

THE CONCEPT OF A "GREATER CENTRAL ASIA": PERSPECTIVES OF A REGIONAL APPROACH

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After twenty years of independence, Central Asian republics continue to share a wide range of endogenous problems which seriously influence and hinder their economic and social development, an intra-regional cooperation and their full affirmation in the international geopolitical scenario: the slow implementation of economic, political and social reforms, poverty, the lack of regional cooperation in the economic and energy sector, the threats represented by the Islamic terrorism, the drug and weapons traffics, a strong marked presidential political model, the failure to solve endogenous problems - such as the shared borders and minorities rights - characterize the post soviet Central Asia allowing to identify itself as a region.

This concept of a "*Greater Central Asia*" reflects the will to promote a regional approach expressed by US and EU in order to help Central Asian republics to handle and to solve the common problems promoting regional stability and security in the area: this approach appears fully functional at the strategic goals achieved by the United States (and - in the lesser extent - by the EU) in the area, focusing on the strengthen of the security and the stability in the region by means of the military and economic cooperation of the Central Asian republics in the framework of the Northern Distribution Network.

The aim of this paper is to evaluate the impact of this regional approach in the evolution of post soviet Central Asia in the next years, starting from the analysis of the potential fields of positive application and the weaknesses points which could hinder its concrete implementation. However, the mistrust existing among the Central Asia political leaders, more interested in internal issues and to affirm themselves as regional leaders than to find common regional solutions, the lack of cooperation between "energy-rich" and "energy-poor" countries, the divergent geopolitical goals achieved by the two regional superpowers could represent serious threats to the coherent and successful setting up of a regional approach.



Different evolutions and shared problems in post soviet Central Asia

Since the independence the five Central Asian republics have attracted the growing interests of several states inside a geopolitical competition that has been too emphatically defined as a modern version of the 19th century "Great Game": this competition was triggered by the concern of a power *vacuum* after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the consequences that unsolved political, economical and social problems could provoke beyond the regional boundaries, as well as by the strategic relevance of the region determined by its geographical position of centrality and its closeness to Russia and China and above all by the opportunity to exploit the Central Asia and Caspian huge oil and gas reserves, in order to secure the control of the exports energy routes.

However, after twenty years of independence Central Asian republics have consolidated their state-building process imposing themselves as independent nations playing a role in the regional geopolitical scenario and inside the international community.

Despite the shared soviet experience, the path followed by the independent Central Asian republics is marked by some relevant differences: for example, in these twenty years Tajikistan was the only state ravaged by the effects of a bloody civil war, controverting some fears and speculations about the spread of a pervasive condition of political and institutional chaos following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which could affect Central Asian political stability.

Among all five Central Asian republics Kazakhstan is affirming itself as a leader nation in the region, thanks to its political stability, the partial adoption of structural reforms and the wealth deriving from its oil and gas energy reserves: the designation of Kazakhstan to assume the 2010 OSCE chair must be considered as the international legitimation of the country for the political and economic role which could play in the area, contributing to ensure regional stability and participating in the energy and trade geoeconomic corridor oriented to the Western markets.

In the political sphere, the Kyrgyz's will to create the first parliamentary democracy in Central Asia shows the different evolution which characterizes the region, considering that the other four states are based on a strong marked presidential political model: in addition, Kyrgyzstan experimented two changes in power (2005 and 2010) while the other four (except Turkmenistan) are ruled by the same presidents which lead these states to the national independence.¹ Moreover, the existence of a multi-party system and a liberal social environment represents another element which underlines Kyrgyzstan's different evolution in comparison to the rest of the region.

