

#15
April 2011

Strategic Vacuum in Central Asia—a Case for European Engagement?

By Tomasz Sikorski

An interesting phenomenon in Central Asia—Halford Mackinder’s pivotal area of the heartland—can be observed. The great political powers, when it comes to action in the region, seem to lack power at all. The U.S. assigns all its attention to the war in Afghanistan. Russia, painfully hit by the economic crisis, recognises that it is terribly difficult to rebuild its erstwhile zone of influence. Also China is not warmly welcomed in the region. What is then left? It seems that in the foreseeable future Central Asia is not going to be a scene of the so-called New Great Game. On the contrary, the region will be somewhat abandoned by the main political powers. The purpose of this paper is to prove the abandonment thesis, predict what is going to happen and propose recommendations for the European Union to act effectively in the new situation.

The Thesis

American goals in Central Asia reached their peak during the first term of George W. Bush’s presidency and comprised energy cooperation, internal security and the promotion of democracy. However, the interest of the U.S. was getting weaker from 2005-06 onwards. Now it boils down to the transit of supplies for troops fighting in Afghanistan and small amounts of aid. All the other topics have ceased to be of the first rank. The agendas of American envoy visits prove that bilateral ties between the U.S. and countries of the region are now utterly pragmatic and devoted to one goal: to win the war. Since the fight is not going to last forever, it might be predicted that U.S. troops’ withdrawal from Afghanistan will result in a further decrease of American interest in Central Asia.

The importance of the region in economic terms is not large enough to justify cooperation at all costs. The American energy companies are not likely to increase their activity in the region above what has already been achieved (BTC, BTE, Chevron at Tengiz). The so-called “Western Corridor” through the Caspian Sea and Caucasus to the Black Sea or Turkey already exists but only for oil. It is debatable whether the gas pipeline between Central Asia and South Caucasus—the missing link—will be built. The “Southern Corridor” through Afghanistan and Pakistan has not been constructed and is unlikely to be built soon. Besides, Central Asia is not the most attractive source of energy. Hopes from the early 1990s about the “Second Persian Gulf,” have proved to be groundless. Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan indeed have substantial reserves of hydrocarbons, but they are not as abundant and as easy to recover as was thought some 20 years ago. That is one more reason for a reduced interest in Central Asia. The lack of good transport routes makes cooperation in any other sector of the economy extremely difficult. Concepts of transit by Pakistan, Afghanistan or India are unreal, and routes via Iran are unacceptable to the U.S.

What about the second important player, Russia? One cannot help thinking of its policy in the region as a model example of failure. If keeping post-Soviet countries inside the Russian zone of influence was indeed Russia’s main purpose, it is now visible that this goal has not been achieved. Despite the erstwhile Moscow supremacy (before 1991) and its best efforts at present, the relative position of Russia has decreased during the last 10 years. Russia is lacking its traditional levers of control such as opportunities for workers from Central Asia. Russia can no longer threaten Central Asian states with closing the labour market, as it has been closed since the economic crisis began in 2008. Although economic links between former Soviet republics still exist, the failures of Russian-led integration initiatives such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) or Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) are visible. It is also possible that the Belarus-Kazakhstan-Russia customs

union will share the same fate in the near future as it could be ripped apart by the contradictory economic interests of its members.

A lack of a common position of CIS countries about the war in Georgia in August 2008 and a veiled but firm refusal to recognise the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia proved that even if Russia were able to put pressure on countries in its vicinity it could not effectively influence their policies. Consequently, the deterrence effect of a Russian military reaction will be lost over time. The other important Russian lever, the Common Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), also is having problems with the most important being a lack of trust between authoritarian rulers unsatisfied with losing their control over their armies. Not only is Uzbekistan reluctant to allow Russian troops on its soil, but the same fears, although somewhat disguised, are visible in Kazakhstan. CSTO was unable to act swiftly during ethnic massacres that occurred within borders of member state Kyrgyzstan in June. Russia also was unable to bring order individually. What is the point in having a “zone of influence” if this zone is uncontrollable?

The most visible sign of Russian soft power is the popularity of the Russian language, not only as lingua franca, but also as “middleman” between obscure Central Asia and Western culture. However, this too is vanishing. Even Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have noted a reduction in command of the common language. In the rest of the region, the Russian language is widespread only in the largest cities. New decisions by authorities, such as new and unprecedented laws in Tajikistan, are aimed at the elimination of Russian from public life.

Does weakening of the U.S. and Russia mean then that China is to be the next quarterback in the region? Paradoxically, one can hardly expect that. Although the position of the PRC has improved spectacularly—especially after opening pipelines from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan—it is doubtful that Central Asia will come under the Chinese zone of influence. The main reason for that lies in a deep-rooted distrust of China by local elites and societies.

Autocratic rulers of Central Asian states perceive China more as a counterweight to Russia than as a desired partner. Negative stereotypes of the Chinese among Central Asian societies might be an even bigger obstacle to domination by the PRC. China is perceived with a mix of admiration, disdain and fear. And although many dictators are happy to follow in Chinese footsteps, they prefer to do it on their own way. An incident from 12th September 2009, when a quarrel between groups of Turkmen and Chinese workers assembling the Turkmenistan-China pipeline turned into a brawl might be more symbolic than one can think.

Moving from sentiments to actions, it is noticeable that all Chinese successes in foreign policy are being immediately counterbalanced by the protective movements of Central Asian leaders. The pipelines can serve as a very good example. Soon after the Turkmenistan-China pipeline opened, Turkmen authorities quickly increased cooperation in two more directions. Not only were supplies of gas to Russia restored, but also a new connection to Iran was opened. That was a clear sign directed to China: Beware, you are not our Hobson’s choice.

