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From the “forgotten region” to the “great game” region: On the development of geopolitics in Central Asia

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ABSTRACT

Only eight years ago, Central Asian¹ region was characterized as being “largely ignored as a scholarly backwater of the defunct communist world system”.²

Since then the situation has changed; and the role of the Central Asian region in international affairs has increased considerably. Several developments within the region ushered in new geopolitical approaches, echoing international rivalries for the dominance in the ex-Soviet republics. Kazakhstan’s oil export and the Kyrgyz Manas military bases are among those international disagreements that echoed in the “Great Game” vision of Central Asia in the world literature.

Could geopolitics be the key approach to frame complex developments in the region? Or is this the case when particular methodological “lenses”³ through which one could consider the world are counter-productive?

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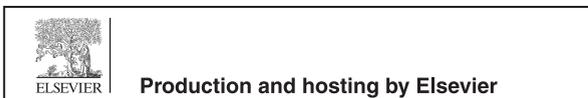
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¹ In this article Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are referred as Central Asia.

² Luong, P. (2002). *Institutional Change and Political Continuity in Post-Soviet Central Asia*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. In Pacek, A.C. (2008). Book Review: *Institutional Change and Political Continuity in Post-Soviet Central Asia*, *The Journal of Politics*, 65.

³ Baylis, J., Smith, S., and Owens, P. (2005). *The globalization of world politics: an introduction to international relation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.3.

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1. Introduction

After the collapse of the USSR, Central Asian countries that were not well known to the general international community have increased their role on the international economic and political landscape. There is a Chinese proverb that it is a great happiness and unhappiness simultaneously to be born when empires collapse and are created. The collapse of the Soviet regime opened new alternatives for the development in the post-Soviet world. However, in addition, instead of entering a new era of post-cold war stability and cooperation, the former Soviet countries of Ukraine, Georgia, and Central Asia are more increasingly defined as transforming into regions of competition for the leading world powers (Lukyanov, 2010). In a recent Swiss paper with the engaging title of “Central Asia: Great Game or Graveyard?”, for example, readers were asked, “Could it be that the Great Game Rudyard Kipling described a century ago in Central Asia is back?” (Feiertag, 2009).

References to the region as a potential source of international conflicts, due to its unique geopolitical position and substantial natural resources are becoming increasingly common. However, the regional transformations are accompanied by numerous problems that complicate not only Central Asian foreign relations, but general development processes. Kirghizia's political and social revolutions, Andigan and Fergana valley events, Uzbekh-Kyrgyzh border tensions, Kozak-Kazakh tensions in the northern territories of Kazakhstan during the first years of independence, potentially explosive investment agreements on oil exploitation and export in Kazakhstan, and the increased threat of drug-trafficking and terrorism spreading from Afghanistan are some of new problems that appeared in post-Soviet Central Asia. The 2010 coup in Kyrgyzstan prompted concerns that such revolutions could lead to increased international confrontation between the global powers involved. These concerns are due to the tension between Russian and US military and economic interests, along with broader factors, where geopolitics does play an influential and critical role. The Central Asian region is also of immense interest to China, which has been trying to increase its role in the region through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and by increasing investments in Central Asian countries. In fact, new concerns are now being expressed that new international confrontations will emerge which may involve China also; while at the same time these powers have been trying to form alliances so to enforce its power.⁴

In this paper, firstly, new geopolitical theoretical frameworks will be examined, addressing new social, political and economic challenges in the region.⁵ It will be argued that two countries in the Central Asian region in particular present the most vivid case studies related to the rise of a new geopolitics: oil-abundant, currently stable Kazakhstan versus explosive Kirghizia, one of the poorest states in the CIS. These two cases are helpful in providing insights into strategic transformations in the region, and the geopolitical dimensions of the region's development. These two states nevertheless have much in common – multilateral foreign policies, and strategically important geopolitical locations; hence presenting the most vivid cases in the recent regional geopolitical developments. Particular emphasis will be placed on the case of Kazakhstan, focusing in particular on the country's relations with its foreign partners in both oil and security. Consideration of these two cases requires examining some existing trends in regionalism, and the role of regional organizations versus international organizations in the foreign relations of these countries. The number of problems and threats that the region is confronted with speak in

favor of the increased necessity of international cooperation between the regional and international organizations. This, in turn, demonstrates that purely geopolitical priorities in the foreign policies of the world powers toward the region and in the foreign policies of the regions' countries themselves are misleading and counter-productive in the long-term perspective.

