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# The Strategic Importance of Central Asia: An American View

STEPHEN BLANK

Undoubtedly Central Asia's strategic importance in international affairs is growing. The rivalries among Russia, China, United States, Iran, India, and Pakistan not to mention the ever-changing pattern of relations among local states (five former Soviet republics and Afghanistan) make the region's importance obviously clear. Central Asia's strategic importance for Washington, Moscow, and Beijing varies with each nation's perception of its strategic interests. Washington focuses primarily on Central Asia as an important theater in the war on terrorism. Additionally, it is viewed as a theater where America might counter a revived Russia or China, or a place to blunt any extension of Iranian influence. Moscow and Beijing view the region as a vital locale for defending critical domestic interests. This asymmetry of interest is a major factor in the competition among states for influence in the region.

## *American Interests*

Indeed, US interests derive, first of all, from Central Asia's proximity to Russia and China. American involvement in Central Asia is primarily strategic in nature, i.e., not primarily associated with access to energy or an attempt to democratize the region, as is often alleged:<sup>1</sup>

The United States and the West in general find themselves increasingly dependent on the continued stability and development of the Central Eurasian region. The United States is heavily invested in Afghanistan, and its engagement there and in Central Asian states is a long-term endeavor. The future of

this region has a considerable bearing on the development of the Global War on Terrorism and in general on US security interests in Eurasia; the maintenance of access to airspace and territory in the heart of Asia; the development of alternative sources of energy; and the furthering of freedom and democratic development.<sup>2</sup>

The region's critical role in US foreign policy was explained in June 2004 by Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasia, Lynn Pascoe:

The primary strategic goal of the United States in Central Asia is to see the development of independent, democratic, and stable states, committed to the kind of political and economic reform that is essential to modern societies and on the path to integration and to the world economy. The strategy that we follow is based on simultaneous pursuit of three related goals. The first of these goals is security. Our counterterrorism cooperation bolsters the sovereignty and independence of these states and provides them with the stability needed to undertake the reforms that are in their long-term interest. However, in order for these nations to be truly stable over the long-term and to be fully integrated into the international community, to achieve their potential, they must allow for greater transparency, respect for human rights, and movement toward democratic policy. Finally, the development of Central Asia's economic potential, including its extensive natural resources, requires free market economy reforms and foreign direct investment. This is the only way to improve the well-being of the region's people, diversify world energy sources, and facilitate the movement of these countries into the world economy.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, energy access, though important, is not and should not be the primary driver of US policy. Rather it is merely a means to an end. Opening Central Asian states' access to global markets and at the same time establishing energy companies' reciprocal access will enable regional governments to diversify their customer base and gain access to markets where they can sell their products at prevailing prices. In this sense the driving force behind US policy is a strategy of sustaining an antimonopoly; while the rationale supporting Moscow and Beijing's policies is quintessentially monopo-

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listic in nature.<sup>4</sup> In fact, American officials consistently caution that Central Asia should not become an arena of great power competition with the associated blocs and alliances. It is these processes that reduce opportunities for genuine regional cooperation, actions permitting the free exercise of national sovereignty.<sup>5</sup>

America's policy of defending the independence, integrity, and security of these states serves to extend the vital geostrategic interest of the United States in forestalling the possible rise of an Eurasian empire on either continent. Of all the major rivals for influence in Central Asia, America is the region's foremost champion when it comes to matters of sovereignty and independence; a fact that should foster a natural harmony of interests between America and the various Central Asian states. Undoubtedly, success in restricting the independence of Central Asian governments would likely encourage leaders in Moscow and Beijing to further extend their hegemonic aspirations.

Russia claims that it has no imperialistic intentions in Central Asia.<sup>6</sup> Yet energy producers in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan know that Moscow pays a price for their gas that is far below global market prices, due to its monopoly on gas pipelines. The various nations all know that the only way they might counter Russia's monopoly is to diversify pipeline routes, e.g., directly laying lines to China or Europe. Despite their energy deals with Moscow, all three states are looking to escape from this neo-imperial relationship and to position themselves where they might force Russia to support price increases for their gas and oil. Especially troubling to this triumvirate is the fact that Russia has reneged on a number of its commitments to invest in the local energy industry.<sup>7</sup> But Russia has neither the resources nor intent to permit Uzbekistan, or any Central Asian state, to achieve a point of development where they might compete with it on a global scale. A monopolistic and neo-imperial policy will continue to be the answer from Moscow. Certainly Russia and China have known for some time that a rivalry or competition for influence in Central Asia is a real possibility. Likewise, they view any nonmonopolistic method of developing organized relationships with any of these nations as a threat to their vital interests.<sup>8</sup> It is clear that Russia regards any substantial western presence in Central Asia as a threat, not to be tolerated.