The distinction between energy-rich and energy-poor states is another element which has influenced the different paths of evolution: mainly Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan (and in lesser extent Uzbekistan) has attracted geopolitical and strategic interests of the international energy companies and states, drawing financial investments

1 This political continuity is easily linked to the authoritarian management of power: early in the 90's the creation of centralized and secular states based on a strong presidential political model could be justified by the necessity to consolidate their national independence, preventing a dangerous political fragmentation (through the promotion of ethnic coexistence) and the rise of Islamist forces which could potentially fill the political vacuum caused by the dissolution of the Soviet Union

oriented to build new infrastructures or to modernize the old ones, to explore and exploit new fields, while energy-poor Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have received lesser geopolitical attention and consequently lesser investments.

At the same time, we can observe that after twenty years of independence, Central Asian republics continue to share a wide range of endogenous problems which seriously influence and hinder their economic and social development, an intra-regional cooperation and their full affirmation as effective players in the international geopolitical scenario: the slow implementation of economic, political and social reforms, poverty, the lack of regional cooperation in the economic and energy sector (mainly in the realization of a integrated regional water system), the problems linked to the landlocked geographic position of the region which hinder their full integration in the economic world system, the threats represented by the Islamic terrorism, the drug and weapons traffics, a strong marked presidential political model, the failure to achieve a definitive and complete solution of the shared border questions (border demarcation, minorities rights, political and legal status of the ethnic *enclaves*).

The preservation of security and stability in the internal and in the regional scenario represents a strategic goal for the Central Asian states, which fear that the spread of a condition of instability could seriously affect the process of state-building and potentially overthrow their secular political institutions.

In addition to some internal factors (such as poverty), the Afghanistan's permanent condition of instability probably is the main source of threats to the regional security architecture: at present, the failure of the attempts to stabilize Afghanistan strengthens the shared necessity of all Central Asian states to fight against the dangerous threats deriving from the Afghan scenario. The growing cross-border armed incursions of the Central Asian Islamic extremists (returning from Afghanistan and Pakistan after the success of the U.S. military campaign) and the narcotic trafficking (with its correlated social effects) don't affect only the Afghan-bordering Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan but the whole region because of the weak controls in the inter-republican borders.

Undoubtedly, the porous Tagik-Afghan border represents one of the main source of instability in Central Asia - as well as for Russia and other countries in the region – because the above mentioned two big threats to the regional security are dangerously existent: firstly, the Tagik-Afghan border has become the favourite route for drug traffickers, who smuggle Afghan heroin through Tajikistan and Central Asia and then rejoin Russian, European and Chinese markets.

Moreover, the several armed confrontation between militants extremists and Tajik security forces in the Rasht Valley Eastern region has shown the deteriorating security situation in Tajikistan, which is seriously threatened by the destabilizing incursions of cross-border armed extremists coming from the Northern Afghanistan provinces.

The concept of “Greater Central Asia”: the benefits of a regional approach

Considering that these destabilising threats and unsolved issues in the political and economic fields affect all five Central Asian republics, the development of a regional approach to handle and to solve these common problems

could be a successful strategic key: in addition, the geographical and territorial contiguity, the traditional and existing religious, cultural, linguistic and historical links contribute to characterize the post soviet Central Asia, allowing to identify itself as a region.

The U.S. concept of a "*Greater Central Asia*" and the EU Strategy for a new partnership with Central Asia both reflect the will of these two important external geopolitical players to support a regional approach in order to help Central Asian republics to handle and to solve their common problems and promoting regional stability and security in the area: this approach appears fully functional at the strategic goals achieved by the United States (and - in the lesser extent - by the EU) in the area, focusing on the strengthen of the security and the stability in the region by means of the military and economic cooperation of the Central Asian republics in the framework of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN)

Even if the EU aims at a balanced bilateral and regional approach towards Central Asia, Bruxelles recognizes that "*a regional approach is suitable for tackling common regional challenges such as organised crime, human, drugs and arms trafficking, terrorism and non-proliferation issues, inter-cultural dialogue, energy, environmental pollution, water management, migration as well as border management and transport infrastructure*".²

The US and EU regional approach towards Central Asia has its best application in their wide support of the NDN, which should become a kind of Modern Silk Road promoting security and economic prosperity in the region in the next years. The NDN is a web of Central-Asian rails, roads and airlines to supply US and NATO troops in Afghanistan: with the exception of Turkmenistan – which has refused to sign a transit agreement in the NDN framework, allowing only refuel operations for US military planes - all Central Asian republics are involved in this multiroute logistical network. The empowerment of the NDN (even through the potential inclusion of Turkmenistan, which benefits of a strategic geographic position bordering Afghanistan) will represent the main attempt to strengthen this regional approach, mainly because its successful implementation could influence and transform the post soviet Central Asia, pushing for a broader regional integration in the economic and energy field, in a scenario of security and stability.