2. Central Asian developments and the revival of geopolitical studies

Post-Soviet transformations are influenced by a variety of national and international factors. There are several theoretical international relations frameworks that have been used to analyze Central Asian developments: neo-liberalism, neo-realism, constructivism, primordialism and geopolitics. A neo-liberal approach to Central Asian developments was especially popular during the initial period, following the collapse of the USSR. However, starting from 2000, increased political and economic confrontations prompted scholars world-wide to refer to neo-realism to understand the turbulent developments in the region. In addition to these traditional schools, constructivism – specifically defining aspects of regional integration,⁶ and primordialism – related to the formation of national identity⁷ have been taking an increasingly stronger niche in the post-Soviet theoretical debates.

New geopolitical studies, focusing on Central Asia, echo concepts that originated before the establishment of the USSR. The geopolitical approach was proposed by Sir Halford Mackinder in his concept of Heartland. His Heartland Theory is apparently the most well known geopolitical model, emphasizing the ascendancy of land-based power over sea-based power. The pivotal area, or the Heartland, was roughly defined by Central Asia, from where horsemen dominated Asia and Europe (Mackinder, 1996, pp. 175–194). On the eve of political transformations in the CIS, Brzezinski, the former national security advisor to President Jimmy Carter, and the US scholar Huntington presented their theories of Eurasia, which was characterized as a potentially dangerous geopolitical and ethnically unstable region (Brzezinski, 1998, pp. 265-269; Huntington, 1996). This agitated many scholars in the former USSR. However, it soon became evident that stability in the region had been seriously threatened by the number of conflicts in the region, and the unstable political and economic regimes in the independent countries. Brzezinski and Huntington's thesis made the US increasingly wary of potential instability in the region. As emphasized in the introduction, "because of its internal problems—which include great economic uncertainty despite vast oil wealth, a disintegrating infrastructure, and the potential for internal instability—and its geopolitical position, Kazakhstan and the region of Central Asia present a complex set of opportunities and dangers for the major

⁴ Mearsheimer, J. (2010). "A Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia". Speech, University of Sydney, Australia, August 4.

⁵ International and national reports, content analysis of newspapers and other periodical literature with regards to the recent coup in Kirghizia have been analyzed for this paper. In addition, the data of the regional integration centers (such as SCO and CSTO), researched during my field-trip, and responses to my questions by the representatives of these organizations are also incorporated into the paper.

⁶ For a sample of these studies, see Kubicek (1997); Luong (2009); Bohr (2004); Tsantoulis (2009).

⁷ See, in particular, Dave (2007); Suny (2001); Shlapentokh (2002); Zamiatin (2002).

powers” (Legvold, 2003). The idea of the “Great Game”, which fundamentally impacted upon the social and economic well-being of the Central Asian population, became a wide-spread notion used to explain the region’s trends.⁸ From the perspective of US policy-making officials, for example, the Caspian region’s geo-strategic dimensions for the United States have not been limited to energy security issues; they have implications for the grand strategy of the United States in the twenty-first century: “the US not only aims to politically control regional energy resources, in particular Kazakh oil, but also checks potential challengers to its grand strategy such as China and Russia” (Iseri, 2009, pp. 26–46). In 2003, Michael Klare’s approach to the US foreign policy interests in Central Asia was also of an alarmist nature, when he stated “the beginning of a new Cold War in south-central Eurasia, with many possibilities for crises and flare-ups, because nowhere else in the world are Russia and China directly involved and supporting groups and regimes that are opposed to the United States” (Klare, 2003). In turn, several post-Soviet scholars also emphasize geopolitics over other approaches in international relations; Dugin’s publications (2004, 2007), prioritizing the geopolitical role and interests of Russia and Kazakhstan are among these new works.

Among other developments of geopolitical approaches applied to the Central Asian transformations, theories of critical geopolitics could be distinguished. This research is presented by such scholars as Agnew, Dalby, Dodds, and Ó Tuathail. Critical geopolitics is aimed “at creating a synthesis between orthodox geopolitics and geo-economic discourse to develop a new understanding of geographic arrangements as social constructions that are changeable over time” (IIAS, 2002). According to this approach world politics is represented by states embedded into transnational techno-economic power structures. It is stressed by the supporters of this approach that such structures threaten habitation and survival on the planet as a whole (Amineh, 2002). The Central Asian developments are, in particular, viewed from this perspective,⁹ and offer a more complex account of the transitions the region has been going through. It should also be pointed out that in the academic literature there is a new tendency to review not only the applicability of any particular approach, but also responsibilities to “launch such ships in the world” (Megoran, 2004, p.735) – thinking strategically about consequences of the approaches presented internationally. Some, such as Cox (1981, p. 87), believe that “theory is always for someone and for some purpose”, referring to the use of geopolitics in pursuing Western interests. In fact, in many cases the broader interests of regions in development (economically or democratically) are not sufficiently considered by the Western powers¹⁰.

