

*Ainis Razma**

Faculty of Economics, Vilnius University

The Geopolitics of Central Asia after the Annexation of Crimea in 2014

The annexation of Crimea accomplished by Russia in 2014 is the event that stands out sharply in the context of post-Cold War international relations: it was the first time after the end of WWII in Europe that a part of the territory of a sovereign state was forcefully annexed. This means that the re-drawing of borders and revisionism are back in international relations as the principles and ways of policy making. It would be plausible to assume that the consequences of an event of such scale would be noticeable not only in its direct neighborhood but as well in more distant, though geopolitically sensitive contexts. The article explores the impact that Russia's Crimea campaign has had on the geopolitics of Central Asia and what consequences could be deemed plausible in the future. It is assumed that, due to the annexation of Crimea, international relations started polarizing around the two centers of power: the West and Russia. This trend brings the mentality of strategic confrontation back into international relations. The polarization seemingly becomes a geopolitical factor, which influences the power dynamics in Central Asia in its cultural-informational, military and economic aspects. From the cultural-informational perspective, the polarization is incompatible with the provisions of multivector foreign policies, and pursued by the Central Asian states; therefore, they attempt to neutralize the trend by withholding from taking clear-cut positions with regard to the Ukrainian events. Such a stance, however, does not provide for hedging against military threats, which are perceived as rather real in Central Asia because of the Russian *modus operandi* in Ukraine, as well as due to the seemingly catalyzing impact of current Russian policies on the local separatist forces and radical Islamic groups. Apprehension about a replication of a Crimean scenario as well as the asymmetric character of military threat may push the Central Asian states to seek security guarantees from outside the region. The consequences of such a development would essentially depend not on the Central Asian states themselves, but on the views the great powers would have on the stability in the region. In case of the domination of a cooperative approach, the formation of the relatively stable system of the regional balance in Central Asia is rather plausible. On the contrary, attempts by any of the great powers to tie stability to their own conditions would deteriorate the situation in the region. The alternative to these two scenarios may well be provided by China, whose policy in Central Asia is becoming more assertive and gaining support from the states of the region. Additionally, the resultant regional power trend would be influenced by the dynamics of the economic relations in the region, the withdrawal of the armed forces of Western allies from Afghanistan, policies of Iran and Turkey in the region, and other factors making up the international context of the Central Asia.

* *Ainis Razma* is a Lecturer of Faculty of Economic of Vilnius University. Address for correspondence: Saulėtekio al. 9, (II building), LT-10222 Vilnius, Lithuania; tel. +370-5-2366146; e-mail: ainis.razma@ef.vu.lt

Introduction

The annexation of part of the territory of Ukraine undertaken by Russia in March, 2014, significantly affected the international system which existed since the end of World War II, by evoking the trend of polarization. This trend further developed into a geopolitical factor, and the impact on the current contexts has scarcely been explored so far. Although the events in Ukraine and their possible consequences attracted a lot of academic attention¹, the majority of studies on the issue are limited to the analysis of the situation of the crisis region. At the same time, the attempts to consider the impact of Ukrainian events in the wider international context are few and far between.² Such studies explore the prerequisites of the success of Russian aggression in Ukraine and address the question of whether they exist somewhere else, with the particular focus on the post-soviet space³. Thus, there is a need for deeper consideration of the effects of the Ukrainian events on the different regional geopolitical contexts. One of the regions characterized by rather intense interaction between West Russia and China is Central Asia. The region is important economically and bears geostrategic value; therefore it is plausible to assume that the exogenous trend of polarization will affect numerous aspects of Central Asian politics, induce latent factors of instability and elicit new tensions within the region. Several scholarly writings already have attempted to describe the particular aspects of the reaction of the Central Asian states to the Ukrainian events: the impact of the Western sanctions to Russia on the financial system of Kazakhstan⁴, official statement of Kyrgyzstan on the Crimea case⁵, and considerations of the possible effects of Ukrainian events on the politics of Central Asian states towards Russia in short and long time perspectives⁶.

This article aims to explore the possible effects of polarization on the ge-

¹ See: Ding, Sheng, "China's dilemma in the Ukraine crisis." (2014), *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, No.255, 2014.03.27, Granholm, Niklas; Malminen, Johannes; Persson, Gudrun (eds)." *A Rude Awakening. Ramifications of Russian Aggression Towards Ukraine*", FOI, June 2014.

² Norberg, Johan (ed.); Franke, Ulrik; Westerlund, Frederik, "The Crimea Operation: Implications for Future Russian Military Interventions", in Granholm, Niklas; Malminen, Johannes; Persson, Gudrun (eds)." *A Rude Awakening. Ramifications of Russian Aggression Towards Ukraine*", FOI, June 2014.

³ Brauer, Brigit, "Cost of Black Tuesday for Kaazkhstan", *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 2014.03.19, p.13-15

⁴ Sabyrbekov, Arslan, "Bishkek's First Official Statement on Ukraine", *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 2014.03.19, p.16-17.

⁵ Hórák, Slavomír, "Russia's Intervention in Ukraine Reverberates in Central Asia", *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 2014.03.19, p.9-12.

