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US AND RUSSIAN GEOPOLITICS IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract: This article examines the growing importance of the Central Asian region on the international stage and the intense competition among international actors to influence the political processes unfolding there, drawing upon the perspectives of both local and foreign scholars. This dynamic indicates that the rivalry between US and Russian interests in the region's geopolitics is entering a new phase, thereby highlighting the need to develop new approaches and perspectives regarding the region. Consequently, the article analyzes the pressing relevance of studying geopolitical interests in Central Asia and substantiates the argument that these interests constitute distinct, independent constructs.

Keywords: Central Asia, geopolitics, geopolitical trend, intersection of interests, Soviet Union, political dominance, geopolitical struggle, democratic criticism, geopolitical directions, informal meeting, Moscow's policy, sovereign debt, "5+1" format.

As is well known, Central Asia is a region where the interests of Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union intersect. Each of them has its own interests in the region. Historically, the region has traditionally been under Russian influence for over a century. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union—and a subsequent slight reduction in Russia's influence—neighboring China began to project its economic and political dominance through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. For their part, the European Union and the United States have also shown significant interest in the region. However, their geographic distance from the area has allowed Russia and China to maintain their dominance in Central Asia.

Local scholars are also presenting well-founded perspectives on this issue in their research. Modern international relations are unfolding under the influence of new trends. Within these trends, the Central Asian region is becoming increasingly important, and international powers are engaged in fierce competition to influence the region's balance of power. This signifies that the rivalry among major powers—such as the US, Russia, and China—regarding the region's geopolitical architecture is entering a new phase, thereby highlighting the need to develop new approaches and perspectives toward the region. In this context, examining the geopolitical interests of the aforementioned trio of international powers in the Central Asia region is a matter of pressing importance.

Current perspectives regarding the interests of the US and Russia in Central Asia are shifting. Under the Biden administration, tensions in US-Russia relations are set to escalate further. The United States will intensify its sharp criticism of Russia concerning issues of democracy, human rights, and values. America's geopolitical rivalry with Russia in the post-Soviet space will intensify; the US will increasingly and actively support Ukraine—as well as the opposition in Belarus, Moldova, and Georgia—in their confrontations with Russia, while generally stepping up both traditional and public diplomacy across the post-Soviet region. Consequently, the overall climate of US-Russia relations will become increasingly strained.

The US and NATO military presence in Afghanistan in 2001 fundamentally altered the situation, significantly intensifying their engagement in the region. This signified the region's inclusion within the sphere of US interests and a rise in its importance to American foreign policy. However, the situation has been viewed from varying perspectives. Amidst the sanctions imposed by the US and the EU on Russia—due to its aggressive policies toward Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea—and against the backdrop of the US-China trade war, both Russia and China have been increasing their activity in Central Asia.

The US has sought to secure full control over oil and gas pipelines, railways, and transport links within the geopolitical space stretching from the Caspian Sea and Central Asia, through Afghanistan, to the Indian Ocean. While advocating for Central Asia to become a region open to all—without the absolute dominance of any single state—the US simultaneously aims, through its own engagement, to ensure the region pursues an independent foreign policy and maintains access to alternative paths of development. For this reason, the United States supports informal meetings among Central Asian heads of state. It is also worth highlighting the establishment of a forum comprising regional experts dedicated to addressing integration models and resolving issues collaboratively, based on the region's own interests. The forum held its inaugural meeting in October 2018, where discussions focused on developing a new concept for regional integration.

The emergence of the U.S. strategy for Central Asia is not coincidental; it follows recent pressure from Russia on Uzbekistan regarding accession to the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Russia's various geopolitical projects aimed at restoring the former Soviet Union pose a significant threat not only to the region itself but also to U.S. interests there, as the United States seeks to avoid the emergence of an unstable region in Eurasia. Against the backdrop of encroachments on the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, Central Asian states are compelled to give serious thought to their own independence and sovereignty. In this context, the U.S. stance regarding the region is of great importance to the Central Asian states. Speaking at a briefing organized for journalists and media representatives regarding this strategy, Lisa Curtis, Senior Director for South and Central Asia at the U.S. National Security Council, stated: "We view Central Asia as a region of geostrategic importance in its own right. This is not tied to our involvement in surrounding nations, particularly Afghanistan. Above all, we see the new strategy as a reaffirmation of the U.S. policy of steadfast support for the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of the peoples of Central Asia—both individually and as a region. We believe that through U.S. engagement in the economic and energy sectors, as well as in matters of democracy and governance, the peoples of Central Asia can operate as a regional bloc of cooperative partners and develop the capacity to advance their own national interests." "We assure the peoples of Central Asia that they have the freedom to choose from various partners and opportunities to realize their interests," it was emphasized. Peace negotiations in Afghanistan play a crucial role in ensuring regional security. From this perspective, the establishment of peace in Afghanistan would not only reduce the threat of terrorism in the region but also diminish its dependence on external forces for security. According to analyst Igor Pankratenko, Central Asian states are reacting cautiously to the fact that security—long the "priority product" traditionally offered to the region by official Moscow—no longer holds the same level of significance, and that Russia is stubbornly pushing this offer. However, the growing US influence in Afghanistan and the establishment of peace there would naturally make it difficult for Russia to justify the continued presence of its military bases in the region; it might even foster the development of new security perspectives among regional countries that differ sharply from Moscow's interpretation. Specifically, a reduction in the terrorist threat in the region would serve as a factor that somewhat lessens its military dependence on Russia. ...serves.

