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Russia and China in Central Asia

Russia followed China in becoming a part of the Central Asian geo-political reality, but lagging behind the Middle Kingdom almost one hundred years. Unlike Russia, China was not a newcomer in the region, as historically Chinese Empires always considered Central Asia to be vital to their international security. During the rule of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) China undertook another attempt to put under control the vast region of the Eastern Turkistan and by the middle of the 17th century this drive to the East was more or less accomplished. Only in the middle of the 19th century the Russian Empire following the logic of imperial expansion moved in to Western Turkistan. In several decades this geopolitically important region was incorporated in the Empire. The treaty of Saint-Petersburg (1881) established the new border between the two countries and in the aftermath in 1884 Xinjiang was formally proclaimed the new province of Chinese Empire.

The 19th century Russia was an empire on the rise, while China was a great power in decline, but Russia was more interested in the establishment of a secure border with the neighbour (longest in the world), then in its total disintegration. It did not mean somehow that Russia did not utilize Chinese weakness for its own advantage. Obviously it did, if one takes in to consideration the way the borders between the two countries were demarcated and privileges obtained by the Russian Government in North-East China region of Manchuria. Somehow during the Muslim's revolt in the Chinese part of Turkistan in 1860s Russia refrained from giving support to the insurgents¹.

One of the most important reasons of not seeking the collapse of the Chinese Empire, including its Western frontier was the "invisible third," who was quite identifiable, in fact, and close to Chinese and Russia's southern borders. In the middle of the 19th century the British Empire was continuing its eastward expansion with

¹ P. CHUVIN, R. L'ETOLLE, S. PEYROUSE, *Histoire de l'Asie centrale contemporaine*, Paris, Fayard, 2008, p. 93.

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Abstract

This paper argues that cooperation between Russia and China in Central Asia is one of the important aspects of their bilateral relations. The initial motivation for this cooperation was limitation of the Western influence in the region, primarily of the USA. Somehow, Russian-Chinese interaction in Central Asia is not limited to opposition to the "third party" and includes such important aspects as maintenance of regional security and equilibrium of interests in different spheres of economic ties. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) became a useful platform in monitoring of these diverse interests, though declarations sometimes prevail over practical deeds. The forthcoming withdrawal of the Coalition troops from Afghanistan will increase the responsibility of the SCO in terms of the international security in "Broad Central Asia."

KEY WORDS: Central Asia, strategic partnership, international security, economic cooperation, "Big Game", SCO

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“opium wars” against China (1840-1842; 1856-1860) and coming in to close proximity with Russia's newly established Central Asian frontier, especially after Britain's attempt to conquer Afghanistan. England's geo-political intrigues in Turkistan (“The Great Game”) were the real nightmare for both Chinese and Russian diplomacy in the second part of the 19th century. Only after the 1907 treaty on the spheres of influence in Central Asia was signed between Russia and Britain the “Great Game” came to an end².

In 1904 English geographer Halford Mackinder published a famous article, which laid foundation for geo-political approach to international politics. In this publication and in his later works he specifically stressed the geo-political importance of the region of Central Asia from the point of view of global hegemony. He also predicted that in the 20th century China could put entire Turkistan under its control and that could possibly lead to the conquest of Russia. In the 20th century this prediction never materialized and, though the histories of the two countries saw drastic changes and new fundamental challenges, they managed more or less to secure their geographical boundaries in Central Asia.

Relations between Chinese Republic (1912) and Soviet Russia (1917) were characterized by Russia's involvement in China's domestic policy, as it actively supported the communist movement in this country, suffered military confrontation (the 1929 border conflict over China-Eastern Railway) and evolved it to military-political alliance during the Second World War. On the eve and during the war Soviet Russia established its control over Xinjiang but again refrained from the annexation of the Chinese territory³. On the other hand, the Soviet Union gave full support to the independence of the Outer Mongolia, which led to significant territorial losses by China. Relations between the USSR and the People's Republic of China (1949) suffered ups and downs as well: from ideological brotherhood and military-political alliance in 1950s to military confrontation in 1970-1980s and attempts of normalization of bilateral relations on the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Priorities of Foreign Policy of Russia and China after the “Cold War”

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, global and Central Asia's regional geo-political realities changed drastically. The Russian Federation (1991) was only half of the former Soviet Union both in terms of its geographical, human and economical resources. As a result of these perturbations the border line between Russia and China shrunk almost two thousand kilometers, China received five new neighbours, independent states of the former Soviet Middle Asia – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan and had to deal with the new border frontiers issue.