⁶ Janeliūnas, Tomas; Kasčiūnas, Laurynas, "Prognozavimo metodų taikymas politikos moksluose", *Politologija*, 2007, Nr.3, p.20.

opolitics of Central Asia. On the basis of the contemporary research on Central Asia as well as the media reports on the recent events relevant to the political developments in Central Asia and Ukraine, an attempt is made to forecast the impact of polarization on the dynamics of the military, economic and cultural-informational elements of power in Central Asia. For this purpose the method of geopolitical analysis is employed. Analyses at the sub-systemic and systemic levels are later summarized by synthesizing the resultant power trend in the region. In this text the term „system“ refers to the region of Central Asia which is defined geographically by the external borders of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The notion of the system dynamics here relates to the shifts in the policies of the states of the region due to the possible impacts of the geopolitical factors focused upon here. Hence, the main question of the analysis at the systemic level is: what effect will the exogenous factor of polarization (i.e. the change in the character of the relations between the great powers of the world politics) have on power dynamics in Central Asia? The subsystem level of analysis will examine the developments of a given Central Asian state, focusing mainly on the reactions manifested by these states and revealing their possible causes. The analysis will start at the sub-systemic level, then pass onto the systemic one. The resultant regional power trend is synthesized in the conclusions part of the paper.

The formulation of the main question of this analysis reflects efforts to discuss possible future outcomes of current developments. From the point of view of forecasting methodology, the paper should be treated as an individual expert assessment and should be attributed to the domain of descriptive foresighting⁷. In the conclusion, several alternative future possibilities are depicted, thus, at least to some degree, the paper attempts a construction of scenarios. However, for the purposes of this paper the latter method is an auxiliary one, used mainly for summarizing considerations and drawing some generalizations. Therefore, logically consistent cause-effect connections will not be explicitly highlighted.

Paradigmatically, the discussion is being constructed within the framework of neoclassical realism; thus the main unit of analysis is the state or the political system (e.g. the EU). Additionally, in this text the reification “the West” is also treated as a unit of analysis, but only in the sense of the states comprising the space of liberal democracy. The purposefulness and the usage of such reification here is argued for by the coinciding foreign policy stances of

⁷ Rettman, A. “NATO Chief Describes “Outrageous” Russia as Threat to Europe”, Euroobserver, 2014.05.14, <http://euobserver.com/defence/124184>, visited on 2014.06.12.

these states towards the inviolability of state borders in Europe, the rule of the international law and some other common approaches towards the conduct of the actors on the international scene.

1. Polarization as the Geopolitical Factor

The trend of polarization, which became clearly pronounced in international relations since the annexation of Crimea, is noticeably aligned along the East-West axis. Hence, the inclination to search for similarities between the current situation in Europe and the Cold War era is understandable. However, the differences between the first and latter situations are essential. On the one hand, the West currently is once again turning into a geopolitical notion, quite similar to the one established during the Cold War, and generally defined as the grouping of states which make up the space of liberal democracy. However, compared to the Cold War period, the ongoing polarization features the West, which is geographically wider and now encompasses the parts of the former East. On the other hand, to similarly imbue the notion of the East with a geopolitical meaning hardly makes any sense for the context of the annexation of Crimea. This notion does not refer to any wider assemblage of states bond by ideological or geopolitical motives, but solely to Russia. Thus, the contemporary polarization of international relations reminds us of the developments in Europe on the threshold between the 19th and 20th centuries, rather than the Cold War political setting.

In the process of polarization, developments in the cultural-informational domain are among the first to be detected. Initially the changes appear in the political rhetoric between the poles of the system - it starts getting harsher. Later on, mainly via mass media, the poles embark on the development of particular attitudes of the opposing pole, mainly basing them on certain archetypical images and political myths. Finally, the polarization turns into one of the main sources of identity which is the essential condition for distinction between "us", and "them". Thus, the cultural-informational dimension of polarization influences the shaping (or the revival) of the mentality of strategic confrontation, which in turn leads to the gradual adoption of the logic of the zero-sum game in a great number of aspects in the relations between the opposing poles. In the strategic confrontation between East and West, the military component of polarization is also rather conspicuously expressed. The flights of Russian strategic bombers close to the United States' objectives, and simulation of assaults against targets in the Western countries during military exer-

cises, hint that Russia does not discount the possibility of a military collision with the West. NATO, in its turn, openly named Russia as a threat to Europe.⁸ While both poles are engaged in the demonstration of military capabilities, the greatest number of real actions has occurred so far within the economic domain, by introducing direct and retaliatory sanctions, and exerting influence on global markets with the aim to erode the economic potential of the opponent. Economically, the current polarization revealed the energy vulnerability of Europe and the strategic importance of its dependence on Russian natural gas supplies. Aiming to reduce this dependence, the United States has principally agreed to liberalize their natural gas export policy, and embarked on negotiations with the EU on these issues. At the same time, president Barack Obama of the United States, on various occasions mentioned that the EU “cannot just rely on other country’s energy, even if it has some costs, some downside”⁹. He openly urged Europeans to reconsider of the attitudes towards shale and shelf gas extraction, as well as towards nuclear energy, which dominated European energy debate during the last several decades. In other words, the West clearly drifts away from cooperation with Russia in the energy field, and this trend most likely will lead, if not to the complete seclusion of the EU from Russian gas supplies, then at least to the development of the system which will ensure the fulfillment of the EU energy demands, with only optional participation of Russia.