Since 9/11 a second vital interest for the United States has materialized, namely defense of the United States and Europe from Islamic terrorists. Consequently, victory in Afghanistan, i.e., a conclusive routing of the Taliban and the establishment of a secure, viable, and legitimate Afghan government, is a vital American interest which has to be achieved just as much, if not more, than in Iraq. Other important interests for the United States are based on what

might be termed an “open door” or “equal access” policy for American firms seeking energy exploration, refining, and marketing. To the extent that Central Asia’s large energy holdings are monopolized by Russia due mainly to the dearth of pipelines, regional governments are not able to exercise effective economic or foreign policy independence. Therefore, energy access on equal terms with America or other western nations is closely linked to the overarching objective of safeguarding the independence, sovereignty, and prospects for development of these nations and their economies. Again, it is Washington, not Moscow or Beijing, that champions the economic and political freedom of these states.

Not surprisingly, the leitmotif of US energy policy has been focused on fostering the development of multiple pipelines and links to foreign consumers and producers of energy, one recent example including electricity to India.<sup>9</sup> Central Asian energy states recognize that their security and prosperity are inextricably linked to the diversification of pipelines; a goal placing US and Central Asian interests in harmony. Washington has continuously sought the prevention of a Russian energy monopoly related to oil and has received considerable support from other nations in the global oil market. Unfortunately, America has not achieved as much success with regard to the natural gas market. At the same time America has sought to isolate Iran from inroads into Central Asian energy by urging various nations to build pipelines bypassing that country and by placing sanctions against those countries and firms that would trade with Iran.

Examples of pipelines that bypass Iran and Russia are the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, a project the United States has long urged Kazakhstan to join, a project that would see the construction of a pipeline under the Caspian Sea; the proposed Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TAP) line which may even be extended to India; or alternatively a potential pipeline delivering newly discovered Afghan energy resources to the subcontinent. Beyond the scope of pipelines, there has even been an initiative to link Central Asian and South Asian electricity networks.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the United States along with western firms has been relatively successful in gaining access to a number of Kazakhstan’s oil fields.<sup>11</sup> But in the realm of gas resources the West has encountered greater difficulty due mainly to the monopolistic power of the Russian petroleum company Gazprom and Russian control of the pipelines. Finally, Washington has a major interest in promoting domestic policies in the five former Soviet republics and Afghanistan, leading eventually to democratization, open markets, free societies, good governance, and lasting security.

This means that the commonly accepted view that Washington’s strategic objectives are based solely on access to resources and the transformation of Central Asian regimes to democracies is utterly misplaced. This

view is not supported by the actuality of American policy, most notably, the amount of resource invested against those particular objectives. These misconceptions are reminiscent of the systematically propagated canard put forth by losers in the “color” revolutions, including Moscow. Perhaps the best known of these hoaxes was Moscow’s attempt to establish its own candidate in the Ukrainian elections. The charge that the US government, through the Central Intelligence Agency and nongovernmental organizations, is using elections or revolutions to unseat unfriendly governments and that democracy is simply a tool to accomplish those ends, is wholly mendacious. The current Administration has invested neither the rhetoric nor sufficient resources to foster unwanted democratization anywhere in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). As Michael McFaul of Stanford University notes, the Administration’s democratization policy toward Russia has been “anemic.”<sup>12</sup>

While Washington admittedly seeks energy access for US firms on a competitive basis, it knows full well that it cannot completely supplant Russian or Chinese interests in the region. Rather, in keeping with the geopolitical imperative of preventing any imperial revival in Eurasia, America simply wants to prevent Russia or any other foreign power from dominating Central Asian energy markets. Consequently, Washington has championed pipelines like those of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to China and the projected TAP and Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) line to India.