Indeed, if at present the main priority of the NDN is military - in order to boost American and ISAF presence in Afghanistan and to prevent the dangerous spread of instability towards Central Asia - its geopolitical value is clearly evident because the Central Asian republics have become tightly involved in a framework of economic and military cooperation with the United States and NATO: in addition to ensuring stability and security in the region, the NDN implementation should boost economic development, enhance regional economic integration and cooperation improving the transportation infrastructure and opening Central Asian land-locked markets to the global market.

The building of a Modern Silk Road (MSR) will help to achieve these goals, by means of converting the NDN infrastructure of supply route for military aims to an Eurasian broader trade and transport network able to ensure

2 Council of the European Union, The European Union and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership, European Communities, October 2007, p.11.

a path to prosperity and security for the region, as confirmed in February 2011 by the U.S. Assistant of State for Central and South Asia Robert Blake during his visit in Turkmenistan

While the creation of the NDN was motivated by the U.S. military's immediate logistical needs, its establishment nonetheless offers a unique opportunity to lay a foundation for a Modern Silk Road, which would help stabilize Afghanistan in the long term and transform Eurasia, linking these landlocked economies to the world markets. The pacification of Afghanistan and the regional stability are the necessary preconditions in order to realise this unified Eurasian trade and transport system, based on the regional cooperation and economic integration: for these reasons, Afghanistan is conceived as the "missing link" for the implementation of the MSR.

It is appropriate to underline that the development of this project ensuring a permanent condition of stability and security will produce benefits not only for the Central Asian states and Afghanistan, but also for the regional geopolitical players which should be involved – such as China, India, Russia, Pakistan, Iran – and EU and US. However, for Central Asian states the implementation of the MSR could represent a fundamental step in order to achieve a full geopolitic and economic independence after twenty years of post soviet experience.

The economic growth linked to the inclusion of post soviet Central Asia in MSR will reduce poverty and improving social condition and professional opportunities for the people, which should allow to defuse the attractiveness of Islamic radical ideology, which proliferate in a scenario of deprivation, poverty, unemployment. At present, the US increasing demand for locally purchased items will enhance the development and economic revenues of the agricultural and manufacturing sectors of NDN involving states: for example, the US planned decision to buy more fruits and vegetables from Uzbek farmers and the shipping them to American and NATO forces in Afghanistan is a part of this strategy.

Moreover the concession of growing and lucrative transit fees, the possibility to refuel and to sell products to military forces engaged in Afghanistan, the development and the enhancement of transport infrastructures (roads, rails) and energy pipelines (hydrocarbons and electricity) are other important benefits which support the weak and landlocked Central Asian economies, allowing them to strengthen their path to the independence and to adopt a profitable multi-vector policy in the economic, energy and political field in order to lessen the geopolitical influence of the two regional superpowers Russia and China.

In the energy sphere the implementation of two planned projects - the Central Asia South Asia power supply project and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India natural gas pipeline – reveal a potential opportunity to develop a broader energy cooperation involving not only Central Asian states but also India, Pakistan and South East Asia, in order to connect energy producer and important energy market of consume.

Factors of weaknesses in the regional approach

Although the positive effects and benefits linked to the regional approach, we can observe some relevant weaknesses points which could set back its concrete implementation.