It should be emphasized that the talk here is about the surfacing trends, uncovering directions of possible further development of international relations and by no means is the claim that the polarization is a *fait accompli*, nor are the relations between Russia and the West stated to be entirely complying with the rules of the zero sum game. Such statements would hardly stand the evidence of the continuing ambiguity around the „Mistral“ ships situation in the French-Russian relations, the facts that certain German companies still persist with contractual relations with Russian economy entities, or the ongoing discussion inside the NATO between those who urge for response and reaction to the Russian threat and those—who call for observation of further developments in and around Ukraine—postponing the formulation of final conclusions and, thus, the adoption of a more articulated policy line towards

⁸ Emmot, R.; Strupczewski, J. “Obama Tells EU To Do More To Cut Reliance on Russian Gas”, Reuters, 2014.03.26, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/03/26/us-usa-eu-summit-idUSBREA2P0W220140326>, visited on 2014.06.01.

⁹ Keneally, M., “Hillary Clinton Compares Russia’s Invasion to Ukraine to ‘What Hitler Did Back in 30s’ Ahead to WWII”, *Mail Online*, 2014.03.15, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2573810/Hillary-Clinton-compares-Russias-invasion-Ukraine-Hitler-did-30s-ahead-WWII.html>, visited on 2014.03.16.

Russia. The latter observation may have several explanations. On one hand, it would be reasonable to assume that, notwithstanding the fact of the annexation of Crimea, the roots of the perception of Russian threat in the political mentality of the West needs time. Discussions developing this line of explanation often refer to the obviously aggressive policy of Adolf Hitler, starting with the militarization of the Ruhr district, the annexation of the territories of other states and the beginning of the World War II¹⁰. On the other hand, it still may be plausible to suppose that the primacy of geopolitics is not a feature exclusively pertaining to Russian foreign policy, but to a certain extent is characteristic of the actions of some Western states as well, e.g. Germany or France. It would be rather difficult to attribute the influence of the annexation of Crimea entirely to geopolitical arguments. Hence, along with geopolitics, normative reasoning should be taken into account, advancing evidence of the international law violations of the established regime, or pointing to the real or perceived Russian foreign policy principle, whose continuous application makes up the very threat. However, the reduction of the observation field to a solely geopolitical perspective allows one to advance the assumption that the application of some menacing foreign policy principle would be limited and would cease at a particular boundary. In other words, in such a perspective, policy rationale rests on the recognition of the zones of geopolitical influence, seeing the latter as the basis for further development of constructive and mutually beneficial relations. The different relational importance of the geopolitical element in political thinking has possibly catalyzed differences between the EU's and the USA's rhetoric towards Russia.

2. The States of Central Asia in the Face of Ukrainian Events

The foreign policies of all Central Asian states, including the neutral Turkmenistan, manifest the feature of multivectority, though to a different extent. The cultural-informational aspect of polarization in its very essence is ideologically incompatible with the political attitudes that these states declare. Therefore, Ukrainian events presented a challenge for the diplomacies of the states of the region. The official statements of the Central Asian states on Cri-

¹⁰ "The Position of the republic of Uzbekistan on the Situation in Ukraine and the Crimean Issue", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2014.03.25, <http://www.mfa.uz/en/press/news/2014/03/1529/>, visited on 2014.03.25.

mea, though employing essentially the same subtly nuanced wording, were rather different. Uzbekistan officially expressed a rather negative attitude, calling to “refrain in international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state”¹¹. President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan, obviously hinting at Russia in his comments on the current situation in world affairs, said that “the mutual trust in the modern world noticeably decreases”¹². The position of Kazakhstan, on the contrary, was essentially propitious to Russia. The official statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan reads that the incorporation of Crimea within Russia is the „expression of the free will of the inhabitants of the autonomous republic”¹³.

A statement of approximately similar content was officially circulated by Kyrgyzstan¹⁴. Tajikistan and Turkmenistan together abstained from any official comments concerning the situation in Ukrainian-Russian relations. In terms of expression, the texts of all the analyzed statements are rather alike. They feature the domination of the subjunctive mood, and the talk here runs about what and how things should have been done, but not how the situation actually developed; the emphasis is often on the principles of actions instead on the actions undertaken. Moreover, certain aspects of the Ukrainian situation are interpreted in the way which allows for their positive assessment (e.g. referendum as an expression of the free political will of the society), while some other aspects of the same situation are seen as deserving improvement (e.g. the call for the respect of territorial integrity). Thus, depicting the situation as ambiguous allows Central Asian states to evade the possibility of essentially polarizing assessments. In other words, the texts of the official statements show attempts to amortize the cultural-informational aspect of the polarization by the employment of pros and cons arguments.

Though having communicated rather different official messages, in the practical domain Central Asian states have shown similar activities, the cha-

¹¹ Azizov, Demir, “Uzbek President Says Trust is Most Important Element in Strengthening Int’l Cooperation”, *Trend*, 2014.05.22, <http://en.trend.az/regions/casia/uzbekistan/2276997.html>, visited on 2014.05.25.

¹² “Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan on the Referendum in Crimea”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan, 2014.03.18, <http://mfa.gov.kz/en/#!/news/article/13803>, visited on 2014.03.18.

¹³ “Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic on Situation in Ukraine and Crimea”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2014.03.20, http://www.mfa.kg/vistupleniya/zayavlenie-ministerstva-inostrannih-del-kirgizskoi-respubliki-ot-20-marta-2014-goda-3_en.html, visited on 2014.03.20.