Europe on the other hand is taking an increasing interest in Central Asia for the specific purposes of gaining independent access to various pipelines, permitting the petro-states to sell their products abroad without fear of Russian intervention.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, the economic and political implications of Russian control over Central Asia’s interface with Europe could have serious repercussions for all the parties. As a result of this fear of continuing Russian influence a harmony of interests has developed between America and Europe. This cooperative spirit is especially strong in light of Moscow pushing to establish a gas cartel between the gas-producing states of Central Asia, the Persian Gulf, and its conglomerate, Gazprom.<sup>14</sup>

### ***Russian Interests***

A Russian-led cartel, worse yet the possibility of a joint Iranian-Russian cartel, may have been the underlying premise for President Vladimir Putin’s 2006 proposal to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Iran regarding a gas and oil amalgamation with Russia. Such an undertaking would prevent Central Asian states from selling natural gas on the open market to customers of their choice. Any such agreement would only perpetuate individual

nations' dependence upon Russia, and slow economic expansion.<sup>15</sup> The cartel would facilitate Russia's ability to squeeze European customers for economic, political, and strategic gains at the expense of western interests. Russia has exerted considerable pressure upon Kazakhstan, and similarly Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, to desist supporting the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline or the initiative to construct a pipeline under the Caspian Sea.<sup>16</sup> Kazakhstan or Turkmenistan, or both, may be forced into becoming Russia's "partner" in the development of natural gas.<sup>17</sup>

Such policies often lead, in Russia and other regimes, to the consolidation of authoritarian regimes, governments relying on the income derived from natural resources to maintain power. Indeed, arguably the Putin regime could not have survived if it did not dominate the Central Asian gas and oil sectors.<sup>18</sup> That is why US efforts to open these sectors have tremendous effects in Russia far beyond the directly observable consequences such as the political liberalization of Central Asia. Equally important, Russian domination of Central Asia and maintenance of its neo-imperial policy is truly a vital interest for Moscow because it calls into question the very essence of its domestic form of rule.

Russia has waged a stubborn campaign to prevent Central Asian states from affiliating either with the United States or other western militaries. It seeks exclusive control of the entire Caspian Sea and aspires to be the sole military power in the region. States such as Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan may rely upon the West, especially America, to assist them in developing military capabilities suitable for national defense and protection of assets abroad.<sup>19</sup> Russia has formed the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in an attempt to prevent former members of the Commonwealth of Independent States from aligning with NATO. As part of this effort Moscow demanded a veto power over other CIS members' defense ties with the West. Former Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov stated,

The countries of the region are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization. And [if the countries of the region are] making a decision about hosting new bases on their territory, they should take into account the interests of Russia and coordinate this decision with our country.<sup>20</sup>

In 2003 Ivanov claimed the right to intervene in these countries and recently highlighted Russia's anxiety about any potential political change the nations might wish to make in their constitutions. Undoubtedly, military responses to these challenges are being considered.<sup>21</sup> In 2006 Minister Ivanov again stated that Russia viewed any threats to the constitutional order of CIS regimes as a major threat to Russian security.<sup>22</sup> Presumably, such threats justify Russian military intervention, and Russian force deployments in Central

Asia have been clearly structured to optimize Moscow's capability for power projection in that region. Similarly, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov threatened "disloyal" governments in the CIS with the use of "every conceivable economic pressure tactic."<sup>23</sup>

Another purpose of the CSTO is to create legal-political grounds for permanently stationing Russian forces and bases in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and possibly Uzbekistan; ostensibly to defend these regimes against terrorism.<sup>24</sup> Nikolai Bordyuzha, the CSTO's Secretary-General, has also called on its members to coordinate efforts to counter religious extremism, i.e., give it a license to meddle in their domestic affairs. The CSTO is constantly seeking to augment the scope of its missions in Central Asia, moving from air defense to counterterrorism, and now is discussing peace support operations in order to cement the Russian-dominated security equation there.<sup>25</sup> These policy imperatives are part of a larger pattern of activities that comprise intensified Russian efforts to create more effective trade and defense organizations in the CIS under its auspices, consolidating its hegemonic position.

### ***The Succession Issue***

In short, Russian domination, no matter how attractive it might appear to local governments, is usually disastrous, due mainly to the fact that Russia does not care how these nations govern themselves. This political neglect fosters a situation of neo-colonial dependence that can only lead to disaster. Pressures on these governments from within are likely to result in chaos in the inevitable event of a succession scenario. Central Asian and foreign observers have expressed concern regarding what might happen in cases where the leadership retains its power because of its relationship with Moscow. Many analysts have been warning for several years that the succession in Turkmenistan or other Central Asian states might even lead to violence.<sup>26</sup>