The most important is the traditional rivalry and mistrust existing among Central Asian republics, a factor which continues to hinder a real regional cooperation after twenty years of independence. This attitude is particularly evident concerning transboundary relations, because the reciprocal suspicious and hostility has delayed and prevented any form of economic and energy cooperation, also undermining the achievement of the regional stability and security's goal.

The need to stop the armed transboundary incursions of terrorists and extremists has pushed Central Asian political leadership to adopt rigid measures which also affect the border trade and fuel political mistrust among the states. These tensions show also the difficulties of the EU Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA) to solve the problems linked to the shared borders according to a regional approach.

Concerning energy and transport projects based on a strengthened regional cooperation, the political mistrust is hindering the realization of the Central Asia South Asia (CASA) power supply project, because of the hard opposition between water-rich Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and the downstream countries which use water for the cotton irrigation: much of Central Asia's water flows from the mountains of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, leaving downstream countries Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan dependent and worried about the effects of planned hydropower plants upstream.

In this case, the strategic needs of internal policy of the downstream countries are prevailing over the regional interest to create an integrated Central Asia water system and the development of a regional electricity market.

The implementation of CASA project could allow to the energy dependent Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to exploit opportunities to expand electricity exports to Afghanistan and beyond to South Asia, by means of the building and the enhancement of hydropower stations allowing them to become energy independent. Instead Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan fear that the construction of the hydropower stations could reduce the flows of water and negatively affect their cotton production, which represent one of the most important export.

Especially Uzbekistan is opposing against the construction of Kambarata (Kyrgyzstan) and Roghun (Tajikistan) big hydropower stations, because Tashkent fears that those two countries' use of water from Central Asia's two great rivers -- the Syr Darya and Amu Darya -- to generate power will diminish the amount reaching Uzbekistan, which have Central Asia's largest population and it is a big cotton producer. Uzbekistan also claims that any transboundary hydropower project should be realised only after comprehensive assessments of its environmental impact in the region. The Uzbek opposition against the Roghun hydropower project has arisen a sort of "diplomatic" conflict with Tajikistan, fuelling a renewed mistrust in the regional cooperation which provoked some disruptions and delays in the NDN supply route crossing Uzbek-Tajik border

At the same time, the building of the ambitious Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline project – which would supply 33 billion cubic meters of Turkmen gas a year to Pakistan and India via Afghanistan's unstable southern provinces – could potentially promote stability and prosperity in the region, even if the success of this project is subordinate to the achievement of some challenging preconditions such as the concrete stabilization of Afghanistan and a reciprocal political dialogue between Pakistan and India. The realization of TAPI pipeline will

have important benefits for the involved state actors: Turkmenistan would diversify its energy export towards lucrative Southern East Asia markets, Afghanistan would obtain billions dollars of transit fees and would also benefit of a necessary condition of stability and peace useful to implement a national building process, while Pakistan and India will receive gas supplies to support their growing energy demand.

However, it is evident that until now the Afghan unsolved condition of instability and the traditional rivalry between India and Pakistan could hinder this project of regional cooperation.

Firstly, the planned transit routes crossing Baluchistan and Southern Afghanistan highlights the existing and dangerously unsolved security concerns, spreading serious doubts about its effective realization. In addition, we can note that the realization of this energy infrastructure without a real pacification and stabilization of Afghanistan would represent an opportunity for Taliban and Afghan warlords to substitute the central national administration in order to manage the flux of money based on transit fees and investments necessities to build the gas pipeline.

Moreover, the traditional and rooted mistrust which characterizes the relations between India and Pakistan constitutes another big hurdle concerning the TAPI implementation, even if an energy cooperation deal involving the two regional rivals would really have a positive influence in the scenario of a *Greater Central Asia*.

In the framework of a regional energy cooperation, the Sino-Turkmen gas pipeline has represented an element of success even if the disharmonious relations among the involved states threats to damage its concrete development. This energy route allows Turkmen gas to reach Chinese markets, but also involves Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, because these nations are crossed by the pipeline and they sell to China part of their gas.