¹⁴ Pannier, Bruce, „Uzbek Broadcasters Set to Self-Destruct”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, <http://www.rferl.org/content/qishloq-ovozi-uzbekistan-broadcasters-self-destruct/25361053.html>, 2014.04.14, visited on 2014.04.14.

acter of which has allowed for the assumption that Russia is likely perceived as an ominous pole. On April 14, 2014, after separatists captured and started broadcasting from several TV stations in East Ukraine, the government of Uzbekistan issued a resolution ordering that all the TV and radio facilities in the country be rigged with explosives for their easy and immediate detonation in the case of an attempt of hostile usage. The National Security Service of Uzbekistan issued additional orders prescribing that all the ventilation piping and shafts in all broadcasting facilities all over the country be equipped with smaller diameter tubes to prevent usage for inside access. Moreover, the setup of broadcasting studios was ordered to not allow adjoining from any other premises, including the restrooms. Live coverage and broadcast as a type of TV program was banned, and this ban was also extended to news issues. Many other prohibitions and limitations were introduced. In Kazakhstan, the law on media activities in crisis situations was passed. The document provides for the suspension of news releases up to 24 hours, should the particular situation occur. The municipality of Dushanbe issued an order prescribing that used tire yards must be located at least 40km from the city border¹⁵. It is obvious that the Central Asian states vigilantly monitor the development of the events in Ukraine, note the peculiarities of the insurgent tactics and by “trying on” the observed situations, attempt to prevent their replication domestically. Thus, the impact of the polarization on the dynamics of the military component of power is quite distinguishable, and different from the case with the cultural-informational element is more direct and more difficult to amortize, if at all. The aforementioned “trying-on” of the situations also means that the Central Asian states are searching for and revealing the domestic prerequisites, analogous to those which were exploited in Ukraine in favor of Russia.

The replication of Russian actions in Ukraine is potentially dangerous for Kazakhstan, where one quarter of inhabitants are Russians, and the share goes up to 50% in the northern parts of the country. However, there is a noticeable shortage of valid information on what moods and outlooks currently dominate among the Russian-speaking population of Kazakhstan, the fact of „cleansing“ the state apparatus from Russians as well as some other manifestations of the ethnic segregation in the first years of independence, allows for the assumption that the Russian minority in Kazakhstan would be a rather receptive audience for Russia’s information operations. In this context, Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s interview for *Forbes Magazine* in 2008 is worth some attention.

¹⁵ “Alexander Solzhenitsyn on the New Russia“, *Forbes*, 2008.05.08, http://www.forbes.com/2008/08/05/solzhenitsyn-forbes-interview-oped-cx_pm_0804russia.html, visited on 2014.06.14.

The writer outspokenly asserts that “all of northern and northeastern Kazakhstan is actually part of southern Siberia “, where Russians “are being repressed in their national, cultural, business and daily life”¹⁶. Geopolitically, the annexation of North and North-East Kazakhstan would provide Russia with quite a few advantages, primarily related to the opportunity to exert the bigger influence on China. This part of Kazakhstan is crossed by the trade and energy routes to China; moreover, it borders Xinjiang, the rebellious China province where ideas of Uighur separatism are deeply rooted.

The development of Kazakh-Russian relations so far has not provided any grounds to advance menacing forecasts: Kazakhstan is usually treated as the staunch and influential ally of Russia in Central Asia. However, by the end of 2014, there were signals that friendly allied relations—seemingly confirmed by the Eurasian Union Treaty, signed on May 29, 2014—are getting worse¹⁷. Additionally, there are facts which hardly fit within the context of mutual confidence between Kazakhstan and Russia. On March 28, 2014, i.e. 12 days after the referendum in Crimea, Russia announced plans to deploy „Iskander“ short range ballistic missiles at the border of Kazakhstan¹⁸. It is planned to deploy 12 such platforms at the Totskoye-2 site in the Orenburg district by the end of 2014. According to Russia, the deployment of “Iskanders” is a preplanned activity within the framework of CSTO’s program aimed at the creation of military prerequisites of the enhancement of the stability of the region at the time when the forces of the USA and its NATO allies will start leaving Afghanistan. However, the choice of military capability for this purpose remains unclear. Afghanistan lies well out of the range of missiles deployed, whereas the territory of Kazakhstan is completely covered. In this context it is worth noting that Kazakhstan hosts Russian military bases as it is, not to mention the special military units deployed there to secure the Baikonur spacecraft launching site.

The Crimean events of March 2014 coincided with the noticeable rise of Karakalpak separatism in Uzbekistan. On March 14, 2014, a previously unknown group, “Alga Karakalpakstan”, posted the following statement on the Facebook page of Uzbek opposition movement “Birdamalik”:

¹⁶ Paul Klebnikov, “Zhirinovskiy Is An Evil Caricature Of A Russian Patriot – An Interview With Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn”, *Forbes*, May 9, 1994.

¹⁷ Casey, Michael, „Russian-Kazakh Relations Took a Dive in 2014“, *The Diplomat*, 2014.12.20, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/12/russia-kazakhstan-relations-took-a-dive-in-2014/>, visited at 2014.12.20.

¹⁸ “Russia to Deploy Iskander Missiles at Kazakhstan Border”, *TengriNews*, 2014.03.28, <http://en.tengrinews.kz/military/Russia-to-deploy-Iskander-missiles-at-Kazakhstan-border-252507/>, visited on 2014.03.29.

The people of Karakalpakstan do not agree with the foreign and domestic policies of [Uzbekistani President Islam] Karimov's regime. Karakalpaks are eager to join Russia. By culture and language, Karakalpaks are closer to Kazakhs but will the [Kazakhstani] president support the freedom and independence of the Republic of Karakalpakstan? If we hear a good signal from the Kremlin, Karakalpakstan is ready to raise the Russian flag¹⁹.

