 20th century: **there is no Central Asian question in the sense and the form it was formulated in geopolitical thought, since it a priori denied the Central Asian countries and nations not only the right to self-determination, but also to participation in it.** By the mere fact of their independence, the Central Asian nations are modifying the perpetual geopolitical "land vs. sea" formula.

Russia has always been responsible for the Heartland—this was its share of the responsibility for what was going on in the world. Today, the NIS found within the Heartland are also partly responsible. Is Russia ready to accept this? Any answer from the Russian political community will be sincere and correct even if the answer is "No" and smacks of neo-imperialism. No matter what (empire, power, Eurasia, or Heartland), **Russia is and will remain an integrating state**. It should treat this mission with adequate responsibility, that is, in full conformity with the new democratic geopolitics.

Stephen Blank has said something that is worth noting. He has pointed out that Russia's diplomacy is demonstrating persistence and that the country insists on the once chosen course, even when the events that prompted it have disappeared.[13] Indeed, conceptually, Russia's insistence on the mul-

[11] D. Trenin, op. cit., p. 91.

[12] See: V.I. Maksimenko, "Rossia i Azia, ili anti-Brzezinski (ocherk geopolitiki 2000 goda)," *Vostok,* No. 4, 2000.

[13] See: S. Blank, "Russia's Questionable Offensive in Asia," *Asia Times,* available at [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/EG01Ag02.html].

ti-polar worldwide expanse rebounds with the multi-polar post-Soviet political expanse, something that Zbigniew Brzezinski termed "geopolitical pluralism." Carried away by the multi-polarity conception, which did not replace bi-polarity, but disappeared along with it (it appeared in the 1970s as an alternative to bi-polarity), many Russian politicians and political scientists gained nothing more than a conceptual "headache." Today, several geopolitical schemes are coming into being within the multi-polar approach: Russia-China-India, Russia-Iran-China, Russia-Iran-India, or Russia-France-Germany as counterweights to the unipolar world as represented by the mythical American hegemony.

Brzezinski and many of his colleagues have already demonstrated that these schemes are still-born. There is another aspect of the same problem fully applied to the post-Soviet expanse. While enlisting allies in the Far Abroad (Iran, China, India, Iraq, or HAMAS), the Russians tend to ignore their Near Abroad neighbors and take their potential support of Russia's anti-American moves for granted. The post-Soviet expanse itself is multi-polar: Ukraine, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan (the latter has not realized this) are the poles of local importance within the CIS.[14]

Here is a seemingly minor fact that sheds enough light on the problem. After studying his country's energy and ideological problems, Tajik analyst I. Asadullaev arrived at the conclusion that the Russian analytical institutions and services regard the American conception of Greater Central Asia as a threat. "They interpret it as an attempt to separate the region from Russia," writes the Tajik academic, "and look at themselves as the only source of regional security."[15]

And further: "**Russia and China are two major factors of stability, but, by pursuing the policy of Tajikistan's limited energy security, they threaten Tajikistan as a country. Every great country, the U.S. included, tends to help Tajikistan, if it accepts its strategy**."[16] He has come close to the thought that any of the Central Asian countries might once again lose (or not acquire, to be more exact) the right of decision-making on the Central Asian issue. The author has set himself the task of finding a suitable niche for his country and succeeded: "Russia as a stabilizing factor in the region, and in Tajikistan as its part, yet unwilling to permit it full independence in the energy sphere (meaning the Rogun Hydropower Station), is pushing Tajikistan toward the Muslim world in search of donors. This orientation will force Russia to retreat as a civilizational factor. Recently Tajikistan restored the national form of writing and pronouncing Tajik names. There is a lot of talk about replacing the Cyrillic with the Persian alphabet based on the Arabic."[17]

Like many of his colleagues, Asadullaev cannot refrain from hinting that Russia is waging political games that are drawing both Dushanbe and Tashkent into Tajikistan's energy security issue. This is promoting its "withdrawal" into the Islamic world, where there are forces waiting for it to distance itself from "the Russian factor in geopolitics and the spiritual-political aspects."

