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**RESEARCH AND EURASIA: GEOPOLITICAL CONTOURS**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Over a decade has passed since the independence of the countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus. During this period, some momentous events and major transformations have occurred in the region's social, economic, military and political life. Consequently, some research centres have focused on such concepts as social development and the shaping of new regional identities, while others have turned their attention to issues in the changing security environment, or have concentrated on the process of nation-building along with the current ethnic conflicts and crises.

Today a considerable number of scholars increasingly view Eurasia as an economic and political powerhouse of the twenty-first century. The various co-operative-competitive issues engulfing the sensitive Eurasian region include the exploitation of the Caspian seabed resources, ethno-political conflicts, the problems involved in oil and gas transit routes, links with world markets, and the region's critical security and environmental issues. Studies have particularly focused upon changes in the political and economic structures of the region, and can be included under the heading of regional economic challenges and the creative role of regional co-operation. This is a list which can, particularly with regard to Central Asia, for instance, run as follows: a 'clash of civilisations', and a 'dialogue of civilisations' as a means of promoting mutual understanding; energy resources, its transport and impact on the Eurasian environment, and especially the Caspian region; the effects of globalisation on the region; the role of transit routes in the development of regional co-operation; and analysis of regional security plans during the past decade.

The list is longer. In point of fact, contemporary research on Eurasia has focused on a specific range of issues, especially the new security architecture in place. Other scholars have focused upon the coming together of Western and Eastern Europe, particularly in the context of the European Union and integration. Still other scholars have looked at new regions - the eastern half of Europe, Central Europe, the Baltics and the Black Sea coastal area. Occupying a pivotal position in research on Eurasia remains the Russian Federation.

Major themes clearly emerge concerning the roles of interested actors - both major and minor - in a complex mosaic of Eurasian life: the decline of Russia and the ascendancy of the West, Turkey's moderate success, a restrained Iran, China's growing presence, the limited role of Pakistan, India as a keen observer, Uzbekistan as a future major player, Tajikistan and Afghanistan in stagnation, Turkmenistan as an increasingly neutral player, Kyrgyzstan with Russia, Kazakhstan also, but in a more erratic manner, progress and strife in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan locked in conflict,

Chechnya as the first real post-imperialist Russian challenge, Japan and South Korea as interested parties, and Israel as a potentially dynamic newcomer.

This wide canvas is further coloured by a range of related references, not only to other countries such as Ukraine, Moldova, Cyprus and the Baltic states, but also to a range of geopolitical, geographical, demographic and environmental issues. These issues are inter-linked: conflicts such as Kashmir and Kosovo, and Afghanistan and Tajikistan; and regional security complexes that overlap - Eurasian, Middle Eastern and those of the Asia-Pacific region.

## **SECURITY**

Newly independent states are particularly sensitive to security problems, as they lack the experience that comes from independent statehood. They have not had the opportunity to develop a defined culture for strategic planning or foreign policy engineering. Furthermore, newly independent states - only recently emerging as sovereign, autonomous actors - feel insecure and quite uncertain about what their security interests and priorities should be, and how to go about defining them. Thus, they tend to underestimate certain security threats, exaggerate others and, sometimes, even miss vital factors in the game of national security planning. Their strategic visions, and corresponding calculations, are mainly based on historical memories, which themselves are constructed with reference to ethnic lines. They are also affected by a division between 'us' and 'them', and the classical pattern of 'insiders' and 'outsiders', or 'enemies' and 'friends'. These calculations are also grounded on an assessment of the global political and economic system, which quite frequently becomes unrealistic, being judged through the states' perspective on security.

With reference to the interacting foreign policies of these and other interested states in Eurasia, a pertinent question arises: if issues of geo-economics (the distribution of wealth) become more important than conventional geopolitics (the distribution of political and military power), will Eurasian states' foreign policies also change? In Central Eurasia, if wealth is converted into political muscle, nationalistic pride can give rise to competition and self-assertiveness. Economic interdependence and tight commercial relationships can also collapse into trade disputes and political rivalry. Nevertheless, the apparent shift of priorities to the economic dimensions of world politics is certain to shape the distribution of twenty-first-century power in Eurasia. However, the accelerating global shift to an integrated market, where the porousness of national borders and the homogeneity of commercial products are in ascendancy, will be a slow process in Central Eurasia in contrast to, for instance, the European region, North and South America and the Asia-Pacific region. Thus, the distribution of political and military power will remain of paramount importance for the foreseeable future. The ending of the Cold War, moreover, has meant a more complex distribution of global power.

