

**«THE NEW GREAT
GAME» IN CENTRAL
ASIA: THE USA ROLE****Introduction**

The independence of the Central Asian states after 1991 revived the Great Game that turned into a term used by specialists of IR-theoreticians and practitioners looked at the system of international interactions in the region. The peculiarity of the new stage of «the Great Game» is in the composition of the actors (state and non-state), their interests, instruments and strategies. The term «Central Asia» in this paper refers to five former republics of the USSR (set up by the J.Stalin nation building reforms in 1924) – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Although, from the historical and cultural viewpoints, and also from the geopolitical considerations of great powers, the region need more careful definition [1].

The term «Great Game» emerged in 1830s to describe the geopolitical competition of Russian and British empires in Afghanistan and adjacent areas, but became popular due to R.Kipling's novel «Kim» [2].

We consider the outbreak of «the New Great Game» since the disintegration of the USSR. The Central Asian states were passively involved in the East-West confrontation being part of the military-nuclear and resources systems of the USSR.

The independence after 1991 catapulted them into the global politics and forced to take part in the unveiling geopolitical competition for the region. At the same time the regional states have to cope simultaneously with the myriad of domestic problems.

The structure of «the Great Game» metaphor looks as follows: geopolitical struggle for the region between the non-regional actors (originally between Russian and British empires). But it should be noted that the regional structures- indigenous groupings – societies and the states were of little importance for the external actors, that easily neglected them or manipulated depending on the game progress aimed just to include the regional structures into the spheres of their interest.

The USSR disintegration opened a new page in the geopolitical history of Central Asia and vast opportunities for old and new actors in the reincarnated «Great Game». The term itself was coined by the champion of the Western imperialism R. Kipling to herald a new era

in the Western presence in Asia – civilizational, i.e. to save the savage peoples both from their problems and those brought by the white civilizations. What was behind the poetical terminology?

The violent struggle for natural and human resources, strategic transit points, political control over the regimes in power (the indigenous and the imposed ones). The crucial events of the first half of the XX century – World War I, Russian revolutions, the danger of the communist expansion after the World War II, «Iron curtain» and Cold war containment froze the plans of some international actors to get control over the strategically important region. After 1991, the western powers rushed into the region in hope to get control over its enormous resources – oil and gas, uranium, transit potential, but the most challenging was the chance to monitor the development of two giants – Russia and China.

The power vacuum, seemingly left after the USSR dissolution could be easily filled by the Chinese and Islamic influences. The nation/state building processes, searches of the economic and political models for reforms, civilizations calls from the east and west – for the first decade after 1991 provided fertile ground for experimental games of western powers, Russia, China, Turkey and Islamic countries. But the regimes gradually grew and crafted new face of the region, but the nature of the instability is hidden within the regimes, that veiled themselves under the masks of «Central Asian Switzerland», new democratic models, etc.

Mail body

What is new about «the New Great Game» agenda?

Today, there are several potential geopolitical trends, in which Central Asia can «move». The United States is one of the vectors of influence. During the formation of the new independent states, the US interests mainly concentrated in the military-political sphere. However, the most active period of the US regional policy started in early 2000s during the anti-terrorist operation. However, this effect is very unstable and characterized by constant change of difficulties.

1.1 The US interests evaluation in Central Asia

The US policy in the Central Asia passed through several stages:

I stage (1991-1996). The USA was a newcomer to the geopolitical competition in the region after 1991, but it does not mean that the region was outside the US global geopolitical interests. To be correct, it was beyond the reach, being under the Soviet iron and nuclear shield. President B.Clinton

through series of diplomatic contacts and economic initiatives marked the active stage of the US policy in the region.

The basis was created by Freedom Support Act of 1992 that viewed the Central Asia states (as well as all former Soviet republics) as potential members of the democratic community with market economies. The USA emphasized the promotion of democracy and market reforms first, and employed the multilateral mechanisms – Central Asian economic community and Partnership for Peace Program [3].