And, finally, a revealing conclusion: "Russia is doing a lot to stabilize the situation in the region and in Tajikistan; it is a source of security. But it is pushing the country toward geopolitical alternatives to deal with the most urgent problems. This policy is dangerous both for Russia and Tajikistan. In recent years, Tajikistan has been trying to convince Moscow not to limit its presence to the military factor alone, even though construction of the Sangtuda Hydropower Plant is in progress. To accomplish this, Dushanbe is turning its attention to Russia's rivals."[18]

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[14] Here I use the term "pole" in the meaning accepted by world politics yet I shall not go into details of the well-known theory of poles.

[15] I. Asadullaev, "Geopolitika 'tiani-tolkai' v Tsentral'noi Azii," available at [www.centrasia.com}, 4 July, 2007 (source—Ferghana.ru).

[16] Ibidem.

[17] Ibidem.

[18] Ibidem.

This means that beside the world poles, there are latent and obvious local poles potentially able to affect the moves of the world poles. Dmitry Trenin has quite rightly pointed out that: "Multi-polarity not only offers a simplified and distorted picture of the world, but also orientates Russia's foreign policy toward aims that do not always have anything in common with its national interests."[19]

What are Russia's interests in Central Asia? For many years, since 1991, there have been no attempts to answer this question—it remained in the shadow of Russia's world policy. Central Asia was a region of secondary importance for Russia. Russia was too engrossed in reforming its statehood (under Putin, it has been paying even more attention to this) and maintaining (preserving) its world power status. While, from the very beginning, the United States has been, and is, systematically demonstrating its interests in Central Asia, the Russian Federation has so far failed to formulate its position with respect to Central Asia. It was only recently that the Russian expert community exerted more serious efforts to understand, demonstrate, and rank Russia's interests in Central Asia. Dmitry Trenin, for example, has grouped them into strategic and specific. The strategic interests concentrate on preserving internal stability, preventing Color Revolutions, containing the foreign military presence, maintaining allied relations between Central Asia and third countries; supporting inter-state stability; cutting down drug trafficking, and promoting nuclear non-proliferation. The specific interests, according to Trenin, are: (1) economic interests: closer cooperation in the security sphere under Moscow's guidance; cooperation in the defense industry and arms trade; greater Russian military presence in the region; setting up a free trade zone; influencing the production and transportation of Caspian energy resources; domination in the Central Asian gas sector; control over the regional hydropower resources, and involvement in other economic sectors; (2) humanitarian interests: support of ethnic Russians; problems of labor migration from Central Asia to the Russian Federation; promotion of the Russian language in the Central Asian countries; and creation of a common information expanse.[20]

Dmitry Trenin suggests that Russia "**do not attempt to become the sole security guarantor of Central Asia; and recognize that, in Central Asia, the fundamental interests of Russia and the United States coincide; cease regarding the American presence in the region as inherently anti-Russian** (bold type mine.—*F.T.*)".[21]

V. Tsymburskiy, quoted above, has a slightly different opinion about the same subject—Central Asian studies in Russia have obviously gained momentum. He has written: "The crazy ideas à la Dugin-Mitrofanov about the geopolitical division of Central Asia should not be encouraged as obviously provocative and breeding crises among the three powers (Russia, China, and Iran.—*F.T.*). They are also pushing the local elites and nations to invite the West to be a defender and guarantor of their sovereignty."[22] I totally agree with the first part of what is quoted above, but refuse to understand why the West should be prevented from becoming the defender and guarantor of the Central Asian states' sovereignty. In other words: why should Russia perform this mission? Why should we prevent the world's leading countries from helping the local states to protect their sovereignty and independence as a value and an aim of great importance? I am growing increasingly convinced that when talking about Central Asia's calls "on the West as the defender and guarantor of their sovereignty," Russia has in mind not so much the issue of sovereignty as the Western challenge issue. Russia is obviously not as interested in Central Asian sovereignty and independence as it is in its own sovereignty (there