## **GEOPOLITICAL RESEARCH**

In the last analysis, Central Eurasian geopolitics depends on the progression and results of the rivalry between competing regional and geo-strategic states and their allies. But a geopolitical analysis remains limited in its objectives and can offer only a constellation of geopolitical events.

A great deal of research on Eurasia (Eurasia in the Western geographical sense and not the Russian 'Near Abroad' sense) has essentially offered a series of isolated insights - building blocks for a structure that has yet to be designed in its entirety. A vitality of these ideas, which rarely coalesce

into a finite system, has rather led to hypotheses that have or have not shown a capacity for continuing growth. The international politics of Eurasia cannot be measured by a single standard. Particular past and present circumstances shape states of the region and their relations. The variety and change in these relations can never be fully caught by a theoretical system, but belief in the need to ascertain the essence of phenomena is essential to an understanding of the international politics of the region. Regulative ideas need to be brought out into the open, including those centred on alignments, security complexes, state interests, conflict and the struggle for influence in the region - including ethno-political divisions. Research into Eurasian affairs ought to have the theorist's respect for linkage between past and present events. This can be deemed as research of a historical interpretative kind, which encompasses speculative reasoning. The dangers of exaggeration, of being blinkered by contemporary issues, are thus largely avoided.

However, methodological questions remain. For instance, to what extent do political events in Eurasia modify the perspective that is brought to bear on these events? Is it valid to deduce from an absolute standpoint - e.g. that of the geo-philosopher?

The present can claim no superiority over the past and, for this a priori to be valid, the past can claim no superiority over the present. Geopolitical history, furthermore, is not a book of examples from which scholars can learn, directly or by analogy. Geopolitical history is marked by variety and, in the last analysis, is not strictly subject to patterns or geopolitical paradigms. Certain large themes do occur throughout the history of Eurasia and, from a historical standpoint, safety, strength and knowledge remain elementary human desires. However, in geopolitical terms they express themselves in changing forms. In this sense, the international relations scholar of Eurasia has to be prepared to broaden his or her horizons, as elements of the history of Eurasia may not have lessons or rules to offer the scholar. At least, such an awareness of this issue should sharpen the scholar's critical judgement.

## **CENTRAL ASIA**

Most significantly, Central Asia is the only region in the world where the impact of four nuclear powers comes into play: Russia, China, Pakistan and India. The West's priority is to contain nuclear proliferation. Although it can be argued that the ambitions of most Central Asian states, and many Western ones, in some way meet in Central Asia, the overriding fact of political life in Central Asia is that it faces a greater potential prospect of significant political instability than at any time since the Soviet take over.

Since the collapse of the USSR, commentators have been trying to see how Central Asia should fit into the complex matrix of the West's foreign policy concerns. Until 1991, Central Asia was simply considered an appendage of Russia's domestic preoccupations. Many analysts today put Central Asia into some kind of strategic framework with a focus on the 'stans' (Azerbaijan is allowed on the margins). In this view, the 'stans' are less actors in their own right than objects of other's action. Other analysts link Central Asia with the mosaic of Islamic culture, usually with a 'fundamentalist' attachment. The study of Central Asia is at other times seen as a logical addendum to Middle Eastern studies, in spite of the thin historico-political and ethnic bases for such a perspective.

The search for a Central Asian paradigm must be more flexible than this. If it is not, then there is a danger that Western analysts in particular may derive incomplete assessments thereby limiting the exploration of various kinds of mutual interests. President Karimov of Uzbekistan has expressed this

kind of anxiety. Uzbekistan's choices, according to its political élite, are more varied and complex than the majority of Western discourses concerning which path Uzbekistan should take - the Turkish Model, the Iranian Model or the Chinese Model. Such a restricted outlook on Uzbekistan's political and economic opportunities may render an Uzbekistan-West interaction superficial and hostage to various prejudices.

Traditional attempts at drawing borders around Central Asia have tended to obscure rather than enlighten the reader. Is Central Asia a disjointed community held together by shared ethnicity, language, culture and religion? Is Central Asia a resurgent outpost of Islamic militancy, where Middle Eastern conflicts may be played out? Is Central Asia an extension of the Turkic world, a supple spine of a new Eurasia? Is Central Asia a group of geographically proximate countries inextricably tied to Russia in most things?

In the past, Soviet sources composed the bulk of the most serious academic studies on Central Asia. The few Western universities with Central Asian programmes concentrated on the languages, history, religion and culture of this circumscribed area. Turkish specialists, following the lead of the great French Central Asianist, Alexandre Bennigsen, were among the most important scholars, and arguably came closest to an understanding of an integrated culture where Turkey plays a significant role, rather than as a region made distinct by Soviet borders.