Others, like Hepple (1986, p.32), are against “dangerously misleading geopolitical doctrines and policies”. In many cases approaches, based only on geopolitical aspects, could serve as propaganda for policy-makers (Kara-Mursa, 2000), as opposed to providing efficient and helpful clues to more successful regional developments and international cooperation. This statement is applicable to Central Asia; developments therein are further reviewed in the article.

3. Kazakhstan’s ‘multipolarity’, oil politics, and security policy

Kazakhstan is a landlocked country between Russia, China, Kirghizia, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. Following the collapse of the USSR, the advantageous geopolitical location – between Europe and Asia in more broad terms – and the country’s rich natural resources resulted in the interests of the major global powers such as the USA, Russia, China, Europe, and the Islamic world in strategic cooperation with the Republic. During the last two decades, Kazakhstan’s multipolar foreign policy was chosen by Kazakhstan’s government as a response to these vested interests, and as a strategy to balance the national interests among these global powers (Ipek, 2007). According to Yertisbayev, ex advisor to the President of Kazakhstan, “Kazakhstan’s multi-vector foreign policy is not just a subjective will or “doctrine” of Nazarbayev, but, apparently, the result of the geographical position of the young independent state, [and the] appearance of a new geopolitical reality in the world politics — Central Asia” (Yertisbayev, 2001).

The Republic has vast various natural resources, including uranium and crude oil, the exploitation and export of which has eventually resulted in the country’s macro-economic growth. In 1992, Kazakhstan’s GDP was equal to 20 billion USD; however, in 2008, due to the country’s oil reserves, it reached 135 billion USD (CIA, 2010). Kazakhstan is the second largest oil producer among the former Soviet republics after Russia (Ernst & Young, 2011, p. 2); and by 2015, according to the Republic’s state strategies, the country will join the top 10 oil and gas exporters. Kazakh oil export is growing rapidly, with current infrastructure delivering it to world markets via the Black Sea (through Russia), the Persian Gulf, to the north pipeline and rail (through Russia also), and recently to the East – China (UNCTAD, 2010). Oil production and exploitation have raised several international controversies, involving Russia, the US, and several European transnational oil corporations (Babali, 2009). The investigation of oil at the Kashagan field has considerable role in these controversies, as it is believed to be the largest oil discovery in the last 35 years (US EAI, 2008).¹¹ Kalicki, who served as the Clinton administration’s Ombudsman for Energy and Commercial Cooperation with the New Independent States, appealed in his work for Washington “to do whatever is

⁸ See, for example, Malisheva (2009); Blank, S. (2001); Allison, R., and Jonson, L. (2001). *The United States and Central Asia, in Central Asian Security: The New International Context*. Washington, DC and London: Brookings Institution and RIIA.

⁹ See, in particular, Megoran, N. (2004). The critical geopolitics of the Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan Ferghana Valley boundary dispute, 1999–2000, *Political Geography*, 6(23).

¹⁰ Examples of Kazakhstan’s oil politics and the situation over human rights and social developments in Kyrgyzstan are further outlined.

¹¹ It should be pointed out that these controversies between the countries even include the estimates of the field’s oil reserves – as US EAI estimates are considerably higher than those of the Russian sources and some international reports.

necessary to ensure the emergence of secure and independent routes for Caspian energy to reach the outside world” (Kalicki, 2001). American companies alone hold more than a quarter of foreign direct investments in Kazakhstan – approximately \$11.8 billion from 1993 through to 2006 (National Bank of Kazakshtan, 2006). The construction of oil pipelines and their direction is another disputable international issue. One of the most salient examples includes a consortium to build a 980-mile-long pipeline system to transport oil from Tengiz, western Kazakhstan, to the Black Sea at Novorossiysk, Russia. In 1995, Chevron and Mobil Oil of the United States, British Gas, Agip of Italy, and Russia’s LUKoil enterprise agreed to fund the entire pipeline project in return for a 50 percent share in the pipeline, the governments of Kazakhstan and Russia agreed to receive the other 50 percent. However, pipeline construction was delayed despite further international negotiation over alternative routes and it only started to bring oil to world markets in 2001 (Mamedov, 2001; pp. 217–259). In general, following the two decades of numerous discussions over the Caspian, including its division (in terms of territorial waters, economic zones, and the ownership of resources) progress has not been considerable (Malashenko, 2007). In addition, Kazakhstan has recently started to change its investment policy from providing favorable incentives to foreign investors to minimizing these preferential conditions and re-enforcing national stakes in the Republic’s oil reserves.