[19] D. Trenin, "Nenadezhnaia strategia," *Pro et Contra,* Vol. 6, No. 1-2, 2001, pp. 51-65.
[20] See: D. Trenin, "Russia and Central Asia: Interests, Policies, and Prospects," pp. 75-136.
[21] Ibid., p. 130.
[22] V. Tsymburskiy, op. cit.

is a Western challenge). It turns out that the two sovereignties (of Central Asia and Russia) are incompatible. These are just scholastic deliberations.

I used them to attract the analysts and the academic community to the hermeneutic problem of Central Asian studies: explanation and interpretation, on the one hand, and understanding, on the other, are mutually dependent. This leads to a hermeneutic circle, which means that in order to understand anything it should be studied and vice versa. Indeed, the U.S. and Russia can be regarded either as antagonists in Central Asia or as partners. One can be a pessimist when it comes to Central Asian integration or an optimist. The problems that mar the relations among the Central Asian states can be interpreted as disuniting, or as stimulating cooperation.

Meanwhile, the signs of Russian-American rapprochement in Central Asia and even of certain modifications of the Central Asian issue became clearer during President George W. Bush's visit to Moscow in May 2002. The Joint Statement on Counterterrorist Cooperation, a product of the Moscow visit, said, in part: "Believing that the sovereignty, long-term stability, prosperity, and further democratic development of the states of Central Asia serve the strategic interests of the United States and Russia, we pledge transparency and cooperation in our relations with the states of Central Asia. An important step for ensuring their security is to eradicate terrorist activities in Afghanistan once and for all and to assist in the prevention of their reoccurrence."[23] The Joint Declaration of the two presidents on New Strategic Relations between the United States and Russia says: "In Central Asia and the South Caucasus, we recognize our common interests in promoting the stability, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of all the nations of this region. The United States and Russia reject the failed model of 'Great Power' rivalry that can only increase the potential for conflict in those regions."[24]

Responsibility of Central Asia (*Karimov vs. Nazarbaev*)

I am almost fully convinced that Russia has never doubted not only the West's inability to push it from Central Asia, but also its inability to become the region's dominant force. What remains unclear is **the policy pursued by the independent (particularly from Russia) Central Asian states**. This policy, however, is expected to modify the classical Heartland theory (which I have written about above). But to many people's surprise, this course was not always straight and clear. From time to time, the local countries challenged Russia's dominance, while at others they recognized and generally accepted it.

There is enough evidence of this, Russia's membership in the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) being one of them. It distorted the region's geographic configuration and the structure's political composition. In fact, this reflected not so much Russia's de facto offensive as the Central Asian countries' surrender: they admitted their inability to resolve their disagreements and invited Russia to act as a mediator.[25]

At the same time, the current disagreement between Russia and America over the region's future is a dual symptom of the budding new world post-Cold War order. On the one hand, the old model of the balance of power in international relations (which appeared to be buried forever) was revived

[23] [http://moscow.usembassy.gov/bilateral/joint_statement.php?record_id=8].
[24] [http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/05/20020524-2.html].
[25] For more detail, see: F. Tolipov, "The Expansion of CACO: A Russian Offensive or a Central Asian Surrender?" available at [www.cacianalyst.org], 1 December, 2004.

as very much needed. On the other, the new Central Asian issue in the Russia-America relations—whether the region becomes democratic or not—has made it clear that geopolitics can distort the democratization policy and cast doubt on it.