In regional context Washington mainly focused on strengthening its position in strategic economic spheres, first, oil-and-gas, in extraction and export of hydrocarbon raw material, in construction of gas-and oil pipelines around of territory of Russia, Iran and China.

Military-political issue developed in the framework of the «Partnership for Peace» Program. The creation of the security system in the region that the US administration started to develop since early 1990s included the multilateral and bilateral cooperation [4].

Since 1994, the regional states (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan) joined the NATO Partnership for Peace Program that could lead to further isolation of Russia from the region [5]. In December 1995, the USA supported creation of the Central Asian peacekeeping battalion formed by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to provide stability and peace in the region (Tajikistan joined in 2002).

II stage (1996-2001). In this period, American policy in the region was concentrated on developing close relations with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. It led to the fact that Uzbekistan began to depart from Russia and searched the strong cooperation with the US. The development of American-Uzbek relations went slowly enough and only on the limited circle of questions. Nevertheless, it had a negative impact on relations between Moscow and Washington.

The energy resources of the Caspian Sea became a serious incentive to seek ways to get involved deeper in the region and minimize the chances of Russia return. The biggest US transnational oil companies fueled a number of US geopolitical projects in the Caspian Sea areas – Central Asia, Caucasus and Iran. The US deputy state secretary S.Talbott [6] in 1997 explained why the regional countries are in urgent need of US support to establish democratic societies. He stressed that access to the regional oil and gas reserves are essential for US vitality [7]. Since 1993-1994 the

USA reached a number of energy agreements with Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, as major oil rich states. The uncoordinated and conflicting actions of US agencies in 1992-1996 prevented the realization of US interests in the region, and only since 1996 when the National Security Council was authorized to orchestrate the agencies activities and concentrated on security challenges to energy resources of the Caspian Sea [7]. The stress was made on the areas adjacent to Russia and Iran. Thus, since 1996 the energy factor dominated the US agenda in the region and ranged from the economic aid through energy development projects to transportation and military programs.

III stage (2001-2005). The major obstacle to enlargement of the US presence in the region was Russia, and the US administrations developed a number of initiatives to undermine it and create stable links with some states. Kazakhstan was the first regional state to get involved into the US projects- from denuclearization to energy projects [8]. The US interests are quite understandable in the context of the American global strategy and plans to undermine the rising Russian and Chinese influences in the region and in global affairs in general. The reserves of the Caspian Sea could be an efficient instrument in the global competition for the oil market control.

The period is characterized by the activating «the New Great Game». In «the New Great Game» Central Asia became the forefront of the fight against international terrorism, and a major player used as a barrier to «religious extremism» and «drug trafficking» to the West. Donald Rumsfeld, Defense Secretary had agreed with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to establish military bases in territory of this country [10]. But the State Department less and less liked violations of human rights in these countries.

It seemed the US did not have the real competitors in the region. Historical influence of Russia in Central Asia weakened. China has not yet fully involved in the struggle for Central Asia and the EU was satisfied with existing level of partnership.

The situation has changed in 2005 with a «Tulip Revolution» in Kyrgyzstan. In May of that year, Uzbek security forces killed hundreds of protesters in Andijan city. The reaction of the US in the first case reaction was panic, because of fear to loose the Manas air base. Second, the critical position of Washington deprived America the airbase on Uzbek territory.

IV stage (2005-2009). In this period, the US strategy in Central Asia envisages the balance

of regional cooperation in the sphere of security, energy, economy and freedom through conducting the reforms. The Greater Central Asia (GCA) project originated as a proposal by S. Frederick Starr (2005) [11], Director of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute (CACI), emphasizes that the U.S. has to fulfill its obligations in the region and build its long-term policy strategy based on regional vision.