Among other consequences, the emergence of the new independent Russian state out of debris of the Soviet Empire brought the emergency of formulating the foreign policy priorities of this new country. Being initially a Eurasian great power, Russia after the fall of USSR quite paradoxically became more Asian and less European due to secession of its former European parts, but was still geographically the biggest country in the world, rich with diverse natural resources, highly educated population and military-industrial complex second only to the USA.

The last two decades of the history of reforms in Russia can be seen through the prism of search of identity which manifested itself in the debate between Russia's Westernizers (*Zapadniki*) and partisans of the unique Russian identity – Eurasianists (*Evrasiitsi*). Unlike their opponents, the supporters of the last school of thought and political trend associated with it insisted that Russian's are not Europeans, Russia had to find its own path towards modernity and reject basic values of the Western

² J. PIATIGORSKY - J. SAPIR (eds), *Le Grand Jeu 19e siècle. Les enjeux geopolitique de l'Asie centrale*, Paris, Editions Autrement, 2008, p. 15.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 73.

civilization⁴. In terms of foreign policy, this debate between Westernizers and Eurasianists focused on the relations between Russia and the countries of the West, the USA and the EU.

I would rather argue that to a larger degree Russian foreign policy during the last two decades was the application of this debate to international relations and evolved according to a cyclical pattern which included three stages of the cycle: pro-Western, multi-dimensional and anti-Western. During the first decade of the existence of new Russia under President El'tsin there were three elements of this cyclical change, which started as an extremely pro-Western course in early 1990s and resulted by the end of 1990s in an attempt to initiate triangle Moscow-Beijing-Dehli alliance in order to limit Washington's unilateralism under the slogan of the "multi-polar world". In Moscow's interpretation, the West tried to utilize for its own advantage Russia's weakness taking a decision on the NATO eastward expansion (1994) and ignoring Russia's interests and position regarding important international issues (Kosovo crisis of 1999).

During Putin's term one can also identify a similar mode of development: from enthusiastic support of the "struggle against terrorism" after the events of "September the 11th" to the souring of Russian-Western relations in the middle of the first decade of the 21st century. From Russia's point of view, the "tulip revolutions" in some of the former Soviet Union republics were the result of the scheming of the West against Russia's interests in its "near abroad" (*blizhnee zarubezhie*). The final accord of this anti-Western trend in Russian foreign policy was 2007 Putin's Munich speech which was delivered almost in the "cold war" spirit. The "Reset" in Russian-American relations during the Russian President Medvedev and the US President Obama administrations was only partially successful and bilateral ties were still characterized by obvious lack of trust. Generally speaking, Medvedev's foreign policy was the continuation of Putin's course, which was not surprising as Putin continued to be the most influential politician in Russia and senior member of Medvedev-Putin "duumvirate". Putin's returning to power in 2012 makes one to expect that the "anti-Western" trend will prevail, the possibility of rapprochement with the Western partners will be unlikely and the entire course of Russia's foreign policy will continue to shift in Eastern direction.

It is worth to note that, despite the changing priorities of Russian foreign policy, one of them stayed intact – Russia's "near-abroad", the former Soviet Republics which joined the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was proclaimed the sphere of vital interests of Russia⁵. At the beginning of 1990s and to a larger degree up to now it was a mere declaration of intents on the part of Russia as it was short of resources to substantiate its claim, which was in fact rejected by the USA and Europe. In fact, in 1990s, as some scholars argued, the new edition of the "Great Game" was started again, but with different players – the West was represented now by the USA and the EU⁶. This factor became one of the important reasons of Moscow's acceptance of China's active involvement in Central Asian affairs and, on the other hand, strengthened China's intention to be a part of them⁷.

China's home and international situation was quite different by the end of the 20th century. If Russia seemed to be a country in decline burdened by a deep economic crisis and split by unresolved issues of historical-cultural identity, China was obviously on the rise. It demonstrated its unique eco-

⁴ M.R. FREIRE - C. AMADO MENDES, *Realpolitik Dynamics and Image Construction in the Russia-China Relationship: Forging a Strategic Partnership?* in «Journal of Current Chinese Affairs», no. 2, 2009, p. 31.