Central Asia is surrounded by undemocratic states, which means that the new players of the Central Asian Big Game have been waging a "zero-sum" game, while the regional and extra-regional countries had to follow the "win-win" policy as fully corresponding to the new democratic geopolitics. This created a paradox in Russia's ideas about the relations between the local countries and the West: while building strategic relations with the West/U.S., Moscow is fairly nervous about the Central Asian countries drawing closer to the West (the phenomenon of America's military presence in the region is the best confirmation). As member of the G-8, Russia is irritated by the fact that the Caucasus and Central Asia cooperate with NATO; a key SCO member, an associated OIC member, and an invariable participant in the APR summits, Russia did not rejoice at America's "Greater Central Asia" project. Having done next to nothing to liquidate the seat of terrorism in Afghanistan, Russia criticizes the inability of the international forces (under U.S. and NATO command) to stabilize the situation there.

The democratic agenda should be freed from geopolitical complications. How can this be done? The extra-regional powers' destructive geopolitics and the geopolitical distortions of local democracy should be rectified in the most constructive manner. The former (geopolitics) cannot be avoided, while the latter (democracy) cannot be discarded. The solution is as follows: the "*geopolitical democracy*" formula should be transformed into the "*democratic geopolitics*" formula.

I have already written about the multi-polarity of the post-Soviet expanse—the time has come to say that it contradicts the "democratic geopolitics" conception. Prominent Russian political figure A. Sobianin has pointed out that Turkmenistan is the region's only "dark horse." "It is more than an enigmatic joker, which appeared along with the changes at the very top. It is a strong independent player. It is not the region's strongest country, but it is found at the unique bifurcation point of a unique point in history when even its tiniest steps might change the trajectory of Kazakhstan, Russian, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan foreign policies. The question is: where will it go?"[26] I think that this multipolarity will not only complicate the already complex and dangerous Big Game; it does not answer Turkmenistan's long-term interests. It may rebound as soon as Turkmenistan joins the game. The far from simple position of the enumerated countries in the geopolitical game with the world powers is more confirmation of the above. I can only add that Turkmenistan is not alone at this "unique point of bifurcation of a unique point in history"—its Central Asian neighbors and the region as a whole have also reached the point.

There are no "ifs" in history, but let us imagine, for the sake of an argument, how geopolitics would have developed in Central Asia if Uzbekistan's relations with the United States had not suddenly deteriorated; if Uzbekistan had remained outside the SCO and EurAsEC; if it had remained in the GUUAM; if the CACO had not merged with the EurAsEC, and if Uzbekistan had not allied with the Russian Federation (in fact the half-baked Agreement merely repeats their earlier Agreement on Strategic Partnership). The list of these changes, which were neither logical nor predictable (nor expected), demonstrates their geopolitical anti-American bias. I can go as far as saying that if none of the above had happened, Uzbekistan would have become the Central Asian leader, not because of America's backing, but because, to quote a Russian poet, it "really forced one to admire it—and never played a shrewder trick." As a genuine and responsible regional leader, Uzbekistan would have been prepared to fulfill its new mission of the region's political unification.

[26] A. Sobianin, "SShA ne khotiat, chtoby integratsiey Tsentral'noy Azii zanialas Rossia," available at [www.centrasia.org], 25 July, 2007. Interview by Alexander Evgrafov, 24 July, 2007 (source—Rosbalt).

What the country lost by severing relations with the United States and what it gained by allying with Russia on an anti-American basis deserves special discussion—it seems that the country could have preserved its relations with the former, while improving its relations with the latter. Washington and Moscow have places of their own in Tashkent's foreign policy—its foreign policy regarding each of them does not have to be mutually exclusive. Today, Uzbekistan's foreign policy suggests the following important conclusion.

Its absence and its involvement may influence the region's geopolitical situation in a critical way. To quote Sobianin, it should merely choose the right road at the bifurcation point. Russia was disturbed when Uzbekistan allowed the United States to station its troops on its territory—and breathed again, and even rejoiced, as soon as Uzbekistan drove away the American contingent, together with the American NGOs. Uzbekistan's activity could turn it into a driving force of regional integration; if it prefers to abstain, the driving force will be slowed down in its progress toward integration.