One of the priorities of U.S. geopolitics in Central Asia involves ensuring stability in Afghanistan and fostering cooperation between Afghanistan and the states of the region. The U.S. government fully recognizes that establishing peace in Afghanistan is a matter of paramount importance for regional states and has consistently proposed mutual cooperation to achieve this goal. The United States aims not only to strengthen ties between Central Asian nations and Afghanistan but also strives to confer a new geopolitical status upon the region.

According to traditional geopolitical perspectives, Central Asia comprises five former Soviet republics—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan—and has long been viewed as a region within Russia's sphere of influence. Russia's interests in Central Asia are deeply rooted in history. Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Kremlin leadership continued to regard Central Asia as a zone of primary interest. To consistently secure its geopolitical interests in the region, Russia acts as a key player within regional structures such as the CIS, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Eurasian Economic Union. These organizations serve as important mechanisms for reflecting Moscow's policy in Central Asia across the post-Soviet space.

Recently, views have emerged among regional officials regarding the need to reconsider the concept of Central Asia and include Afghanistan in it. In March 2019, at an expert meeting for the first "Connecting Eurasia: From the Atlantic to the Pacific" dialogue held in Brussels, Sodiq Safoyev, First Deputy Chairman of the Senate of the Oliy Majlis, emphasized the necessity of directly including Afghanistan in integration processes within Eurasia, and Central Asia in particular. Furthermore, at the international conference on establishing peace in Afghanistan held in Tashkent in March 2018, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani stated that he views his country as a Central Asian state. Major energy and transport infrastructure projects—such as the CASA-1000 energy system and the Lapis Lazuli transport corridor—are currently being implemented to realize this vision.

One must also consider the potential impact of Uzbekistan joining the EAEU as an observer on its multifaceted relations with Afghanistan. For instance, this move could call into question the U.S. initiative regarding Afghanistan's integration with Central Asia. If Russia were to use the EAEU framework to curtail Uzbekistan's plans concerning Afghanistan, the region's dream of accessing global markets via Afghanistan would be shattered. The region would remain artificially cut off from Afghanistan, ultimately falling entirely under Russian influence—an outcome that serves the interests of neither the United States nor the countries of the region. For this reason, the United States and the countries of the region—particularly Uzbekistan—must give serious thought to the integration of Central Asia and Afghanistan and take extensive practical steps toward that end.

The U.S. has established various forms of dialogue involving itself to spur integration processes in the region. Specifically, the state and prospects of mutual cooperation are being discussed within the framework of the U.S.-Central Asia Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) Council and the Central Asia Trade Forum. Recent developments in the region have opened up broad opportunities for such cooperation. U.S. investment activity in the region focuses primarily on connecting the region with Afghanistan and ensuring an American presence in that process. In doing so, the U.S. offers the region alternative paths to integration, distinct from other projects involving Russia. This approach aims to counterbalance Russia's growing influence in the region. In turn, this paves the way for the countries of the region to make independent foreign policy decisions.

Recently, concerns have arisen that projects such as the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and China's "Belt and Road Initiative" pose a significant threat to the sovereignty of the region's nations. In particular, China's "Belt and Road" infrastructure initiative is creating serious

sovereign debt issues for the countries involved. For instance, in December 2017, China took control of Sri Lanka's strategically important Hambantota Port after the country failed to repay such debt. Consequently, participating nations are being compelled to reconsider their involvement and their decisions regarding attracting investment from China. The risk of the situation seen in Tajikistan repeating itself in Kyrgyzstan not only complicates the regional landscape but also leaves the region vulnerable to Chinese influence.