⁵ After the fall of the USSR the three concepts of the foreign policy were adopted: in 1992, 2000 and 2008. In all these documents the list of regional priorities of Russia's foreign policy is started with the CIS. In the "The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation" adopted on 12 July 2008 one can find the following statement: «Development of bilateral and multilateral cooperation with the CIS member states constitutes a priority area of Russian foreign policy». <http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/ns-osndoc.nf/e2f289bea62097f9c325787a0034c255/cef95560654d4ca5c3257>.

⁶ See M.R. FREIRE - R. KANET, *Key Players and Regional Dynamics in Eurasia: The Return of the "Great Game"*, Haundmills, UK, Palgrave Mcmillan, 2010.

⁷ T. KELLNER, *L'Occident de la Chine. Peking et la nouvelle Asie centrale (1991-2001)*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2008, p. 241.

conomic development and was quite stable politically as the Chinese Communist Party left behind the theory and practice of “class war” and accepted the unifying idea of Chinese nationalism⁸. At the beginning of the 21st century the Chinese leadership seemed to be leaving behind one of Deng Xiaoping’s major legacies, a pro-American foreign policy orientation in order to facilitate economic development, and demanded that their country should stand up to Washington more directly⁹.

Some scholars argue that the new turning point in Chinese foreign policy became apparent between 2004-2006 and represented among others such features as the pursuit of equal cooperation with the USA, efforts to reshape the orders of different regions of the world and a rising tendency of soft-balancing in great power relations, which was represented by a deepening strategic partnership with Russia including the region of Central Asia¹⁰. Anyhow, zigzags of Russian foreign policy, growing nationalism in China and its intention to position itself as one of the major centres of global international relations did not prevent growing cooperation between the two close neighbours. Bilateral relations experienced a great improvement after the fall of the USSR: from final normalization in early 1990s to “strategic partnership” proclaimed in 1996 and finally to the Russian-Chinese treaty of 2001, which laid a new foundation for ties between the two countries. Last but not least, by the end of the first decade of the new century the two neighbouring states managed to solve the border issue, which had overshadowed their interaction for a century and a half¹¹.

Russia and China’s Interests in Central Asia: Strategic Partnership and Tactical Disagreements

After the fall of the USSR, Russia’s policy in Central Asia was based on the intention to safeguard the close relationship with the former members of the Soviet Union, to secure its leading role in the region and to protect Russia’s “near abroad” in terms of international security. Somehow, in early 1990s Russian leadership was preoccupied with the task of establishing a strategic partnership with the West, primarily with America, while the country’s economic resources were limited due to deep economic crisis that cost Russia almost 50% of the former GDP. The situation in the new independent Central Asian states was quite far from being desirable as well. They were in a state of catastrophic recession, embarrassed by the decision to liquidate the Soviet Union which was undertaken without their concern by Russia, Ukraine and Belorussia, and the policy of unconditional alienation with the West conducted by the new Russian government.

The reaction of the ruling elites of the newly independent states of the region to the changed international environment was different: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan looked for closer ties with the Russian Federation, while Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan preferred to distance themselves from Russia under the slogans of “decolonization”¹². Meanwhile, Russia’s concerns regarding international security situation in the region were not groundless as in the neighbouring Afghanistan pro-Moscow regime fell and finally hostile Taliban government came to power. The most dangerous current of

⁸ T. SAICH, *Governance and Politics of China*, New York, Palgrave, 2001, p. 73.

⁹ W. TOW - R. RIGBY, *China’s Pragmatic Security Policy: the Middle Power Factor*, in «The China Journal», no. 65, January 2011, p. 160.

¹⁰ Z. BAOHUI, *Chinese Foreign Policy in Transition: Trends and Implications*, in «Journal of Current Chinese Affairs», no. 2, 2010, p. 41.

¹¹ There are quite different points of view on nature of Russian-Chinese relations. While some Russian scholars are overoptimistic, some of the Western observers characterize them as “forging” strategic partnership in order to have an instrument to influence position of the West (M.R. FREIRE – C. AMADO MANDES, op. cit, p. 33). Others, correctly emphasized that for both countries their relationship is a secondary one to that with the USA (T. SAICH, op. cit, p. 279). Somehow, the fact that two states depend on economic relations with the West more than on by-lateral economic ties can not compromise the fact that in terms of global and regional politics they “strategically” need positive cooperation with each other and do in fact cooperate despite existing differences of opinion.