In December 2011 China and Turkmenistan will sign a deal to expand the capacity pipeline (from 40 billion cubic metres – bcm - to 60 bcm), showing the growing possibility of cooperation between energy-rich Central Asian states.

The role of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as transit states will permit them to play a key role in any future negotiations or projects. At present, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are in pricing disagreement with China and Ashgabat has not yet gained approval from the transit states over the planned additional pipeline. So even if Turkmenistan gives into the lesser price for natural gas, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan could deny transit to prevent the Turkmen supplies from reaching China, in order to keep pressure on China in their own negotiations, conditioning the full implementation of this project.

One of the most important factor which concretely prevent the regional cooperation in Central Asia is the opposition of clashing geopolitical interests and strategic aims achieving by the involved external geopolitical players, mainly Russia, United States, European Union, China and in lesser extent Turkey, Iran, South Korea, India: this external influence have marked a division between Central Asian states, because most geopolitical attentions and economic investments are focused on the possibility to exploit hydrocarbons energy reserves and on security issues linked to the stabilization of Afghanistan and the NDN implementation.

Consequently, external geopolitical actors prefer to develop bilateral relations with energy-rich Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan (considering also that they are two of the five Caspian littoral states) or to engage themselves in a kind of “airbases military race” instead of the promotion of a broader regional strategy which could better help Central Asia republics to achieve the goals of economic independence, security and stability and to solve endogenous problems which set back their evolution.

At the same time, an overview concerning the other attempts to develop a regional integration and cooperation in different fields (economic, military, political) shows the difficulties and the obstacles to achieve this ambitious aim: the Turkmen refusal to join the existent regional multilateral organizations - the EurAsian Economic Community (EurAsEC) in the economic field, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in the military-security sphere – has hindered the project to involve all the Central Asian republics in an enhanced regional cooperation framework. In addition, other points of weaknesses are the Uzbek decision to suspend its participation in the EurAsEC in 2008 and the participation limited at Kazakhstan in the planned EurAsEC Custom Union (with Russia and Belarus) even if there is the will to also include Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Conclusion

A coherent implementation and a potential success of the regional approach in the Greater Central Asia region, by means of the realization of a Modern Silk Road and a structured regional cooperation, is heavily dependent on the security and political issues: however, the problematic achievement of these preconditions is seriously preventing the development of this geopolitical strategy. The persistent condition of instability in Afghanistan is setting back the realization of the regional approach.

Firstly, security issues hinders the creation of the East-West geo-economic corridor based on trade and energy, while the growing incursions of armed extremists coming from Afghanistan are provoking a dangerous condition of instability in Central Asian nations, fuelling transboundary tensions. The mistrust existing among the Central Asia political leaders and their prevailing interests in internal issues is weakening the regional cooperation, as shown by the developments in the EurAsEC, the Turkmen refusal to be involved in regional organization, the opposing views inside the CSTO concerning the deployment of the Rapid Reaction Force.

Moreover the planned NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014 is spreading concrete fears concerning regional security, even because Central Asian nations are wary and not reliable about the CSTO and SCO capabilities to impose themselves as regional security providers.

In order to prevent this threat, it will be necessary to develop a deepen cooperation between Central Asia and external geopolitical players involved in the region (a kind of strengthened 6+3 initiative), in order to build a “regional security architecture” which must represent the beginning of a geopolitical framework on which further implement a broader strategy focused on the energy and trade cooperation and to solve the shared problems.

However, the NATO departure from Afghanistan and Central Asia will necessarily coincide with the predictable weakening of the NDN framework of cooperation: China and Russia could take over the US leading position and promote an enhanced regional cooperation to handle shared problems and threats, on condition that they can overcome Central Asian rivalry and mistrust.

Concerning the problem of the water management, it appears necessary an international mediation in order to compose the clashing interests which oppose upstream and downstream nations: a potential agreement based on the prevailing regional interests will represent an important success, as a first step towards the establishment of a wider framework cooperation.

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