The Central Asian countries are facing **ambiguous perspectives as CIS members**—this is clear. It is equally clear that Moscow's choice of either Nazarbaev or Karimov, on the one hand, and their choice, on the other, is of immense importance. Their personalities are not as important as their policies, their involvement in the Big Game, and their ability to contribute to reforming geopolitical democracy into democratic geopolitics.

President Nazarbaev has managed to use his country's natural resources (energy resources in particular) to his own advantage and to the advantage of his country. Kazakhstan vacillates between the Eurasian, Central Asian, or even pan-Asian (let us recall the surrealistic CICBMA [Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia] idea) biases. The state, which has posed itself the task of becoming the OSCE chairman in 2009, first moved toward democracy by introducing certain democratic changes in April 2007, then immediately retreated by lifting the limit on the number of presidential terms for the incumbent.

At the same time, Kazakhstan's economy demonstrates fantastic achievements. The "Kazakhstani miracle" has already reached Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Kyrgyzstan, where its investments have already become a factor of economic growth. "Dizzy with success," the country's leaders have posed themselves the task of joining the group of the world's 50 most developed states. Its peacekeeping contingents are involved in Iraq and Afghanistan, yet the country never went as far as Uzbekistan by establishing allied relations with Russia, its immediate neighbor, and never spoilt its relations with the West and America.

Uzbekistan, so far, has failed to elaborate an integral foreign policy doctrine and, instead of a pro-active strategy typical of any strong state that relies on the nation's multi-parameter potential, it preferred re-active tactics. There is no dynamism in Uzbekistan's dealings with the world powers: there are EU sanctions in the wake of the Andijan events of May 2005 instead; in dealing with its Central Asian neighbors, Uzbekistan for some reason selected self-isolation.

The above means that Karimov's vs. Nazarbaev's approach is a choice between *pro-active* and *re-active* policies and the stakes the world leaders are placing on the one or the other in their geopolitical intrigues. No one, or almost no one, is paying attention to the fact that the question of the two key countries' responsibilities for the region as part of the Heartland was ignored. Stakes should be placed on Central Asia as a strategically important region rather than on specific people or personified politics.

Those who talk about Central Asia in geopolitical terms prefer to dwell on the foreign military presence, the West's offensive and Russia's surrender, the struggle over the region's energy resources, etc. The countries are mostly ignored—much is said about them and instead of them. Regrettably, too many local experts, analysts, political scientists, and politicians are caught up in the latest fash-

ions and willingly repeat scholarly and quasi-scholarly ideas about their region coined by others and imposed on them on the academic commodity market.

Does Central Asia have its own interests and what are they? **Its key strategic interests can be described as independence, democracy, and integration**, which formulate the following short- and middle-term tasks:

— restoring the regional structures of the five Central Asian states;

— treating a political alliance as the most important task;

— annulling the visa regime between the five countries;

— harmonizing the constitutions and the laws of the five countries and adopting a Manifesto of a United Central Asia;

— transferring to common external and defensive policies (patterned on European policy) right up to restoring the Central Asian battalion;

— withdrawing from the CIS and establishing relations with the CIS countries on a bilateral basis;

— asking the large world powers for broad international support (à la Marshall Plan for Europe) for implementing large regional economic projects.

Central Asia should, while recognizing its geopolitical interests and Russia's concerns about the foreign military-political and other presence, understand, articulate, and defend *its* (not other countries') interests. In fact, Central Asia has *its own* concerns over the foreign presence in the region that differ from Russia's. Central Asia should stop serving the great powers' interests—and thus discontinue its dependence. This should not be taken to mean that these interests immanently contradict the interests of the local countries: they might even be mutually harmonious. I mean to say that the world **should stop thinking and talking about Central Asia from the point of view of great power geopolitics without thinking and talking from the Central Asian viewpoint at the same time**.