¹² P. CHUVIN - R. L’ETTOLLE - S. PEYROUSE, *Histoire de l’Asie centrale contemporaine...*, cit., p. 182.

events, in Moscow's view, was the situation in Tajikistan where Islamic fundamentalists challenged the secular government in the course of the civil war. The situation in Central Asia experienced drastic changes again in the aftermath of the USA-initiated and NATO-led intervention in Afghanistan which resulted in the fall of the Taliban government but failed to bring peace and stability to this country.

It is worth to note, that in early 1990s Russia was not sure of the real intentions of China in Central Asia. Russia's self-perception at that time was that of a Western-type democracy in formation, while China was looked upon as a communist country ideologically alien, unpredictable and unreliable. Only in the mid 1990s, as I argued earlier Moscow started to reconsider relations with China as a counter-balance to the Western growing influence in Central Asia¹³.

Russia's policy in the region was based on the intention to secure its leading role through the net of international organizations of security and economic cooperation. Among them the leading role belongs to the CIS and to the Collective Security Treaty Organization - CSTO (Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan). It is worth to note that Uzbekistan several times changed its attitude to CSTO, while Turkmenistan from the beginning distanced itself from its activity. In order to reach a deeper economic integration, Russia - with the support of Kazakhstan - initiated in 2010 the establishment of the Custom's Union (CU), which was joined by Belarus. On this foundation Russia is determined to build in the future the "common market," or the "joint economic space" including the members of the CIS. The step in this direction was undertaken in 2001 when the Eurasian Economic Community (EEC) was initiated with the participation of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Armenia, and with Moldavia and Ukraine having observer status. In October 2011 the current Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that his objective was to transform the EEC into an Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) by 2015. This will be hardly achievable, bearing in mind diverse and sometimes contradictory interests among the members of the EEC.

Only in the first decade of the 21st century, due to a certain economic stabilization in Russia and the obvious threat of losing competition with the EU and China in the region, the Russian Government decided to pay closer attention to strengthening economic cooperation with the Central Asian states. Along with expanding bilateral economic ties in 2007 the "Concept of international Economic Development" was passed by the Russian Government, according to which during 2008-2011 Russia spent almost US\$500 mn per year on boosting economic cooperation with its partners mainly in Central Asia¹⁴. Besides, Russia is in fact subsidizing Central Asian economies in an indirect way, as more than 3 million "season labourers" are looking for work in Russia every year. In 2011 Uzbekistan labourers banking money transfers to their country soared 150% to US\$4.3 bln, Tajikistan's rose 36% to US\$3 bln, Kyrgyzstan workers transferred US\$1.6 bln and that made 43% more to compare with previous year. Money transfers from Russia amount approximately to 50% of the GDP of Tajikistan. While Turkmenistan was lagging behind only with US\$34 mn mainly due to emigration policy of this country¹⁵.

Unlike Russia, since yearly 1990s China was pursuing mainly economic goals, first of all of getting access to rich energy and mineral resources in the region. By the middle of the first decade of the 21st century total amount of economic interaction between China and the Central Asian countries

¹³ Among an influential part of Russia's expert community (especially in the Institute of Far-Eastern Affairs, Russian Academy of Sciences) alarmist theories of the new edition of the "Great Game" are quite popular. They reflect certain points of view among the political establishment which blamed the USA, EU, Japan and NATO of "playing geopolitical games" in Central Asia. See Y. MOROZOV, *The World Crisis and the Geopolitical Situation in the Central Asian Region: Topical Problems of the Development Strategy of the SCO in the 21st Century*, in «Far Eastern Affairs», vol. 37, no. 3, 2009, p. 134.

¹⁴ D.A. BRICHEVSKII, *Perspektivi razvitiya povestki dnya SHOS (On the perspectives of Development of the SCO Agenda*, in A.V. LUKIN (ed), *Strategiya Rossii v Tsentral'noi Azii i SHOS (Russia's Strategy in Central Asia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization)*, Moscow, MGIMO-Universitet, 2012, p. 169.

¹⁵ *Central Asian Laborers Sending Home More Remittances in 2011*, in «Turkmenistan Newswire», 12 April 2012.

probably left Russia behind¹⁶. Although trade relations between the PRC (People's Republic of China) and the countries of the region make only 0.2-0.3% of the total external trade of China it is considered to be a very important and promising direction of economic expansion. The Republic of Kazakhstan remains the main priority and China's trade turnover with this country makes almost 80% of all other countries of the region, approximately almost US\$15 bln in 2008. By the end of 2008 China controlled 20% of the oil industry of Kazakhstan and managed to win 49% of shares in MangistauMunaiGaz (MMG), Kazakhstan's state oil producer, while Russia's GazProm-Oil company which was also a failed contender¹⁷.