In the area of international military cooperation Kazakhstan has also went through transformations. The Republic’s military doctrine reflects its official policy. In fact, it underlines relations and partnership with Russia, China, Central Asian neighbors, the CSTO, SCO, UN, OSCE, NATO, European Union (EU), and the United States. Initially Kazakhstan’s actual military policy was largely divided between Russia and NATO. Following the 9/11 events, Kazakhstan expressed eagerness to assist the US in the War on Terror. In fact, Kazakhstan has had more than 20 engineers from its peace support battalion, KAZBAT, deployed in Iraq under Polish command with U.S. military airlift and logistical support from 2003 until 2008, when the troops were withdrawn (McDermott, 2008). It should be pointed out that, while the Republic provided support to the US in the Iraq war, Kazakhstan’s government took a very cautious position on conflict in and around Afghanistan (NATO Research, 2001). Moreover, regardless of the support to the US in the War on Terror, in the second decade following the collapse of the USSR, Russia has gradually transformed into the key military partner of Kazakhstan. This can be explained by many factors, including the resolution of several key issues relating to the division of previously co-owned assets, and new threats of insecurity in the region that demonstrated the Republic’s weaknesses in security

and military resources. Major threats to security in the region are related to problems such as extremist movements and drug and illegal trafficking¹² that have intensified in the second decade following the collapse of the USSR. The republic is even considered to be “a major transit country for illegal trafficking and, in particular, illicit drug-trafficking originating from Afghanistan”. Other major concerns relate to illegal arms smuggling, particularly from Afghanistan, and illegal immigration, mainly from Afghanistan, China and Uzbekistan (NATO, 2005, p.14).

In the Republic’s military policy changes, the role of the border was influential. It should be noted that for Kazakhstan initially the border issue was linked to Russia and China; however, after an agreement with Russia on the delimitation of borders was signed in 2005, the Chinese aspect of possible territorial disputes became among the most important possible threats to the national security of the country. Hence, Russia has recently transferred from a perception of a possible threat with regards to the territorial integrity of the country to a political guarantor in Kazakhstan’s relations with other countries – as it had been during several centuries – and, particularly, in relation to China. In fact, it was stressed that during in the second decade, following the collapse of the USSR, that “as a nuclear power, Russia is a guarantor of national security for Kazakhstan” (Sultanov, 2010). A protocol on the demarcation of their common border was signed between Kazakhstan and China in 2002. This allowed Kazakhstan to transfer some border troops to other sections of their border. However, according to Kazakhstani officials, 70% of all Kazakh border troops remain deployed on the Chinese border (Plater-Zyberk & Conflict Studies Research Centre, 2002). In addition, Kazakhstan’s military personnel have been also trained in the Russian Federation.

Another development in the Republic’s foreign relations that extends the oil-politik is related to the cultural and social ties between Kazakhstan and Russia, as even the border between these countries is the longest international border in the world (over 4300 miles long) (Kazakhstan’s Embassy in the Russian Federation, 2008, p.18). Initially, the huge Russian diaspora was a stumbling block in relations between the states. In fact, among the key reasons for dislocation of the former capital Almaty (ex-Alma-Ata) to Astana (ex-Chelinigrad) was the threat of these territories secession to Russia (Olcott, 2010, p.100). The majority of the Russian population lived in the Northern territories, reaching more than 60% of the population; while the dislocation of the capital was “accompanied by migration of ethnic Kazakhs from the countryside to the urban areas, where Russian dominance is, thus, was being diluted” (Trenin, 2002, p.190). However, during the contemporary period, the considerably decreased share of the Russian Diaspora in the Republic’s population became an important factor, contributing to the facilitation of business contacts and cooperation between the states.