In contemporary analyses, Central Asia is less a region than a concept. Should, for example, Central Asia include Mongolia and Tibet? Are Azerbaijan and Tartarstan part of Central Asia because their populations share Turkic roots, Islam (although Shiite in the case of Azerbaijan) and a common language family with other Central Asians? The forces that define the Central Asian concept may be traditional in terms of rivalries between states that are at the centre of the region and as distant as American oil companies, South Korean investors, or cultural transfers from Pakistan or Turkey. In the context of Eurasian studies, the concept of Central Asia is kept flexible as note is taken of the emerging issues that drive the interaction of Central Asian states with the outside world - not least the presence of the West. In short, issues surrounding Central Asia are multi-layered and overlap. The task of the Eurasian analyst is to tease them out into the open.

The Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union are at the crossroads of ancient civilisations, on the main historical routes between Europe and Asia, bordering the Middle East and running north across the top of the Indian sub-continent. In fact, none of the Central Asian states, being enclosed by Russia and China, has direct access to an open sea. Among them, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan have a maritime frontage but on a closed sea, the Caspian. Being enclosed creates physical dependence on the neighbouring countries that can offer ways of passage.

The region of Central Asia, furthermore, is part of the Islamic world. Central Asia as a region is to some extent an artificial creation. Geographically, the territories included in this region fall into three massive areas: the northern, north-eastern and southern. Only with reservations can we call Aral and the area adjacent to it a geographical segment that is common to the entire region. The interaction between the Pamir Mountains and the river system and deserts of Turkmenistan is more organic, but then these are not connected to the northern lands. It appears that there was no common economic system for the peoples who settled in these lands; no system linked the nomads of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan with the settled dwellers of the other territories. Their external economic links were directed more outside the region than inside it.<sup>1</sup> There are, furthermore, no fixed regional borders between the ethnic groups living in Central Asia. There is no watershed between 'Soviet' Uzbeks,

Tajiks, Turkmens and those who share the same faith in countries to the south and east, such as Afghanistan, Iran and China.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of resources, the internal political and economic makeup of each republic differs. In spite of this, the majority of commentators still analyse Central Asia as one economic and socio-cultural community. These commentators focus on the population of Turkic peoples, or a post-Soviet region, or a region that has been part of the Russian empire. Perceptions are, however, gradually changing. Central Asia is for other commentators better described as the 'Central Asian region', which includes the former Soviet republics and Afghanistan. Either way, any analysis of Central Asia ought to take account of the process of integration and disintegration taking place between the Southern Urals and the Indian Ocean, by for instance, noting the emergence groups such as the Economic Co-operation Organisation (ECO).

One uniting factor in our analysis of the region is the question of Central Asia's relations with Russia. The Central Asian republics are at present faced with two alternative developmental paths: either integrating into a common space with Russia or distancing themselves from the former hegemon country. The latter path, however, is connected not so much with regional co-operation as with co-operation abroad.

## **EUROPE, CIVILISATIONS AND A GREAT GAME**

After the demise of the Soviet Union, with its central plan, one ideology, and a privileged political élite, came no fewer than 27 countries which have emerged out of the communist era (29 if Chechnya is included and if Montenegro splits from Serbia, and 30 if Kosovo becomes an independent republic). Europe is once again diverse. In turn, the political geography of Eurasia is necessarily blurry. History, people and cultures matter again. As a large cartographic, Eurasia is tightly stitched in parts, but with ragged edges; and in other parts is patched with bits stitched on and where borders fray.

The effect on Europe is significant. Which Europe? Central Europe? Eastern Europe? Both? Mittleuropa? Of course, there are various Europes. But the one Europe, which the Baltic states, for instance, adhere to, is a democratic Europe. Estonia has almost become Nordic. Lithuania is at peace with Poland, its historical rival, while Riga remains closer to Russia than the other two. Western Ukraine, furthermore, pulls its country's centre of gravity westward, and Moldova might one day join Romania. Slovakia, after the departure of its authoritarian populist, Vladimir Merciar, is now struggling westwards again. Bulgaria remains sluggish, as does Romania with its population of 23 million and its potential to become the breadbasket of south-eastern Europe. Both however, are westernising, and are intent on joining the EU and NATO. The latest members of NATO and on the brink of joining the EU are the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland (along with the Slovenes and Estonians). Poland, with its population of 40 million, is now the new dynamo of East-Central Europe between Germany and Belarus-Russia. German speakers are back at the heart of Europe as Germany rapidly absorbs its old eastern communist part and especially if its Austrian cousin sheds its Cold War neutrality. In the Balkan peninsula some bits are becoming truly European again. Only Serbia prefers friendship with Russia, while Albania remains in a state of chaotic limbo. In the ex-Soviet Caucasus, Georgia and Azerbaijan are looking westward, and even four out of the five Central Asian republics have joined NATO's Partnership for Peace.