The energy relations between China and Turkmenistan have been expanding recently as the new gas pipeline Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan-China was commissioned at the end of 2009 with total trade relations expanding rapidly and exceeding US\$0.5 bln. China accounts over 90% of foreign trade turnover of Kyrgyzstan, while imports from China exceed Kyrgyz' exports to China over 30 times. China's trade relations with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan look more modest with bilateral trade turnover making US\$1 bln and US\$0.5 bln respectively. China's total assimilated investments in regional economies according to different calculations may reach about US\$15 bln¹⁸.

Obviously Russia is annoyed by China's growing economic expansion in the Central Asian region. Especially irritating are China's successful attempts to broaden energy cooperation with hydrocarbon resources rich Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as Russia would prefer to put under its own control the pipelines system crossing the region and inherited from the Soviet Union. On the other hand, China is disappointed that Russia does not show inclination to invite the PRC to participate in deepening economic integration plans like EEU. China would eagerly take part in the regional "free trade zone", or "common market" as it would be advantageous to its much stronger and fast developing economy. Russia's position is based on the priority of cooperation in certain projects in the spheres of energy and mineral resources, infrastructure, transport, communications, new technologies and nuclear power, while trying to slow down the deepening of economic integration with China. The above mentioned "differences of opinion": Russia's stress on security issues and China's call for deep economic integration can be identified in the activity of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Russia, China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

There is a broad range of opinions about the objectives that led to the establishment of the SCO: real intentions of the "senior" members, motivations of the "junior" participants and the impact of the SCO on regional and international politics. The most widely spread explanation to why Russia "permitted" China to be closely involved in its Central Asian "backyard", as I argued before, was the search for a counter-balance to the growing involvement of the West, primarily the USA, in the regional affairs. Still there were other factors that stimulated Russia, China and Central Asia to cooperate. China was obviously looking for markets and natural resources, Russia was anxious to regain super-power status in global politics and to strengthen its leadership among CIS countries. In the meantime the Central Asian leaders were following the logic of economic and political survival both domestically and internationally; in this sense, the interaction both with Russia and China, which do not care much about the nature of political regimes in their partner-states, could serve as a guarantee of their existence.

¹⁶ P. CHUVIN - R. L'ETTOLE - S. PEYROUSE, *Histoire de l'Asie centrale contemporaine...*, cit., p. 279.

¹⁷ E. MICHAILOV, *U straha glaza veliki (There is no need to be scared)*, in «Gazeta.kz», <http://articles.gazeta.kz/art.asp?aid=140489>.

¹⁸ S. LUZYANIN, *China and Its "Close Surroundings": Regional and Bilateral Relations*, in «Far Eastern Affairs», vol. 38, no. 3, 2010, p. 25.

It is worth to note that a certain part of the expert community in Russia denies the positive role of the SCO and insists that it is a mere instrument of China's expansion in Central Asia at Russia's expense. Some other scholars are not against the idea, but are convinced in the wrong direction of development of the SCO, especially about its projected enlargement. Unlike proponents of the conservative Eurasian approach, Russian liberal scholarship which is obviously in minority nowadays would like to see growing cooperation between the SCO and blocks and political structures of the West including the NATO, the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), etc. Enthusiastic supporters of the SCO in Russia, on the contrary, present it as a new pattern of international organization based on equality between "big" and "small" members, they call for strengthening the cooperation both in the spheres of sub-regional and regional security and for a gradual enlargement of the SCO in accordance with the new challenges in global politics¹⁹.

Chinese experts who mainly do not doubt that participation of their country in the SCO meets PRC national interests, are discussing the sensitive aspects of Russian-Chinese relations under the format of the SCO. Some of them argue that Russia should be accepted as a politically leading force, while China must concentrate more on the economic cooperation issues. In other words, it is better for China to keep a political "low profile" in order not to compromise the productivity of the organization²⁰. Some other Chinese experts argue that traditional Russian influence in the region represents a challenge for China, as Central Asian states look for Russia's leadership and protection, while China is viewed with a degree of suspicion. Therefore, as Zhao Huasheng (a well known Chinese expert on Central Asian affairs) suggests, China must gradually achieve an equal standing with Russia in regional affairs²¹.