For example, when Turkmenistan's dictator, Saparmyrat Niyazov, suddenly died in December 2006, published accounts from Central Asia of local reactions to the news reflected a balance between hope for improved conditions and fear of internal instability intensified by external influences.<sup>27</sup> Shokirjon Hakimov, the leader of the opposition Social Democratic Party of Tajikistan, stated, "Undoubtedly, if the forthcoming political activities in Turkmenistan concerning the designation of the country's leader take place in a civilized manner, then they will certainly have a positive influence on the development of pluralism in the region."<sup>28</sup> The statement of Kazakhstan's Foreign Minister, Kasymzhomart Tokayev, revealed both his government's hopes and its apprehensions when he said that his government has an interest in Turkmenistan's stability. Therefore "Kazakhstan is not going to get involved in any wars for Turkmenistan."<sup>29</sup>

The risks were clear even before Niyazov's death. Indeed, immediately following his death, a number of Central Asian politicians and some, though not the majority, of analysts in Central Asia and Russia expressed fear concerning an eruption of instability in Turkmenistan.<sup>30</sup> The caution expressed by foreign analysts and implicitly conceded by the post-Niyazov regime was not just that Turkmenistan might undergo civil unrest, but that violence could spread to neighboring states. Moreover, a succession struggle in one state could provide lessons for neighboring countries. Although Niyazov's successor, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, consolidated power by decisive measures, the precedent of tough political battles atop a successor regime has raised at least some question as to the stability of these states. Moscow and Beijing clearly were disturbed by their inability to intervene on behalf of then-President Askar Akayev or to promote their own interests in the 2005 Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan's ongoing instability has led China to publicly express concern regarding local trends.<sup>31</sup> But Russian worries go even farther. There are signs that Russian leaders may possibly be considering a preemptive intervention, based on their belief it might be required to rescue such states from collapse. According to area specialist Iliyas Sarsembaev,

Some Russian military analysts consider that if Kyrgyzstan were overtaken by a complete political collapse, Russia and Kazakhstan could impose some kind of protectorate until stability could be reestablished and new elections held. In this scenario, the United States would allow Moscow to take action in Kyrgyzstan, because most of its own resources would already be mobilized in Iraq and Afghanistan—and probably in Iran and Syria. Russian help would then be welcomed and much preferred to that of China. Indeed, if Russia did not dare to put itself forward as a stabilizing force, China might use Uyghur separatism.<sup>32</sup>

Kyrgyzstan is not the only state in Central Asia where Russia feels it or someone else might have to intervene. The Russo-Uzbek agreement of December 2006 gives Russia limited access to the Navoi airfield. But more importantly, it is an indicator that Tashkent and Moscow's anxieties do not simply revolve around the threat of terrorist attacks. The agreement reveals that the degree of amity between Moscow and Tashkent may not be as great as is commonly believed. Since 2005 there has been increased speculation that Russia was seeking a base in Uzbekistan, in particular Karshi Khanabad, a base the US Air Force vacated in 2005. The November 2005 treaty between Russia and Uzbekistan contains language enabling Moscow, if it chooses, to exercise a military option in aiding Uzbekistan's government. This treaty language has fueled speculation that Moscow is seeking permanent access to

Karshi Khanabad. Russia, not wanting to appear as an imperialistic power, denied that there were discussions regarding any bases.<sup>33</sup>

Most probably Russia desires more access to the base because Uzbekistan will more than likely become the regional headquarters for a unified air defense system. This regional system will become a component of the CIS Unified Air Defense incorporating preexisting facilities and structures. To some degree this deal represents what the Russian military analyst Vladimir Mukhin calls a “reanimation” of the Soviet defense structure. Meanwhile Uzbek Su-27 and MiG-29 aircraft will be posted there as part of a regular peacetime deployment. Mukhin also opined that Moscow wanted the base because one of Russia’s primary interests in Uzbekistan is uranium production and enrichment, now being done at the Navoi Mining and Smelting facility close by. Allegedly this new defensive capability will help protect those works from air attacks and international terrorism.<sup>34</sup>

But it is more likely that both Moscow and Tashkent had other enemies in mind. It is rather far-fetched to believe that Afghan-based terrorists might have the capability to launch air strikes into Central Asia. Neither Moscow nor Tashkent has rushed to send forces to Afghanistan to counter any Taliban threat. Evidently their objectives are both nearer and more distant than Afghanistan. Access to an air base in Navoi provides Russia with the capability to project air and air defense assets into Central Asia in response to any possible domestic insurgency or uprising. Moscow and Beijing showed considerable anxiety regarding their inability to intervene in Kyrgyzstan during the 2005 Tulip Revolution; a fact resulting in their conscious effort to achieve a power projection capability in the region. The Navoi air base is part of Russia’s larger effort to encompass all of Central Asia under a single defense organization whose objectives are more than likely counterrevolutionary and antidemocratic.