It could be argued that Kazakhstan generally confirms the trends toward increased confrontation and lack of cooperation on the institutional level between the post-cold war partners. However, during the last two decades there were some cases of successful international cooperation involving Kazakhstan. The negotiation over the

¹² Kazakhstan’s government was initially reluctant to recognize the existence of an indigenous terrorist threat and only at a later stage was the internal terrorist threat admitted. The incidents are related to the involvement of Kazakhstani citizens in the bombings in Tashkent and Bukhara in 2004, as well as the detention in Guantanamo Bay of four Kazakhstani citizens, suspected of militant Islamic activities in southern Kazakhstan (NATO, 2005).

elimination of nuclear and biological forces/weapons between Russia, Kazakhstan, USA and the international community is one of the most vivid cases of this cooperation. At independence in 1991, Kazakhstan “inherited” thousands of nuclear warheads, intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), cruise missiles, and the world’s largest testing facility in Semipalatinsk (where 456 nuclear tests took place over a 50-year period) (MID, 2008). In the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan had been the second republic, after Russia, with a developed biological weapons program. In its press releases, Pentagon officials stated that “Saddam Hussein was certainly trying very hard to get just a few grams of material of this kind, and [in Kazakhstan there were] 600 kilos” (The Guardian, 1994). From 1991 to 1994, there were several international discussions held, and a number of final agreements reached between Kazakhstan, Russia, the US, and IBRD for the eventual dismantling and elimination of all the nuclear weaponry in 1995. Another example involves space-shuttle launches from Baikonur that included international commercial launches from 1995.¹³ These successful examples demonstrate that cooperation among the world powers in the region is possible, and this is particularly important in the area of security or ecology.

4. Kyrgyzstan’s uprisings and “geo-military” auctions

Kyrgyzstan, a small country of around five million people, is known for its different geopolitical “arsenal”. Despite the fact that the Republic possesses natural resources, its poverty rate is extremely high and Kyrgyzstan is one of the poorest states in the CIS. Due to this, renting of the Manas airport is an important source of financing for the state, and the Kyrgyz government has been periodically negotiating the terms of contracts with the USA and Russia, openly targeting the economic benefits of both. The airport is used as a military base for operations in Afghanistan. In October 2008, President Bakiyev threatened to close the American base, opened there after 9/11 events, after agreeing to a Russian loan. He reversed the decision when the US agreed to more than triple its annual rent for the base (Sterling, 2010). These bargains led to wide-spread references to Kyrgyzstan as orchestrating a game of “tug-of-war” between the United States and Russia (Shuster, 2010). Some even accuse Russia of assisting protesters (Siebens, 2010), however many agree that disorder in the region is not in the interests of the Russian Federation (Lee, 2010).

While there are problems in the economic area of development, and disagreements over the strategic partners for cooperation, the population of the country is confronted with serious social problems and problems, related to the non-democratic regime and human rights violations. In particular, in the U.S. State Department’s

annual survey on Kyrgyzstan, the following human rights problems were reported: “restrictions on citizens’ right to change their government; arbitrary killing, torture and abuse by law enforcement officials; pressure on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and opposition leaders, discrimination against women, persons with disabilities, ethnic and religious minorities, and other persons based on sexual orientation or gender identity; child abuse; trafficking in persons; and child labor” (U.S. State Department, 2009). Kyrgyzstan is the only Central Asian state in which two civil uprisings have taken place in the independent era of development. The first, known as the Tulip revolution, occurred in 2005, and another uprising took place in 2010 (Lee, 2010). The last uprising could be referred to as the “peacock revolution”, as the poor population of Kyrgyzstan was agitated by the ex-president Bakiyev’s excessive personal wealth and the perceived level of corruption in the country. Frustration was directed, for example, at the fact that the ex-president owned a private zoo, including peacocks (Editorial, 2010). Immediately after the April 2010 uprising took place, some sources stated that it “was more of a social uprising with very little political perspective than a revolution” (Lee, 2010), pointing that “while people are rebelling against the current regime, they have no trust in the opposition, either” (Lee, 2010). Others pointed out that this recent coup “may appear to be a comparatively minor event on the global stage, but in reality it is a significant development in geopolitics and a very risky tactical ploy by the Obama administration in Washington” (Aardvark, 2010). In fact, immediately after the events, Cohen, US expert on Central Asia, expressed apprehension of the agendas the great powers, as “the United States, Russia and China all have important interests there, from the supply of Afghanistan NATO forces to water resources. Richer and more authoritarian central Asian neighbors are also anxious about the bloody display of the “people power” (Cohen, 2010).