The Shanghai Five group (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) was formed in 1996 with the purpose to solve boundary issues that were inherited from the Soviet Union period. Shortly after, the participants agreed to broaden the scope of their joint efforts and to include actions against terrorist activity, separatism and drugs trafficking. In 2001, after Uzbekistan decided to participate, the group was renamed and since that time is known as the SCO. According to its official documents, SCO is based on mutual trust and benefits, equality, respect for cultural and political diversity and does not constitute a military political alliance directed against any third party²².

The leaders of states and other high-ranking governmental officials of the SCO countries regularly meet with each other, while the every day activity is supervised by the Secretariat based in Beijing and the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure with the headquarters stationed in Tashkent. During the last decade the SCO established ties with such regional groupings as CIS, CSTO, EEC and other international organizations including the UN. The SCO founded the "Energy Club" which is supposed to be an open working platform not only for the members, but for other countries interested in energy cooperation. Somehow, as informed observers conclude, behind the bureaucratic activity there is no comprehensive strategy neither in Russia, nor in China. What became obvious during the last decade is that Russia would like to see the SCO as an international security structure with anti-Western flavour under its leadership, while China would rather downplay the political dimension in favour of an economic cooperation which facilitates its access to the natural resources in the region²³.

¹⁹ S. LUZYANIN, *SCO: Security Problems and Prospects for Cooperation in Eurasia*, in «Far Eastern Affairs», vol. 39, no. 1, 2011, p. 24.

²⁰ LI JINGJIE, *Kuaru xin shiji di Zhong E guanxi (The New Century Chinese-Russian Relations)*, in «Eluosi, Zhongya, Dong Ou yanjiu», no. 2, 2007.

²¹ ZHAO HUASHEG, *Zhongguo Zhong Ya wailiao di lilun he shijian (Theory and Practice of the Diplomacy of China in Central Asia)*, in «Guoji wenti yanjiu » (International Studies), 2007, no. 4, p. 25.

²² See the Official SCO Website: <http://sectesco.org/EN/>.

²³ A.F. MOCHUL'SKII, *Rossiya i Kitai v Shanhaiskoi organizatsii sotrudnichestva (Russia and China in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization)*, in A.V. LUKIN (ed), *Strategiya Rossii v Tsentral'noi Azii i SHOS...*, cit., p. 111.

Among Russia, China and other members of the SCO exist different points of view regards the enlargement of the organization. In 2006 confidential consensus was reached on moratorium on further enlargement; somehow the situation changed when a group of neighbouring countries expressed, maybe quite unexpectedly for the founders, their interest in participation. Currently, besides six full members, four observer-states (India, Pakistan, Iran, Mongolia) and two dialogue-partner states (Belarus and Sri-Lanka) take part in SCO activities and Afghanistan President Mahmud Karzai is a welcomed guest. Russia, which is the main supporter of enlargement of the SCO, as it would strengthen its international stance, was lobbying full membership of its traditional friend India; China was advocating membership of its old allies in the region Pakistan and Mongolia, while Central Asian countries treated the issue of enlargement quite skeptically. China was also insisting on the invitation of Turkmenistan, which did not express much willingness to join the SCO anyway. Besides, Afghanistan, the USA and Turkey showed their interest in acquiring the observer-state status²⁴.

The issue of participation of Afghanistan in the activities of the SCO as an observer state is not limited to the question of the status of this country among other members per se, but is highly significant because of the probable geo-political changes in the region in the nearest future. More than one hundred thousand Allied contingent troops are scheduled to leave Afghanistan in 2014, this could undermine the shaky stability in the country, make return of the Taliban regime possible and unbalance the entire situation in Central Asia. Needless to say, that for all the SCO members this would be the most frightening scenario. As one Russian expert argued, Russia is not interested in the defeat of the Coalition as it could create new security problem for the region and Russia is not interested in the victory of the West in Afghanistan, because it could strengthen America's influence in "Big Central Asia"²⁵. Somehow, the maintenance of status-quo is unlikely and if so, the members of the SCO on individual, or collective basis will have to deal with the changing situation. It would mean more responsibility in term of maintenance of stability in Afghanistan. In this sense, positive response to Afghanistan's application to "join the party" is equal to readiness to share this responsibility.