The annexation of Crimea and events in East Ukraine causes reasonable anxiety for the leadership of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. These Central Asian states host the biggest units of Russian Armed forces in the region. The 201st land forces division is deployed in Tajikistan. Kyrgyzstan hosts Kant air force base, which has recently been enforced by the additional air defense capabilities²⁰. Tajikistan fears that Russia may exploit the situation in the Gorno-Badakhshan district in Pamir. Armed clashes between government forces and informal militant groups crossing the Tajik-Afghan border have been rather regular there in the last several years. The idea that at least part of these episodes might be inspired by Moscow is quite popular among Tajik experts. The rationale behind such thinking is that destabilization of the situation and the possible spreading of unrest may be used to frighten Tajik leadership into increasing Russian military presence in Tajikistan.²¹ The fact that in the year 2013 Dushanbe had agreed on the extension of hosting Russian military bases adds some plausibility to the assumption²². Tajikistan, though, so far categorically refuses to allow Russia to patrol its border with Afghanistan, and this Tajik stance is thought to be one of the reasons for the current intensification of military activities in Mount Badakhshan. It is worth noting that though the narrative of these armed clashes so far is being framed within the thematic of drug trafficking, changing it for ethnic conflict is very easy in this region. First, groups of the population inhabiting the district are ethnically different from Tajiks. Second, Mount Badakhshan Muslims are Shias, while the majority of Tajiks are Sunnis. Thirdly, particular sentiments towards Russia are rather widespread among the inhabitants of this area. In contrast to other territories of Tajikistan, Pamir voluntarily joined tsarist Russia. In the aftermath of the Soviet *Glasnost* period, quite a few politicians argued for the secession of this

¹⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/birdamlikh>, visited on 2014.03.15.

²⁰ "Russia Strengthens Military Bases Abroad – Defense Minister", Ria Novosti, 2014.05.23, http://en.ria.ru/military_news/20140523/190068469/Russia-Strengthens-Military-Bases-Abroad--Defense-Minister.html, visited on 2014.05.23.

²¹ Rotar, Igor, "Tajikistan launches Military Operation in Remote Pamirs Region", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol.9, issue 143, 2012.07.27, [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=39685&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=587&no_cache=1#.Vi93Oyu_J1M](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=39685&tx_ttnews[backPid]=587&no_cache=1#.Vi93Oyu_J1M), visited on 2015.10.27.

²² Rotar, Igor, "Are There Possible Future 'Crimeas' in Central Asia?", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 2014.06.13, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42504&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=13&cHash=486c7fd807a9c10082658971bc4e99fd#.U6ABePks2uI, visited on 2014.06.14.

Pamir region from Tajik SSR and for its incorporation into Russian SFR. Thus, it seems possible to discern the reflections of the Ukrainian events of 2014: on May 22, 2014, during the unrest in Khorog city, the protestors adopted a resolution claiming that the inhabitants of Mountain Badakhshan (Pamir) clash with the forces of Tajik central government²³. It seemingly indicates certain changes in the dominant narrative of situational framing, and these changes will likely prompt Tajikistan as well as Kyrgyzstan to evade Russian integration initiatives in Central Asia to the highest possible extent.

3. Central Asia and the Great Powers: Geopolitical Polarization and its Alternative

The consideration of Central Asia as a region or system is conditional and depends on how these concepts are defined. Actually, the Central Asian states differ among themselves on a variety of aspects. For instance, they feature different levels of autocracy. Kyrgyzstan, according to the various democracy research agencies, could be treated as a partly democratic regime, whereas Turkmenistan features particularly closed type of sultanate. Similarly, the economies of the states of the region feature a number of differences: they are at different levels of development and manifest distinct capabilities to resist the external pressure. The economies of Kazakhstan and particularly Uzbekistan are relatively strong. The latter showed slight growth even during the last global financial crisis. Tajikistan is, however, one of the world's poorest states. Its economy, as well as the economy of Kyrgyzstan, is the weakest in the region. Resource-rich Turkmenistan is highly dependent on Russia, which until 2009 was the only its gas export partner. The situation rapidly changes with China advancing gas pipeline infrastructure in Central Asia. Though, quite significantly, all of the aforementioned differences among the Central Asian states are quantitative nuances of the same geopolitical, geoeconomical and geocultural quality, which by no means overshadows similarities, which mark Central Asia as a region out of the surrounding international environment.

The low level of economic and political integration and the weak cooperation among its states is characteristic of the region of Central Asia. Nevertheless, the systemic interactions within Central Asia, rendering it a system, are rather obvious. The principle interactions happen within the geopolitical

²³ "NATO Opens New Office in Uzbek Capital", World Bulletin, 2014.05.17, <http://www.worldbulletin.net/world/136595/nato-opens-new-office-in-uzbek-capital>, visited on 2014.06.11.

and geoeconomical domains with an uneven distribution of natural resources, water in particular being the main driving factor behind them. One such systemic interaction between the region states is generated by the need to redistribute natural resources. Another one is implied by the necessity to develop and maintain the common infrastructure of energy and transportation. Not only is this necessity prescribed geographically, the perspectives of economic development of each country in the region is directly dependent on their ability to cooperate on infrastructural issues, particularly with a view that all Central Asian states are landlocked. Systemic interactions of a geopolitical and geocultural nature mainly relate to the post-communist condition of the region and its localization at the borders of civilizations. To a major extent all these interactions seemingly produce the geopolitical code of Central Asia: the countries of the region similarly define their national interests, identify threats, formulate and implement their foreign policies.