Unfortunately, unstable foreign policy influences national policy and democracy in the country. Strong interests in keeping the status quo or opting for change are reflected in either the extent to which political actors ignore or draw attention to social and human rights problems in the country. Some Kyrgyz experts stated that despite the unpopularity of Kyrgyzstani president Akaev in the early 2000s, few believed in the possibility of the easy dismantling of his regime (Juraev, 2008, pp.253–264). There are many publications that have sought to explain what happened in Kyrgyzstan in 2005, yet there is no agreement on the nature of this revolution. Polar positions include references to the support of foreign services, drug-dealers, clan battles, and results of the falsified elections. Kyrgyz experts, in fact, make illustrative comparisons of the perspectives on this revolution: the 2005 events in Kyrgyzstan were described as a ‘wave of democracy [that] is sweeping the former Soviet Union’.¹⁴ However, political developments since have lowered expectations of democratic transformation, and already in 2007, it was

¹³ Baikonur, built in Kazakhstan in the 1950s, is the main launch facility for the current generation of Russian rockets. In fact, 70% of the Russian space programs are estimated to be launched from Baikonur (Kazakhstan’s Aerospace Agency, and RosAviaCosmos as *Kazakhstan’s Embassy in the Russian Federation’s* (2001, p.22)).

¹⁴ Cohen, A. (2005). *Helping Kyrgyzstan’s democratic revolution* <<http://www.heritage.org/>> quoted in Juraev, S. (2010).

emphasized that a visionary democratic revolution proved to be 'a limited rotation of ruling elites' (Tudoroiu, 2007). In 2010, the large-scale antigovernment protests were explained world-wide as a response to "the government's brutality and corruption", unfair social policy, and poor public management policy" (Drake, 2010).

Regretfully, the future of the country is unsure, and moreover, some question "who's next?" as poverty and similar political regimes are almost the same across the entire region (Leon, 2010). Kyrgyzstan thus offers another silent case demonstrating the relevance of the geopolitical approaches; the states' development is fundamentally influenced by its geopolitical location and the interests of global powers in it. However, simultaneously, the increased complexity of the problems Kyrgyzstan and the countries involved are confronted with demonstrates that in the contemporary era of globalization purely geopolitical approaches are counter-productive, and misleading.

5. Regionalism and international cooperation

There is a need for stronger international cooperation in the region due to the multiple threats of instability, particularly in relation to ecology, security, etho-religion, and investments.

In fact, Kazakhstan's environmental catastrophes such as Semipalatinsk–Karaganda or Aral Sea could be considered as global environmental disasters. Another global aspect that needs to be raised here is related to the cultural and religious aspects of the region's developments. In fact, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic Kazakhstan is a vivid example of these developments, as more than 120 different nations live there. While multiculturalism is as part of the national state-building strategy; the new Republic's nation-building includes the issue of the transformation of the identity formation based on ethno-religious factors. The importance of issues relating to ethnic relations in the daily life of population had increased in importance not only in Kazakhstan (Human Rights Council, 2009), but in the region in general. It has been argued that ethno-religious factors are a major factor in violent conflict, in Uzbekistan, Kirgizia and Tajikistan. Improved economic transparency is also an important factor that requires stronger international cooperation. Recent and likely changes in the investment policies of Kazakhstan and in Turkmenistan, coupled with "geopolitical jostling between the major powers, and a tension between political and business interests means the future development of the region's abundant energy resources is difficult to predict." (Chatham House, 2010).

These transformations in the investment policies of the region might change the approach of the leading countries toward assessing the region's progress in terms of economic transparency. It has been pointed out in the literature with regards to Kazakhstan, for example, that "the overwhelming majority of the international community seems to be primarily interested in the overall stability of the country and its smooth exploitation and shipment of Kazakhstan's hydrocarbon resources in order to secure their country's energy supply", emphasizing that the diverse western policies toward Kazakhstan are subdivided into the state one and those by such organizations as the Freedom House or

Transparency International (Gumpfenberg, 2007; Olcott, 2005). There is an obvious need for a strong Central Asian security system also. A stable neighborhood is of utmost importance to Europe, for instance, which intends to diversify its energy supply from Central Asian sources, and at the same time to prevent mass influxes of migrants, increased drug-trafficking and penetration by radical and extremist Islamic groups from Afghanistan. Increased attention should therefore be placed on the institutional cooperation between the NATO and the new security organizations in the CIS (such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization).¹⁵

After the collapse of the USSR several integration and multilateral organizations were established by the former Soviet republics. Among them the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) was supposed to be the primary integrating institutional bloc to unite these countries. This organization has been targeted to assist countries in maintaining order and facilitating mutual cooperation. However, to date, it failed to do so. Thus, other organizations with a more narrow focus were created. In the military sphere, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) was established; while in the economic area the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) were created.¹⁶