In fact, during the last Summit of the SCO in Astana in June 2011, it was China (with the support of other Central Asian states) who, despite Russia's efforts, blocked further discussion on the enlargement of the organization²⁶. The forthcoming Summit of Heads of States will be held in Beijing on 6-7 June 2012 and it is likely that this time Russia could manage to overcome, at least to some extent, China's resistance. Though the recommendations passed by the last Meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the SCO (Beijing, 11 May 2012) are obviously based on compromise between the two parts. The Ministers took the decision, as it was declared, to submit the issue of granting the Islamic republic of Afghanistan SCO observer state status and granting the Republic of Turkey SCO dialogue partner status for consideration by SCO Heads of State Council²⁷. In the eyes of Russian diplomacy, somehow, it was not enough as the Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov emphasized during the meeting that it was time to look at the issue of granting to India and Pakistan full membership more positively as they have submitted their applications quite a long time ago²⁸. The agenda of the enlargement of the SCO will be one of the most discussable topics in future activity of the organization and to a considerable extent it will determine the main directions of its development.

²⁴ Apart from traditionally close ties between Russia and India, the main motivation behind Russia's intention to see India as the full-member is concern over China's growing economic influence in Central Asia. See A.V. LUKIN, *Shos I rossiiskie interesy v Tsentral'noi Azii I Afganistane (SCO and Russia's Interests in Central Asia and Afghanistan)*, in A.V. LUKIN (ed), *Strategiya Rossii v Tsentral'noi Azii i SHOS...*, cit., p. 38.

²⁵ I.A. SAFRANCHUK, *Regional'nii format dlya Afganistana in SHOS (Regional Format for Afghanistan and SCO)*, in A.V. LUKIN (ed), *Strategiya Rossii v Tsentral'noi Azii i SHOS...*, cit., p. 150.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p.46.

²⁷ *Foreign Ministers of SCO Member States Meet in Beijing on 05.11. 2012*, [http:// www.sectsco.org/EN/show.asp?id=328](http://www.sectsco.org/EN/show.asp?id=328).

²⁸ "Vistuplenie Ministra inostrannih del S.V. Lavrova na zasedanii SMID SHOS, Pekin, 11.05. 2012" (Minister of Foreign Affairs S.V. Lavrov's Speech During the Meeting of Foreign Ministers of the SCO, 11.05.2012), <http://www.mid.ru/brp-4.nsf/0/41e3b2198f9c3117442579fb0024882>.

Russian-Chinese relations under the framework of the SCO is the reflection of the diverse, but not necessarily deeply conflicting, interests of both countries in the Central Asian region. Russia's policy is based more on idealistic motivations of return to the former grandeur and world leadership, while China's objectives are more pragmatic. Although activity of the SCO is characterized by a certain gap between projected goals and accomplished deeds, it proved to be quite a useful platform for monitoring the "differences of opinion" in order to keep them in dynamic equilibrium.

Conclusion

During the last two decades, Russian-Chinese relations experienced considerable improvement – from balancing on the brink of military conflict during the years of the "cold war" to proclaimed "strategic partnership" and finally "good-neighbour relations" under the 2001 Treaty. Policies of both countries in Central Asia which is often called Russia's "backyard" and is obviously Chinese rear, reflected their intentions towards each other and the outer world. One of the most important factors that made Russia and China to choose cooperation, was the presence in the region of a third party. Unlike the 19th century's "Great Game", this time it was the USA and to a less extent the EU.

The response to this challenge of the West was the establishment of the SCO, which allows its members to monitor their often quite conflicting interests. While Russia stresses the issues of international security in the region and the importance of joint actions in the international arena, China concentrates on Central Asian markets and natural resources. Unlike Russia, China is less inclined to use the SCO in arguing with the West and prefers politically to keep "low profile". Russia is not happy with them Chinese economic expansion in the region, especially attempts to put under control energy resources and means of its delivery, but prefers not to demonstrate its irritation.

Beijing would prefer to be with Russia on the equal footing politically and is irritated by Russia's unwillingness to invite China as a participant in broader economic integration projects, such as EEU, but chooses not to show its feelings publicly as well. Russia would like to see the SCO as the foundation of the future Eurasian security and economic cooperation block from Europe to Pacific under its leadership, while China is more cautious and tries to slow down this process. Somehow, despite these "differences of opinion" the two parts prefer to concentrate on the common objectives. The new challenge to Central Asia and to the SCO as an international organization is the changing international environment. Forthcoming withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014 of the Coalition forces will undoubtedly aggravate the situation in the region and more responsibility for regional and international security will rest upon the shoulders of the SCO members whoever they are.

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