As previously mentioned, the Russian-led EAEU could also become a geopolitical noose for the countries of the region. Furthermore, Russia's attempt to form a "closed" bloc within its political orbit is raising concerns. For instance, Russia's 2018 push to use the union as a vehicle for imposing sanctions on third countries—in retaliation for sanctions applied by the US and the EU—validates these concerns. Moreover, the issues that union members Kazakhstan and Belarus have experienced with Russia have undermined positive perceptions of the bloc. Consequently, investment projects that do not threaten sovereignty remain the only alternative for regional states to such forms of destructive integration. In this context, a constructive policy toward the region by the EU and the US undoubtedly serves as the only solution to avoid these problems.

While the volume of US investment in the region stands at $91 billion, Russia has invested $20 billion in the region since the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is anticipated that the United States will demonstrate greater investment activity in the region in the near future—surpassing Russia—to counterbalance China's clear dominance, characterized by its $300 billion investment in Central Asia. In conclusion, through this new strategy, the U.S. is signaling its intent to not only intensify its engagement in Central Asia but also to support the region in acting as an independent entity in international relations. The strategy also explicitly emphasizes that the region should remain open to all and free from the dominance of any single power. It is evident that achieving this depends, to a significant extent, on how the countries of the region conduct their relations with these powers. The United States has clearly conveyed that it stands ready to support and back the region should such a desire exist among these nations. While experts have expressed varying opinions regarding the U.S. strategy for Central Asia, it has become clear that the U.S. now recognizes the region as a priority area and has demonstrated a commitment to building its relations based on new principles. The new strategy for Central Asia, meanwhile, defines the foundations for establishing such relations.

Russia's policy in the region has not undergone a fundamental shift, nor is it likely to change in the near future. Russia remains committed to a policy of competing with the U.S. in Central Asia. From Moscow's perspective, countries in the region should participate in Russia-centric integration projects and security alliances—currently the EAEU and the CSTO—and, crucially, should not engage in other systems, security arrangements, or integration projects. At the same time, Russia tolerates the fact that certain countries, such as Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan, do not participate in Russia-centric security projects, provided those countries do not participate in other such structures either.

Formats such as "Central Asia Plus" are being developed. For instance, the United States cooperates with Central Asian nations in the "5+1" format; in doing so, it seeks to view the region not merely as an appendage to Russia or China, but as a cohesive, independent geopolitical entity oriented toward the South—specifically toward Afghanistan and India. The broader South and Central Asia macro-region is reflected in the U.S. State Department's organizational structure, where it is officially treated as a single region. From Russia's perspective, this represents an overt attempt by the United States—openly declared—to wrest the region away from Russia and weaken its cooperation with both Russia and China. Russia views the "5+1" format with deep skepticism. At the same time, however, it does not seek to compel its Central Asian partners to shun cooperation with the U.S. This is because

exerting heavy pressure on these nations—or attempting to curtail their foreign policy engagement and multi-vector diplomacy—would risk isolating Russia itself and diminishing its regional influence; it would drive the countries of the region further away, ultimately resulting in the exact opposite of what Russia desires. Consequently, Russia is striving to strengthen dialogue with Central Asian states through a "Russia + Central Asian Countries" format. It is worth noting, however, that this is not the primary or foremost dialogue mechanism Russia is pursuing. For Russia, the EAEU and the CSTO remain the primary institutions for cooperation in the Central Asia region; Moscow views the "Central Asia + Russia" dialogue as an additional tool to strengthen these Russia-centric institutions and draw other nations into them. It is no secret that Russia would welcome Uzbekistan's integration into the EAEU; from Moscow's perspective, a dialogue involving Uzbekistan and other Central Asian states could facilitate the country's eventual accession to the bloc. This is precisely why Russia is pursuing this dialogue.

Russia does not favor engagement between the region's countries and the West, yet it makes no attempt to prevent such interaction. It wishes to avoid forcing these nations into a stark choice or restricting their foreign policy maneuverability, as doing so could diminish Russia's own influence in Central Asia. Moscow will continue to tolerate these dialogues unless a drastic geopolitical shift occurs; for instance, were Kazakhstan to declare the United States its primary partner, Russia might well resort to punitive measures.

Does Russia need allies to counter the West? This question can be answered with both a "yes" and a "no." Russia needs allies to strengthen itself and maintain its position as an independent global power center. Currently, Russia does not seek to involve its allies in its conflicts with the West, nor does it demand that its EAEU allies join in the counter-sanctions it has imposed against the US. Russia requires solidarity on certain key foreign policy issues. For instance, the majority of EAEU and CSTO member states either vote alongside Russia at the UN General Assembly or, at the very least, remain neutral rather than voting against it. However, Russia is well aware that demanding absolute solidarity and loyalty on every issue could backfire, potentially driving these countries away.

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