The escalation of events in Ukraine, and particularly the annexation of Crimea by Russia, coincided with the noticeable rise of the West's political activity in Central Asia. NATO has opened up a liaison office in Tashkent²⁴; so far the only one in Central Asia. On May 5-6 2014, the US Deputy Secretary of State William J. Burns paid a visit to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. A discussion of the situation in Ukraine, Afghanistan issues and Kazakhstan's PPO membership perspectives were among the main points mentioned on the visit's schedule²⁵. It is rather obvious that all the items taken into consideration reflected focal points of the West's geopolitical agenda in Central Asia, hence probably the most essential intention of W.J Burns' visit was the re-actualization of the main aspects of US and NATO cooperation with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Russia also attempts to seek the support of at least a part of its Central Asian neighbors. President Putin visited the region in late November 2014, writing off nearly \$890 million of Uzbekistan's debt, and opening up new lines of credit for the purchase of Russian armaments and military technologies²⁶. However, the situation in the Russian economy may possibly become a source of serious trouble for the region in the near future. The region may become vulnerable to the sanctions imposed on Russia by the West. A large number

²⁴ „Deputy Secretary Burns Travel to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan“, U.S. Department of State, Media Note, 2014.05.05, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/05/225638.htm>, visited on 2014.06.20.

²⁵ „Uzbekistan: Tashkent Has the Power to Influence outcome of the Afghan War“, *Eurasianet*, 2008.11.19, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav111908.shtml>, visited on 2014.05.02.

²⁶ Sorbello, Paolo, „Yes, Uzbekistan is Putin's Friend“, *The Diplomat*, December 15, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/12/yes-uzbekistan-is-putins-friend/>, visited at 2014.12.15.

of labor migrants from Central Asia, particularly Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan work in Russia. Their money transfers make up a significant part of the economies of their respective countries. In case the West would further increase the economic pressure on Russia, Central Asia may face an imminent backward flow of migrants and that would significantly destabilize the region.

In the midterm and long-term perspectives, Russia faces the risk of being pushed out of the Central Asian gas and oil market. The West's determination to seek reduction of the EU's energy dependence on Russia or to cease supply from this country altogether, eventually may significantly change the structure of supply and demand of energy resources in Europe. If Russia's access to the Western markets would be restricted or closed, most likely it would attempt to channel the flow of energy resources to China. However, China itself advances their infrastructural projects for a direct supply from the region, and thus has no need for Russian energy brokerage in Central Asia. Given the events would follow this scenario and in case Russia would fail to rapidly implement infrastructural projects linking Central Asia with Afghanistan and Pakistan (so far no indications, allowing to assume the contrary were detected), the extraction and transportation of energy resources from the region for Russia may eventually render itself uneconomic.

The further advancement of mutual inimical explications in West-Russia relations may cost the USA access to the infrastructure of the Central Asian land and air transportation routes. This would seriously hamper cargo transit to and from Afghanistan and would force Western allies to search for alternative routes. Most likely, the West would have to survey once again the transit route bypassing Russia via the Caspian Sea, as considered back in 2008. Obviously, in this case Russia would lose part of the revenue in payments for the transit permits²⁷. However, today, in contrast to the year 2008, the West may face the polarization induced alterations of the policies of Central Asian states: it would be rather difficult to forecast whether Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan—the two Central Asian states washed by the Caspian Sea—would help the West out should Russia close its borders for the NATO transit.

However, even if the polarization gains momentum, Russia has no geostrategic arguments to hinder the Western allies' transit to and from Afghanistan. On the contrary, the fact of transit actually means the reduction of West's military presence in the region and an opportunity for Russia to finally

²⁷ Drilling Work Begins at 1900 MW Kambarata 1Hydropower Plant", *Hydroworld.Com*. 2013.08.22, <http://www.hydroworld.com/articles/2013/08/drilling-work-begins-at-1-900-mw-kambarata-1-hydrowpower-plant.html>, visited on 2014.06.15.

acquire the superiority of military might in Central Asia. However, a part of military equipment and, most probably weaponry, will stay in the transit states as payment for the use of their territories and infrastructure. A significant part of this equipment will seemingly stay in Uzbekistan, and this makes for a particular concern for Russia. Yet, the policy which would somehow hamper the implementation of the West's transit may have many more undesirable consequences for Russia. Should the transit costs become unacceptable, the US and NATO may decide to leave all their assets in the region and share them among neighboring states, e.g. Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan on their discretion, or offer part of it to more distant countries, e.g. Ukraine, for shipment at their own cost and means.

While until the annexation of Crimea, the development of relations between great powers in Central Asia could be described as a rivalry, in the process of polarization it may escalate to instances of direct confrontation. A lot will depend on what kind of policies will be pursued by the Central Asian states, which so far have attempted to balance the influences of great powers. This feature, characteristic to the foreign policies of all states of the region, seemingly provides for the shaping up of the buffer zone, which could be able to neutralize confronting influences. However, the power balancing capability of the Central Asian autocracies is rather weak. First, all these states are quite susceptible to the domestic unrest and destabilization. The relentless persecution by the Central Asian regimes resulted in the strong radicalization of opposition on the one hand, and in the yawning gap between the elite and the rest of their societies on the other. Moreover, behind the delimitation of borders between the Soviet Central Asian republics was the idea that the titular nation in each republic should not make more than 75% of inhabitants. In spite of almost a century which has passed since the Stalinist socio-political experiments and the shifts in proportions of ethnicities inhabiting the region during this period, the Central Asian states still constantly face the danger of an escalation of ethnic conflicts. Apart from the ethnic tensions, the region is characterized by feuds between the clans belonging to the same ethnic groups and the rivalry among the informal economic-patronage networks stretching over the states' boundaries. This is the additional source of threats. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are susceptible to these kinds of threats to a higher extent, while Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are relatively resistant to them. The region's vulnerability to external destabilizing influences is additionally increased by the low level of cooperation between the states of Central Asia.