At the centre of gravity in Eurasia stands the EU. It is quite simply the most powerful magnet. The

former Soviet zone is on the whole looking westward - with the exception of the old Slavic core of Belarus, under the populist president, Alexander Lukashenko, Russia and to a much lesser extent a slow moving Ukraine under president Leonid Kuchma. But Ukraine and Russia are moving towards a more western way of doing things. Notwithstanding, eight countries in the Russian sway have more or less decamped into a democratic, pluralist Europe. They have knitted right back into Europe. All this means, finally, that a neat divisive line running from north to south no longer exists.

The five Central Asian republics continue to be shaped by a political élite. These states remain in a potentially turbulent region (although less so than the Caucasus). These states are flanked by a range of differing neighbours: to the north by the former hegemon, Russia; to the south by a chaotic Afghanistan, and two regional powers, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the secularist Republic of Turkey; and to the east by a global player, China. An uneasy Tajikistan, relying on Russia, has gold and little else, while Kyrgyzstan, tied to Russia economically, has a great deal of water, an increasingly precious commodity. Uzbekistan, with its regional ambitions, has a sizeable population, along with gold and cotton, while Turkmenistan has natural gas and oil, as does West-and-then-Russian leaning Kazakhstan, along with its gold and minerals, and possessing a huge land mass with few people and with vast agricultural potential. Ethnic and national tensions could, however, increase in the future, perhaps even to the point of a 'clash' between civilisations.

Two points need to be noted here. The first, contrary to Huntington's thesis, is that encounters between different civilisations need not inevitably end in a 'clash'. In fact, there are a variety of outcomes when civilisations meet. These include, for example, hybridisation (e.g. as in the case of the encounter between Romans and Greeks); absorption (e.g. as in the encounter between Romans and the Germanic tribes); the hegemonic model (e.g. as emergent civilisations in Japan and Korea looked to China for instruction in government, ethical guidance, literary and artistic forms and themes); rejection (e.g. as in the case of a Hellenised Persia and Syria under Alexander the Great when Persian and Syrian modes and institutions resurged to replace the original colonising civilisation). A positive encounter, lastly, can be termed peaceful coexistence. An example of this scenario is Bactria in what is today northern Afghanistan. It was a frontier province of the Persian Empire, circa 350 BC, and then it was made a Greek colony under Alexander, then became an autonomous Hellenistic state in 250 BC that survived until 55 AC. During its history, Bactria expanded southward and gained control over a part of what is today northern India. Bactria is a good example of cross-fertilisation, a peaceful bridge between different civilisations. New York, London, Paris and Hong Kong may fulfil a similar function in the future.

A negative encounter can be a clash of civilisations, say as occurred between the Ottomans and Europeans, with both sides protected by empires; and in extreme cases cultural obliteration. An example of the latter is the encounter between the Spanish and Aztecs; and the almost genocidal outcome of the Islamic suppression of Hindu culture in northern India under the Moguls in the ninth and tenth centuries - Sultan Firoz Shah was known to have offered a reward for every Hindu head, and he paid for 180,000 of them, while Sultan Ahmad feasted for three days whenever the number of defenceless Hindus slain in his territory in one day reached 20,000.

The second point concerns the notion of a Great Game being played in Eurasia, espoused by journalists and geo-politicians such as Zbigniew Brzezinski and James Baker, amongst others. This scenario can be dismissed if we remember that the Great Game, Rudyard Kipling's tag for the nineteenth century competition between Russia, as it expanded south where emirs and khans gradually fell under its control, and Britain, for influence in Central Asia. This has now become a cliché, and it is misleading. In the original Great Game, India was the prize, and is somewhat away

from the turf being played on today. In addition, today the situation is more complicated; there are more players, both inside and outside Central Asia. There is one similarity, however, a big prize was and remains access to natural-resource wealth in the region. For the Central Asian states themselves, a big question mark remains as to their use of this natural-resource wealth. Sudden riches carry many risks. History is awash with examples. A generation from now, will these states look more like Norway or like Nigeria? Will the resource-poor share in the wealth? These infant states require political stability as a necessary first step.