In 2002, the Presidents of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan signed a charter in Tashkent founding the Collective Security Treaty Organization (the CSTO), also known as the Cooperation and Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The CSTO grew out of the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States, and first began as the CIS Collective Security Treaty (CST), which was signed on May 15, 1992 in the city of Tashkent. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is an intergovernmental mutual-security organization, which was founded in 2001 in Shanghai by the leaders of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Its creation could be tracked to April, 1996 when the *Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions* was signed in Shanghai by the heads of the states of Kazakhstan, the People's Republic of China, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan. In April, 1997 these countries signed the *Treaty on Reduction of Military Forces in Border Regions* in a meeting in Moscow. The SCO is primarily centered on its member nations' Central Asian security-related concerns, such as terrorism, separatism and extremism (Lukin & Mochulskiy, 2005). The "Shanghai Spirit," and "New Regionalism" are examples of several notions used in regard to the establishment and activity of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The "Shanghai spirit" was outlined by Lu Zhongwei, President of the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations in Beijing

¹⁵ Borduzha, N. (2010). *MGIMO Diplomatic Module*. Speech and conversations with participants of the Module, 14 April, Moscow, MGIMO.

¹⁶ Institute of Far Eastern Studies (2010). *Gosydarstva Chentralnoi Azii, Rossiya I Kitai: poisk novogo formata sotrydnichestva v chelyah realizacii natchionalnih interesov I obecpecheniya regionalnoi stabilnosti v ramkah ShOS* [The Central Asian states, Russia and China: in search of the new cooperation frameworks for the purposes of realization of the national interests and provision of the regional security within the SCO]. Round table' discussions, Institute of Far Eastern Studies of Russian Academy of Sciences, 7 April.

by means of five C's: "confidence, communication, cooperation, coexistence, and common interests" (Tao, 2002, p.23.) In October 2007, the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization signed a Memorandum of Understanding, laying the foundations for military cooperation between the two organizations (Nikitina, 2009).

The relations of the CSO and CSTO with the rest of the world are the most uneven. Although the declaration on the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization contained a statement that it "is not an alliance directed against other states and regions and it adheres to the principle of openness", it is widely perceived in the West that one of the original purposes of the SCO was to serve as a counterbalance to NATO and the United States (Chossudovsky, 2008a). Moreover, the SCO is even defined as "a military alliance between Russia and China and several Central Asian former Soviet republics including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan" (Chossudovsky, 2008b) or as the "Warsaw Pact-style military and security cooperation" (Cohen, 2009). However, the CSTO role even in resolving political coups and instability in the region is limited. During the Moscow State Institute [University] of International Relations (MGIMO) diplomatic Module the question was posed to the secretary general of the CSTO N. N. Bordyuzha regarding the possible actions of the CSTO with regard to military civil coups, such as Kyrgyzstan, and he responded that the CSTO was established against external threats, and that no actions had been planned in response to the events in Kyrgyzstan.¹⁷ However, A. Grozin, head of the Central Asia department at the Institute of CIS Countries, told corporate-owned Russian news agency Interfax on 20 April, "intervention by the CSTO in the event of a civil war in Kyrgyzstan is inevitable, although undesirable" (BBC Monitoring, 2010). Such intervention didn't take place, needless to say. While it is not in the functions of the CSTO to intervene in such internal conflicts, there obviously should be a regional/international mechanism to assist the countries of the region in coping with civil revolutions, especially as such unrest is related to ethnic confrontations among a state's population (as it was in the last case of Kyrgyzstan).

It is impossible to draw a fixed system of regional and international hegemony in the region in security; as conflicting interests in the region prevent having any hierarchy in the region.¹⁸ Due to the increasing role of China in international affairs, the SCO raises concerns in the West; the fact that the US applied for observer status in the SCO, but was rejected in 2005 intensified these concerns. However, in case of the CSTO the situation is the opposite. Openness of the CSTO toward cooperation with the NATO

was rejected despite several attempts by the CSTO and Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to establish mutual links for the partnership. Disagreements exist also in the economic area among members of the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC)/Customs Union and the WTO, "due to the interests of Kazakhstan and Russia in becoming members of this global organization" (Pala, 2006).