The foreign policies of the autocratic "neopatrimonial" Central Asian

states are rather uniquely characterized by their perception of external security, which is probably almost exclusively through the context of preservation of the current domestic political regime. Thus, the most plausible international behavior of any of the Central Asian states in the face of domestic threat is the formation of an alliance with the great power which has offered direct security guarantees to the state's leadership, e.g. by deploying its armed forces or providing other military assistance. Such is the type of foreign policy manifested by switches of the strategic partners every several years that can be observed in the case of Uzbekistan since the beginning of its independence. Russia has often managed to radically influence the policies of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan by offering them financial assistance. For example, in 2009, when Russia promised that the company INTER RAO will invest \$ 2 billion in the construction of Kambara-Ata 1²⁸ hydro-electric power station, Kyrgyzstan demanded for the withdraw of US troops from the Manas military base. By exchanging financial injections with abrupt stoppages of financial inflows for the construction project of the Rogun dam, Russia so far has rather soundly influenced the policy of Tajikistan.

The strategic partnerships of any of the Central Asian states either with the West or Russia, would almost inevitably lead to the polarization of the entire region. The Kazakh-Uzbek relations, characterized by the constant rivalry for the regional leader's role, are important in the given context. Uzbekistan so far has usually attempted to hamper Kazakhstan's integrationist initiatives, showing susceptibility to treating them as an extension of Russia's policy and, thus, discerning the danger to find itself within Moscow's zone of influence. The exception to this pattern was the short period between the years 2006-2007 when, after signing the treaty on strategic partnership with Russia, Uzbekistan had to bend its regional policy to Moscow's interests. If the deepening confrontation between the West and Russia in Central Asia would cause the growth of regional tensions, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan most probably would choose to partner with different powers. Kazakhstan, rooting its statehood in the notion of eurasianism, would plausibly join with Russia, simultaneously attempting to use its sound relations with China to balance Russian influence. The position of Kazakhstan most probably would push Uzbekistan to seek partnership with the USA. In this case, several other factors would be in play. First, Uzbekistan has rather extensive experience in military cooperation with the US; moreover, this cooperation currently runs quite intensively due to the NATO

²⁸ Najibullah, Faranqis, „Eurasian Grouping Plans Regional Army Near Afghanistan“, Eurasianet, 2008.09.19, http://www.rferl.org/Content/CSSTO_Regional_Army_Afghanistan/1201509.html, visited on 2008.09.21.

transit. Second, Uzbekistan was always very suspicious of Russia's attempts to strengthen its military potential in Central Asia²⁹. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan most probably would follow Kazakhstan, while Turkmenistan would plausibly observe neutrality. Thus, the polarization may induce the formation of a regional balance system in Central Asia, where Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan would contest the leadership. Certain cases in the history of international relations may prove that such a system is relatively stable³⁰; hence it may likely be used for the maintenance of stability in Central Asia without direct involvement of either the West or Russia. In such a situation, China would acquire immense importance as well as dominating SCO, if only the military element would be completely removed from the organization's scope of activities. China would be interested in developing economic relations both with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, hence becoming an additional stability factor in the region.

However, the considered system apparently would be subjected to destabilizing influences. The last several years saw the significant activation of Islamist militant activities in Central Asia. This could possibly be the consequence of the constant and successful operation by Pakistani governmental forces against Taliban bases in North Waziristan. As long as these locations start turning increasingly unsafe, Islamist militants will hit the road to Central Asia. The destabilizing potential of the latter factor is even more increased by the possibility that a certain part of NATO's military cargo being transited from Afghanistan via territories of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, may end up in the hands of Islamic militants. Just after the NATO transit started back in the beginning of February 2009, the assortment of Tashkent bazaars was enriched by a choice of US military uniforms, footwear, equipment items, daily packs, etc.³¹ Keeping in mind the volume of corruption in Central Asia, it would be rather plausible to assume the possibility of channeling the weaponry to these militants³². The trend of polarization makes this threat factor even more menacing. The growing confrontation in the region along with regional states possibly choosing alliances with the different opposing poles makes state terrorism support and attempts to direct it towards geopolitical opponents highly probable.

²⁹ Carpenter, Ted G.; Innocent Malou, "The Iraq War and Iranian Power", *Survival*, vol.49, No.4, Winter 2007–2008, p. 66–82.

³⁰ Personal experience of the author.

³¹ Alexander Cooley. *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 99,100,166.

³² Horák, Slavomír, „Russia's Intervention in Ukraine Reverberates in Central Asia“, *The Central Asia -Caucasus Analyst*, 2014.03.19, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12935-russias-intervention-in-ukraine-reverberates-in-central-asia.html>, visited on 2014.03.25.