## **FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS**

Future developments in Eurasia can either be seen in a positive manner (emphasising that states are getting more and more like each other and need not come into conflict with each other, the optimist-rationalist view) or in a negative manner (emphasising the irreconcilable differences between states, and, as in the Kosovo scenario, inside states) - in short, a pessimistic view.

A world economy view can, furthermore, note that developments in the world economy could mean that developing regions such as Central Asia would get a larger slice of the cake. Today, OECD countries account for 60 percent of global wealth, but within 20 years, the OECD's own forecasts show that its share will only be 30 percent. The OECD countries will be richer than they are today, but their share of global wealth will have fallen. Along with Brazil, Indonesia, and Russia, China and India will be the major recipients - these five big economies will account for 30 percent of global GDP.<sup>3</sup> This change will not only bring an important shift in the global balance of economic power, but may also see some countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia dramatically improve their living standards, while for others the living standards may drop even more. Another factor to bear in mind for these infant states is the Information Age. To what extent will the 'weightless' products of the Knowledge Economy become important in wealth creation for the states in the Caucasus and Central Asia?

An indeterminate view, furthermore, may emphasise the current geopolitical status quo, focussing on Eurasia as a complicated and multifaceted region. Azerbaijan, as noted, is part of the Caucasus, yet has strong connections with Central Asia. Iran has more Azeris than Azerbaijan; Nagorno-Karabakh is full of Armenian Christians, while Georgia and Armenia are Christian. The ethnic divisions in Central Asia in particular complicate matters as the Central Asian map, re-drawn in the 1920s, divided the region broadly along lines which constructed nations from the various nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes of the desert and from differences between dialects. As noted earlier, we only need remember that a third of Kazakhstan's inhabitants was Russian, originally arriving during Stalin's eastward push in the 1930s, although a large exodus has taken place in recent years.

These issues, and many more which will affect the Caucasus and Central Asia in this new century, require careful analysis. At the centre of such an analysis resides the CIS.

In a significant sense, the CIS can be commended. None of the twelve states of the Commonwealth has lost its recently acquired independence. To expect fully-fledged integration between its twelve members is unrealistic. Moreover, Russia, as the driving force behind integration has a limited capacity for paying for the inevitable costs of integration. Even in the case of Belarus, the available resources that Moscow can marshal do not meet even the basic requirements. Moscow's earlier preoccupation with a confederacy with Belarus led to less attention being paid to Almaty and Bishkek, which has meant that the latter two have had little choice but to move closer together to parallel the Russia-Belarussian union. Thus far under Putin's new leadership, this union policy is of

less significance. In addition, it is no surprise to note that Central Asian integrationists experience more resource problems than their Eastern European partners.

Bottom-up economic co-operation can create strong ties between Russia and the Ukraine, but will not lead to a political merger of the two countries. However, it is likely that a common economic space including Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and possibly Ukraine will be created. In short, there is potential for strong interaction involving the post-Soviet states as they gear themselves towards an expanded Western Europe. In this way, a new Greater Europe is developing, a new Euro-regionalism. The Central Asian states will be part of this process as Euro-Asian borders fray.

Beyond these issues lay speculation of the future of Eurasia. Will taxes from vodka sales, for example, become more important for the Russian government than the revenues generated by the oil industry? Even with the bootleg vodka industry accounting for 45 percent of sales, liquor taxes bring the Russian government almost as much in taxes each year as the oil industry. Annually, the Russian state receives about 24 billion roubles (£600 million) from alcohol profits, compared with 30 billion roubles (£750 million) from oil. If illegal sales were ended, the government's alcohol income would double.<sup>4</sup>

Will Beijing and New Delhi bury their differences and, along with Moscow, form the most powerful alignment in Eurasia? What if Tashkent joins the other three? Or, will a Sino-American security consensus dominate the region? Will historical rivalries between Poland and Lithuania/Ukraine resurface? Will the West support a Kaliningrad secessionist movement under threat from Moscow? Will the West develop a proper respect for small nations in the Caucasus instead of large political gatherings? Will the West, furthermore, pursue unprincipled foreign policy objectives in pursuit of principle? Are scholars of Eurasia barking up the wrong tree in their search for absolutes in a Eurasian world of botch and fluidity? The range of possibilities is endless.

The best that can be hoped for in the states of the region, finally, is the rule of law, socially responsible markets, education, sound environmental policies and democracy. These will be the basis for future wealth creation and political stability in the countries of the CIS.

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