The project followed the pattern of «Greater Middle East» model, stating the necessity of integration of geographical space into the united regional «link» consisting of traditional Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan), and, potentially, Afghanistan and South Asian states (Pakistan, India, Nepal, Sri-Lanka) in order to pursue a common policy, of «democratization», economic development and security, according to the official version.

GCA includes Afghanistan that has to be joined to stable and Western-oriented Central Asian states, with the view to reduce internal and external tension in the country and in the region. Thus, economically integrated Afghanistan would be a linking bridge between Central Asia and South Asia. This would lead to the economic growth of the countries involved, including Afghanistan. American regional policy stipulates «geopolitical pluralism». Washington invites Moscow and Beijing to take part in the project as guarantors and donors into the regional modernization.

The US steps were explained by changed the geopolitical situation. In order to balance the influence of the United States, Russia and China began to look for the new partners in the region, and in 2005 Iran, Pakistan and India entered Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as an observers. One of the main results of SCO meeting (2005) was the demand to withdraw US military forces from the region.

Expeditionary Corps Coalition forces withdrawal from Uzbekistan and disappointment in the results of a Color revolution in Kyrgyzstan should be considered as a serious defeat of the US Central Asian geopolitics. Thus, the desire to combine liberal (Kyrgyzstan) and realistic (Uzbekistan) approaches in the US Central Asia strategy was not crowned with success expected. Central Asian states did not become significant partners for Washington neither in its war on terrorism, nor in its triumphant spread of Western values.

For this reason, the theme of Central Asia were not announced in the basic documents on US security, such as the «National Strategy of Defense in 2008», or in the course of pre-election debates and discussions,

both in the traditional post-Soviet understanding, and in the context of «Greater Central Asia».

V stage (2009-present)

Since 2001, Washington has been building its interests in Central Asia largely through the prism of Afghanistan. A new stage of the US Big Game in the region associated with the project «New Silk Road». The Project launched in 2011 as a strategic U.S. initiative to enhance transport and trade within this historic cultural zone and the major economies of India, Pakistan, China, and Europe, is solidly grounded in a regional, rather than bilateral, approach. The project demonstrated Washington is looking for a new format of cooperation [12].

According to the Washington politicians, further integration of the economies of South and Central Asia is an important geopolitical lever of influence. It will minimize the influence of Russia and China in the region in future.

However, New Silk Road project in essence, says that after all the US interest in the region is gradually running out. It seems that Central Asia in compare with other regions is not a priority for America.

Does it mean that Washington is leaving «the Great Game»?

Today the place of Central Asian region in an official and expert discourse is estimated differently. Thus, Jeffrey Mankoff (2013) [13], Deputy Director and fellow of Washington Center Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) argues that after 2014 Central Asia is no longer a priority of the US foreign policy.

However, Robert Blake (2013) [14], Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, in his report on the concept of American presence in the region, delivered at the US House Committee on Foreign Affairs, noted that Central Asia is getting more and more important for the United States.

The lack of the US regional strategy explains the difference in assessing the importance of the region. The situation is complicated by the necessity to find common points in post-Afghan foreign policy.

Changing foreign policy priorities toward Asia Pacific and budgetary problems are pushing Washington to reduce its programs in Central Asia. The first reduction in Central Asian projects' funding happened in 2011, when US Department of State and US Agency on international development (USAID) decreased its allotments from 436 to 126 million USD. The gradual reduction of the financing continued in 2013 and amounted 118 million dollars – a decrease of 12% to the level of 2012 [15].

Mainly political, socio-economic and humanitarian programs have fallen under sequestration.

The US presence in the region is more likely will be reduced in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the countries- candidates to the Custom Union membership. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan consider any kind of foreign presence on their territory as a threat to stability. It explains their refusal to move closer with the USA.