6. Conclusion

The collapse of the Soviet Union inevitably led to a new era of international relations. However, 20 years later reaching a consensus on the nature of the world we live in seems to be far from achievable. Moreover, new conflicts and controversies that have emerged in Central Asia and in the entire post-Soviet world require new conceptual and practical approaches for their effective resolution.¹⁹

In fact, although not only widely discussed in literature, the former Yugoslavia and the Caucasus have appeared to be the most unstable regions in post-Communist Eurasia. Central Asia's advantageous geopolitical position, along with the geo-economic benefits from oil resources, have altered existing debates in the field of International Relations due to the myriad of developments related to these new realities. This is particularly noticeable in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, among other countries in this region. In particular, Kazakhstan's investment policy on oil reserves is no longer considered predictable due to the geopolitics of East and West, as well as the tensions between political and business interests, making "the energy game as high as ever"²⁰. Foreign investment policy is under alteration in the state, once referred to by Brzezinski as to a "black hole" on the "global geopolitical map", which might lead to the new wave of international confrontations related to the enormous foreign capital vested there.

Kyrgyzstan's "auctions" relating to its military base Manes for the military operations in Afghanistan is sadly infamous. In addition, there is a threat that periodic uprisings in this state could reverberate across Central Asia, and many are concerned that "it will have a domino effect in the long term" (Lee, 2010). In the short term, the Central Asian leaders will tighten the screws, which will lead to more control and more authoritarianism. Moreover, due to the high poverty in Kyrgyzstan and some other Central Asian states, they are exposed to the threat of spreading terrorism and drug-trafficking from Afghanistan to the other CIS countries and the world. There is an obvious need for a strong Central Asian security system, which is impossible to maintain without international involvement

¹⁷ Bordyuzha, N. (2010). *MGIMO Diplomatic Module*. Speech and conversations with participants of the Module, 14 April, Moscow, MGIMO. Author's question to the CSTO Head Bordyuzha.

¹⁸ Some models refer to broader trends to explain the ties between the powers involved in the region. According to Deyermond's (2009) model of multi-levelled hegemony, for example, the USA is a global hegemon and the Russian Federation is a regional hegemon. See the scholar's work with a vivid title "Matrioshka hegemony? Multi-levelled hegemonic competition and security in post-Soviet Central Asia".

¹⁹ It could be pointed here that over the last decade a significant body of literature has redefined "security" (see Bernard, 1998). With the end of the Cold War, many scholars criticized the traditional, narrow definition of security and focused on issues other than military affairs, such as population growth, environmental degradation, ethnic conflict, crime, drugs, and migration. In fact, in an increasingly globalized world these issues have been becoming increasingly inter-connected also.

²⁰ Chatham House Conference (2010). *The Politics of Central Asian and Caspian Energy*. General Outline, February <http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/central_asia_energy> and Chatham House Conference (2010). *The Politics of Central Asian and Caspian Energy*, Final Panel Debate, London, UK, 24 February.

and cooperation among the leading powers. Meanwhile, the progress on maintaining institutional cooperation between CSTO and the NATO in the region has not yet been reached, which intensifies tensions between the countries of the region, and between the global powers involved.

Problems that are encountered in the Central Asian region require urgent attention by the regional and international organizations and the countries involved; however, reaching an international consensus is even more complex due to the range of interests and capitals vested there (Chufrin, 2010). Despite the importance of the region, international engagement also lacks consistency amongst governments and business structures of different countries, NGOs, and international organizations. It should be emphasized that institutional cooperation is desirable not only in the security areas, but also in the area of economic cooperation. In the area of the energy supplies, EBRD stressed that further support of the energy pipeline developments and infrastructure requires an improved investment climate and transparent international legal framework.²¹ Meanwhile “instead of a shared vision of cooperative security, there is a talk of a new Great Game”, which puts at stake successful economic cooperation (Lo, 2008, p. 97). Contradictions exist also on the institutional level in the trade area-between the EurAsEC/Custom’s Union and the WTO, which complicates foreign relations in the region.

It is considered misleading, then, to refer to one approach in examining the new web of international relations in the region as this will not allow the nation-states to put aside some strategic priorities and to consider others. Central Asian developments are not limited to the geopolitical aspects; currently the countries are encountering a huge spectrum of socio-political and economic transformations. Consideration of these developments through purely geopolitical licenses could rather increase confrontation instead of offering peaceful constructive solutions for the national and international actors involved. What should be prioritized hence is the mutual interest to see the “defunct communist world region” being more integrated into the world economy, and world politics as democratically and economically developed actors contributing to the mutual benefits of the parties involved.

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