China may not only act as an additional external stabilizing factor to the regional balance system, but can eventually be viewed by the Central Asian states as an attractive third vector in the geopolitical choice. The political and economic prerequisites for China to undertake the role of an independent integrating agent in Central as well as in the wider Asia were formed in the run of the last 10-15 years. Chinese investments in Central Asia already surpassed Russian investments in the region. China managed to push Russia out of the position of main trade partner of Turkmenistan – the state possessing the largest reserves of natural gas in Central Asia. The Chinese economic-integration project “The Silk Road Economic Belt” neither includes a condition pertaining to any requirements to pursue democratic reforms and respect human rights characteristic of similar Western initiatives, nor imposes Russian-style geopolitical dilemmas on the Central Asian states. In the foreseeable future, China’s involvement in the region’s economy will likely grow.

While suspiciously assessing Russian actions in Crimea, China likely found itself in a position to reap the benefits from the West-Russia polarization itself. China would face a much tougher challenge if Russia and the West would become partners. Because of good relations between the US and Japan, Taiwan and South Korea, the West-Russia partnership would actually isolate China on the landmass as well as in the sea. China may use the international relations polarization trend to consolidate its leadership in Asia. The manifestations of China’s political will to follow this track can seemingly be observed. In a little more than a month since the annexation of Crimea (May 21, 2014), the 4th summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) convened in Shanghai. The scope and the scale of the organization³³ provide for an assumption that its documents reflect the common stance of the Asian states on security and stability in Asia. The new concept of security in Asia which China has proposed to adopt at the summit, may signify the emergence of a new geopolitical space, resistant to the influences of the West-Russia polarization. In the Chinese conception the main emphasis is not on the threats themselves, but rather on the ways to deal with them: safeguarding the security of Asia is the business of Asian countries. Thus, it seems that essentially China has asserted that if someone (concretely Russia) in international relations will follow the logic of geopolitics, China will hold all of neighboring Asia in the zone of its influence. In such a context, the proposal to establish the Organization for Security and Development in Asia

³³ “Asian Security Should Rely on Asians: Xi”, CCTV.Com, 2014.05.21, <http://english.cntv.cn/2014/05/21/ARTI1400650658177308.shtml>, visited on 2014.05.26.

(alternative for the OSCE), put forward by President Nursultan Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan, seemingly favors the idea of China instead of Russia dominating Central Asia.

Conclusion: the Resultant Regional Power Trend

The polarization of international relations implies changes in the national and civil identities of the poles, evolving along the “us” and “them” differentiation axis. It would possibly claim that polarization progressively catalyzes itself, spreading to a wider context and thus becoming the principle of international relations. The choice between the poles from the inner perspective of Central Asia is seemingly based on the consideration of the *modi operandi* of each of them, and forecasting the consequences of the particular choice on future horizons. This task of assessment and choice appears to be very difficult to the states of Central Asia, because it contradicts their multivector foreign policies, which in their very essence is the avoidance of such assessments and choices. From the cultural-informational perspective the polarization factor in Central Asia is successfully neutralized by the states taking ambiguous stances towards the Russian annexation of Crimea. This is achieved by splitting the object of the assessment into aspects with positive and negative valuations.

The suppression of the influence of polarization on the dynamics of military power is hardly within the scope of capabilities of the Central Asian states. In the face of the Ukrainian events, the states of Central Asia reveal domestic prerequisites that can be used against their security if only backed by sufficient political will on the part of Russia. Thus in the Central Asia, Russia is increasingly being perceived as the potential military threat. This seemingly should stipulate that Central Asia must polarize towards the West; however the latter pole remains rather inert in regards to the Ukrainian events, choosing to act by non-military means. Hence, taking the West's side may cause military danger to that Central Asian state, which would decide to do so because in such a case it would become the target of the projection of Russian military might, while the probability of Western military support would be rather slim. Uzbekistan could probably count for slightly higher chances to be backed by the West for its continuous though uneven relations with the USA to this point.

The economic aspect of the impact of the polarization in Central Asia would primarily manifest itself in the backward wave of migration from Russia that is flooding the region. If solutions for the employment of returning

people will not be found in a rather short time, or if alternative markets will not open up for the labor force from Central Asia, the region may face major social convulsions. Moreover, the strife of the West to dissociate from Russian energy supplies may render Russian oil and gas extraction and transportation activities in Central Asia uneconomic.

Along with the intensification of polarization outside the system, Central Asia's ability to resist it will eventually decrease. Thus, one of the plausible outcomes of the regional power dynamics is the formation of a system of regional balance. Such a system may evolve along the Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan axis and would feature Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan as conductors of Russian influence in the region, with Uzbekistan siding with the West. In this situation it is difficult to discern any prerequisites for Turkmenistan to give up neutrality, thus most probably it would continue its current policy without major changes. Given the geostrategic importance of Central Asia, which provides for the transnational character of the contemporary threats, such a system may seem acceptable both for Russia and the West as one of the least negative solutions in regard to each of the opposing poles.

In the geopolitical context developing under the influence of external polarization, China may generate an alternative regional resultant power trend. Economic prerequisites for such a scenario are more than sufficient. The signs are discernible that China has taken the lead in the construction of security and stability systems in Central and the wider Asian region, designed to be resistant to the external polarizing influences. In the current situation, the geopolitical gravitation towards China might be the most secure way for the Central Asian states to react to the West-Russia polarizing influence both economically and militarily. Moreover, China's geopolitical space would favor the further development of the identities of the Central Asian societies, which are significantly based on the notions of the Silk Road and the multivector foreign policies of the regional states, reflecting and supporting their national identities.

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