Russia’s second objective in the region relates to its fear of American air strikes originating from the south of Russia, Central Asia, or possibly, the Indian Ocean. The Russian military clearly regards the United States and NATO’s forces as its primary enemy. Since 1991 much of Russia’s air defense and early warning system has deteriorated to the point where its military is actually “blind” to potential attacks. This situation cannot be permitted to continue, and “reanimating” the old Soviet air defense system while excluding US forces from Central Asia are key elements in this revitalization effort. Russia apparently is building an integrated land, sea, and air force throughout the Caspian basin, and a unified air defense is critical to the protection of those forces.<sup>35</sup>

Therefore, for Russia, acquiring access to Navoi is a key, though not critical, step toward realizing several diverse objectives. Russia is steadily

moving to implement a comprehensive economic-political-military strategy in Central Asia emphasizing the safeguarding of the internal status quo against any possible foreign intrusion. To a certain degree it is joined by China, which has its own rationale for recognizing the growing importance of Central Asia.

### *Chinese Interests*

The growing importance of Central Asia in Chinese foreign policy is abundantly clear for a number of reasons. One is the many security threats that Chinese observers fear. Most important, however, is the fact that Central Asia's proximity to China leads Beijing to view Central Asian policy and security as a projection of its internal security agenda.<sup>36</sup> This makes stability in Central Asia as vital for China as it is for Russia. Chinese analysts tend to believe these threats can be overcome by well-thought actions and policies on China's part.<sup>37</sup> In this context such well-thought actions mean providing opportunities for China's domestic economic growth and the constriction of western military and political influence.<sup>38</sup> Chinese analysts believe such constriction is essential if China is to successfully counter acts by the Muslim minority among Xinjiang's Uyghur population. Chinese leaders believe these movements cannot succeed without foreign assistance.<sup>39</sup>

The traditional objectives that the Chinese state has pursued over the centuries still remain and they even now constitute the ends to which all the efforts relating to economic growth and internal transformation are directed. These objectives include assuring domestic order and social well-being [i.e., the integrity of both empire and of its present regime]; maintaining an adequate defense against threats to the heartland; increasing the level of influence and control over the periphery with an eye to warding off the threats that may eventually menace the political regime; and restoring China to regional preeminence while attaining the respect of its peers as a true great power marked by high levels of economic and technological development.<sup>40</sup>

China's Central Asian policies reflect many of the considerations that drive its foreign policy, a number of which are derived from perceptions of threats to domestic security. As with its foreign policy, a central motive is the need to forestall any possible threat to China's internal stability and integrity originating from the borderlands.<sup>41</sup> This is especially true in the case with Xinjiang, an object of Russian and Soviet imperialism until the end of the Sino-Soviet rift. Since unrest in Xinjiang and Tibet is not far behind Taiwan as potential threats to China's stability, its foreign policy is designed to forestall such actions and create conditions for continuing development.

According to a number of Chinese analysts, despite the indigenous nature of China's intractable security challenges, especially in Central Asia, Chinese leaders believe that America is contributing to unrest even in cases where its influence may be actually constraining some challenges.<sup>42</sup> China's Central Asian policy flows from the imperative to maintain stability in Xinjiang, forestalling any insurrection or insurgency, while preserving the stability of the current regime from foreign influences. Those influences may be twofold: ethnic or religious movements emanating from over the border into Central or South Asia (Pakistani-based Islamism), or other foreign military, political, and ideological influences. Indeed, the sense of a continuing threat in the region is still officially traceable to America's power and influence.<sup>43</sup> In 1996 the State Council issued a statement,

As long as China remains to be a socialist country with the Communist Party in power and as long as China does not adopt the American political system, no matter how much the Chinese economy develops, no matter how much democracy in politics, and how much improvement of human rights (the U.S.) will [be] just looking but not seeing and listening but not hearing. [The U.S. is just] using [the] human rights [issue].<sup>44</sup>