After 2014, Central Asia will not be longer a priority of US foreign policy. The State Department will have to realize the objectives in the region by limited means. Overall, America will have to change its attitude towards the region. Washington over the past 13 years considered the region mainly through the prism of the attacks of September 11, and cooperation based on the antiterrorist war in Afghanistan. The more integrated approach focuses on the region economic integration into the global economy is an alternative for the US strategy. Washington often ignored the internal problems of Central Asian countries, fearing that criticism may adversely affect the readiness of the Republic to facilitate the transit of NATO cargo and troops to Afghanistan.

The United States will not be able to deal with problems of the region on their own due to economic and geopolitical reasons. The building of the «responsible cooperation» with other leading actors could be the way out of the situation. However, the confrontation between Russia and the West makes it difficult.

In the present conditions Washington cannot resist the Moscow desire to integrate the countries of the region in the economic and then political union. It is difficult for the United States to agree with the growing economic influence of China. Maximum what the US can do is to maintain its influence in the region by offering their services in the field of security (at the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan) or as a promoter of projects in the field of transport and energy diversification (normalization of the situation in Afghanistan and a breakthrough in the Caspian and South Caucasus directions) [16].

Conclusion

Today the new global geopolitical situation in Central Asia should not be associated only with coalition forces withdrawal from Afghanistan. Interests of the old and the new political players should be taken into consideration with the regard to new realities of «New Great Game».

Current changes could be identified both as a start of the big political game's new phase and the competition in the region between Russia, the US, Israel, Europe on the one side, and China, Iran, India and regional states, on the other side. It is necessary to keep in mind that interests of the new and the old political players, first, focused on the development by financial capital of Central Asian resource-rich areas.

The global economic crisis will inevitably intensify non-regional actors' competition for the region. The rise of regional instability and the weakening of intraregional relations between the Central Asian countries lead them to seek assistance from external players. The world rising centers are including in the 'Great Game' along with the traditional players and create the alternative to the West.

In these conditions, regional states face the problem how to avoid the influence «divide and rule» policy of the great players. It is more important to create conditions for sustainable economic development and political stability, to resolve security problems beneficially for all, but not only for separate political players.

In particular, Kazakhstan intends to strengthen Central Asia's role in the geopolitics through the development of international transport corridors [17].

On the one hand, it will increase the role of regional states in the world politics. On the other hand, it will allow the Central Asian states do not act as objects of the «Great Game». «After the disappearance of the» Great Silk Road «with the beginning of Maritime Traffic the great states on the territory of Central Asia ceased to exist. Our countries have remained on the margins of world politics for a long time. Now together we would go back into the lead and become a serious players on the world political arena, «- says Sultan Akimbekov, Director of the Institute of the World Economy and Policy at the First President Fund of Kazakhstan [18].

The requirement for foreign aid lead to the great powers' (China, Russia, USA, EU countries, India and others) interference in the regional countries affairs. This trend will continue in the future. Nevertheless, this competition does not have to take the form of great power rivalry but cooperation in addressing important regional issues (terrorism, «failed states» or drug trafficking).

Ted Donnelly [19] from the US Army War College offers Washington to invest in strengthening the borders and the adoption of protective measures to isolate the Fergana valley from the militants operating in Afghanistan [20].

The US colonel considers the military security cooperation with Russia and China will help Washington to promote the idea of connecting Russia, China, the SCO and the CSTO to the maintaining the boundaries of the «Great Game».

However, not competition between the leading players, but instability of the region is a major challenge and a factor of the New Great Game development. For each of the great powers involved in Central Asian game, high uncertainty and instability in the region is a very serious challenge, since their policy becomes extremely irrational, contradictory and inconsistent [21]. The combination of all the above factors characterize the region.

Central Asian countries use Russian and Chinese contradictions of interests in the oil sector. They also can refer to the interests of Russia's security services when working with the US military.

But playing on contradictions and balancing based on the conflict of interest is not prospect for regional states. In our opinion, in order to move from subject's position to object's one Central Asian states should develop the process of economic integration. This will allow regional states to protect their national interests and sustainable development in the new geopolitical conditions.

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