Conclusion

I have discussed three approaches to Russia's Central Asian policy: Gorbachev vs. Yeltsin; Putin vs. Bush, and Karimov vs. Nazarbaev. They reflect the three scopes and three levels of the policy pursued by the politicians described above: continental (CIS-wide); global (Russian-American), and regional (Central Asian). The first symbolizes Russia's treatment of the post-Soviet expanse, which in effect is continuing an undemocratic geopolitics; the second reflects the worldwide struggle between the ideas of democracy and geopolitical interests; the third speaks of the inevitable, and unwelcome, result of the combined effects of the first two factors.

The three political trends associated with the two world powers' attitude toward Uzbekistan, as well as its attitude toward them, are equally unwelcome. I have in mind the United States' revisionism; Russia's revanchism; and Uzbekistan's reversionism.[27] I mean to say that Washington's revision of its position in relation to Uzbekistan, as well as Moscow's resultant revanche might be caused by Tashkent's retreat and abandonment of its former foreign policy orientation. It has become clear, however, that Uzbekistan's reversionism is inappropriate, not only in relation to Russia and the U.S., but also to its closest neighbors.

[27] See: F. Tolipov, "Uzbekistan's Reversionism, America's Revisionism, and Russia's Revanchism," *CACI Analyst,* 22 March, 2006, available at [www.cacianalyst.org].

It seems that American revisionism will not develop further—Washington will merely readjust its strategic course in Central Asia. Today, Washington's position is a dual one: first, its assessments of the May 2005 Andijan events remain the same; second, the U.S. State Department put forward the Greater Central Asia conception, which means that America is seeking a different, yet active as ever, Central Asian policy.

Moscow's revanchism is improbable: so far this is confirmed by the efforts of certain Russian analysts and experts to offer a more adequate Central Asian policy.

Recently A. Sobianin wrote something that surprised many. While being aware that Central Asia may grow suspicious of Russia's neo-imperialist designs, he pointed out that there are two international organizations able to defuse the fears: the SCO and the CICBMA: "There are more members in the CICBMA than in the SCO, therefore it is probably the only international organization that unites all the countries directly or indirectly involved in the Durand Line and Kashmir issues.

"The problems that are unlikely to be resolved (or cannot be resolved at all) at the level of bilateral relations and that are unlikely to be resolved within the Central Asia and Russia community will be easily settled within wider integration projects and large international organizations."[28] I cannot agree with it: the fears of revived Russian imperialism can be quenched not by large international organizations (which themselves might be latently neo-imperialist), but by Russia's openly democratic geopolitics. It should abandon its desire to preserve the status quo in Central Asia. (As for the CICBMA, I believe it to be a pseudo-mechanism of confidence-building and interaction in Asia, which, as distinct from Europe, is not united. It is fragmented civilizationally, formationally, geopolitically, historically, and religiously. The so-called Durand Line and the Kashmir issue cannot bring together the highly fragmented continent; more than that—many of the CICBMA members are absolutely indifferent to Russia's imperial policies in Central Asia.)

Great Russia should pursue great policies; today its grandeur can be better illustrated not by its imperial nature, but by its democratic policies, both at home and on the geopolitical stage. Significantly, today Russia no longer looks like a defender of Central Asia—it is Central Asia that is protecting Russia's southern borders by the very fact of its independent existence, democratic development, and unification. This is what new democratic Russia should really want.

Here are two important comments about the legacy of those who recently left the political scene and of those who will leave it soon.

A. Chernyaev, Mikhail Gorbachev's former aide, has written the following in his book on perestroika and his former patron: "It is ridiculous, highly provincial, and in general unworthy of Russia to present its democratic foreign policy and its relations with the United States as though they began from scratch, as its present rulers are wont to do."[29] There should be continuity in foreign policy.

I want to say again: Russia at all times has been responsible for the Heartland—this has been its share of responsibility for the world. Today, it shares this responsibility with the newly independent Central Asian states, which means that they should shoulder responsibility for world affairs as well. Are they all aware of this?

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[28] A. Sobianin, op. cit.
[29] A. Chernyaev, op. cit.