This outlook explains much of China's desire to protect Xinjiang from greater western engagement and cultural penetration, as well as from the more classic threats of internal unrest and foreign military intervention. China's presentation of its new security concept contains a much broader definition of its internal sovereignty and external security policies, all aimed at dethroning any regnant US system of power, replete with its alliances and ideological or intellectual underpinnings. A critical component of this new concept is to deny any legitimacy or opportunity for US interference in what China terms its internal affairs—Taiwan, Xinjiang, and Tibet—and to minimize the American presence in Central Asia. Beijing cannot permit any of these issues to become internationalized and is constantly attempting to blunt such initiatives. For example, in its 2003 White Paper on Xinjiang China epitomizes its defensiveness about the province.<sup>45</sup> Specifically, the fear of any hint of revolution or reform. As authors Dong Xiaoyang and Su Chang write:

If the Color Revolution proceeds in other Central Asian countries, which is very likely at present, then more elections will be seen in Central Asia, supported by the opposing forces and other forces, and the revolution may well come about through violence or riots. At least from present perspectives, the violent mode is hard to avoid.<sup>46</sup>

Because such upheavals may lead to other security threats, beginning in 2005 China and Russia supported the repudiation of any American democratizing efforts. Both governments initiated and continue to pressure Kyrgyzstan to eject America from its base at Manas, 200 miles from China's border.<sup>47</sup>

Color revolutions, or the possibility of any popular uprising, present China with immense problems, primarily due to the fact that it lacks the means to manage such a crisis without harming other foreign policy objectives. The following analysis by Huasheng Zhao is particularly revealing.

If another colored revolution were to occur in Central Asia, it would confront China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) with a difficult dilemma. China as a great power has important strategic interests in Central Asia, yet could not effectively intervene in the event of social and political turmoil. The same would be true of the SCO. Although the SCO makes security a principal concern, it would not intervene in the internal affairs of states in the region. If any dangerous situation were to arise, the SCO would confront a difficult choice. If it did not intervene, Central Asia could be destabilized, with a negative impact on the SCO, its authority, and its prestige. After the Osh disorders in Kyrgyzstan (where the Tulip Revolution began), and the Andizhan incident, some argued that, since the SCO could not guarantee security, it could not be regarded as an important regional organization. If, however, the SCO were to intervene, it would violate its basic principles and become embroiled in the political crisis. This is the challenge that the colored revolutions pose for China and the SCO; whatever their choice, it is fraught with negative consequences.<sup>48</sup>

It is easy to see why China is concerned about Kyrgyzstan's instability while at the same time seeking to enhance its multilateral and bilateral connections in Central Asia through energy initiatives and military relations. Success in these areas will expand its repertoire for dealing with potential security challenges throughout Central Asia.<sup>49</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

For China and Russia the urgency of countering what they regard as a systematic US challenge to their interests in Central Asia has served to draw them together, in spite of their many long-standing rivalries. It has also led to the creation of international organizations and structures representing an alternative model. These organizations take the form of the CSTO, Russian-proposed groups such as the so-called Caspian Force, and the SCO.<sup>50</sup> The SCO exemplifies this new strategy and serves as a model for future organizations in Asia.<sup>51</sup> Beijing also hopes to reshape its Asian security agenda in an

effort to attenuate the US alliance system, replacing it with one that is ideologically and politically more congenial to Beijing's desire for unfettered sovereignty and freedom of movement in world affairs.

Step one for the SCO was to build the group, the first multilateral group China had started on its own. Step two: expand it to discussions of trade, economics, and energy. Step three: begin discussions on more substantive security partnerships. The SCO has gone so far as to conduct its own joint military maneuvers, in China's Xinjiang Autonomous Region. This approach of deepening regional multi-level ties will likely be repeated in other forums, such as the ASEAN+3 grouping (Association of Southeast Asian Nations plus Japan, Korea, and China).<sup>52</sup>

But even beyond this approach, the astute student of global affairs can discern "a world without the west" that is evolving. This new world gives every promise of presenting an alternative international order with its own economic flow of peoples and goods based on manufacturing and energy requirements, an ideology the Russians call "sovereign democracy." This new ideology is characterized by emphasis on state sovereignty, a structure of military alliances, and a communications system based on officially controlled media.<sup>53</sup>

The world may be witnessing a period of growing importance for Central Asia. It is a region where competing systems for international order are fully engaged. It may well be the case that what transpires in Central Asia, i.e., competition between international powers, will shape the future order of the world. One need not engage in far-reaching geopolitical speculation regarding the future of Central Asia to understand it already is a political battleground of growing importance. A battleground in which future geopolitical destinies may well be prefigured. This is more than sufficient reason to focus America's policies and interests on a region that not long ago was considered a backwater.

#### NOTES

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