Finally, Chinese engagement concentrates more on economic issues than geopolitical ones. A good example is the revolutionary change of government in Kyrgyzstan in April 2010. Though theoretically it happened in the Chinese area of interest, the only Chinese reaction was a statement by the MFA’s spokesperson. Due to the Chinese stance of non-intervention in the internal matters of other states, neither PRC diplomacy nor Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) engaged in this case. It showed that China is in fact absent in the security architecture of the region.

Iran, Turkey, Pakistan and India are less visible in Central Asia than was previously expected. That is because of the geographical remoteness of India and Turkey and internal problems in Iran and Pakistan. Moreover, since Iran is a diplomatic pariah it is not likely to be an attractive partner for Central Asian states, and its influence is visible only in Tajikistan. Even if they forget about hostility towards each other, Pakistan and India cannot think seriously of cooperation with Central Asia with the present turmoil in Afghanistan. Large expectations for cooperation between Turkey and Central Asian Turkic states (i.e., all of them apart from Tajikistan) that emerged in the early 1990s were quickly and negatively verified. It turned out that differences between the former Soviet republics on the one side and Turkey on the other were too large. Although Turkey is a valuable economic partner, it can hardly be a “big brother” or Central Asian spokesman for the world. Therefore ideas of common Turkic political initiatives were unlikely to materialise.

Difficult Years to Come

Since the main players' activity in the region will diminish, within the next decade countries from the region (at least the stronger ones) will have wider room for political movement. Already today Central Asian politicians are keen to manoeuvre between large players. The best example is found in decisions by Kyrgyzstani authorities in 2009 to be elastic enough to take money both from Russia (allegedly, in return for closure of an American base) and from the U.S. (in return for maintaining the facility).

Unfortunately, this freedom of action does not mean that stability and cooperation are to reign. On the contrary, one can expect more dynamic changes, short repeating clashes and diplomatic frictions. Today's rivalry between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan for supremacy in the region, protector-seeking behaviour among smaller countries, instability and lack of institutions are all symptoms that things are going to intensify. The events of 2010 in Kyrgyzstan showed the inability of the state to perform its basic functions. A similar situation may occur in Tajikistan at any time.

It is unrealistic to predict new agreements or effective cooperation between more than two countries in the region. Although free-trade agreements or customs unions would be fruitful in poverty stricken countries, this scenario is unlikely due to the unwillingness of some countries, especially Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, to open their economies. And it is also unlikely that the countries will cooperate in the politico-military area as all the leaders are very sensitive to their sovereignty.

There is no system of common security in the region, and it is doubtful that one will be established in the near future. As massacres in southern Kyrgyzstan showed, neither SCO nor CSTO are able to create an area of common stability even slightly similar to that of NATO. Deeply rooted threats come from unresolved problems with national minorities, water shortages, energy trading and border delimitation. More importantly, endemic poverty in countries of the region (except Kazakhstan) combined with bad economic policies mean that cohorts of young people and children of demographic expansion (1% to 2% annually), will be unable to find a job and plan for a decent future. That will result in a growing frustration, increasing popularity of Islamic fundamentalist movements and lowering sentiments for neighbours as in the pogroms of 1989-91 and June 2010.

Rising instability on one side and the decreasing activity of external players on the other present both need and opportunity for the EU to engage more strongly in the region. Why are Central Asian states important in the first place? The EU's Central Asia Strategy (approved in 2007) clearly states that the role of the region is crucial in energy supply security and more precisely in the diversification of energy sources. The region lies at the rear of the Afghan war and is a barrier sheltering Europe from Afghan drugs. Therefore, the aid to unstable countries is no longer European benevolence—it is an investment in common security.

SWOT for the EU

Up to now, the European Union external strength has been compromised by a deficiency in forming an effective common foreign policy, the incomprehensible institutional outlook of the EU and a lack of consistency in action. An inability to react quickly is understandable, considering the EU is formed of 27 states, only some of which have interests in Central Asia. They are split over the priorities in the post-Soviet zone (Russia or Russian neighbours), relations with China and war in Afghanistan. Only about a third of the states in the EU are seriously interested in Central Asia, the most active of which are France and Germany.

Among the biggest weaknesses of the EU is, paradoxically, its firm policy of promoting democracy, rule of law and human rights, which is very annoying for dictators. The European policy of "stick and carrot" doesn't work in Central Asia because the only "stick" the EU can use is simple restraint from giving a "carrot" (aid), which can be easily delivered by other great powers, especially China. Thus, the effectiveness of the EU is reduced in comparison with Russia, China and even the U.S., and yet Europe cannot just leave its values aside. It can be even predicted that the value awareness in European foreign policy is going to increase, as the European Parliament is going to extend its prerogatives. It can be easily assessed, however, that human rights and rule of law initiatives, present in the EU Central Asia Strategy, are unlikely to succeed.

The biggest strength of the EU is its large, attractive market and capital resources, abundant know-how and "soft power," which is hard to estimate but is significant. United, the EU can provide technical and institutional assistance in such areas as water management, energy efficiency, border control, SME promotion and in fighting corruption. For poorer countries such as Tajikistan, the EU is

simply a donor of aid. For richer and stronger countries such as Kazakhstan, the EU presents itself as a buyer of energy resources and an attractive investor.

Other players' strengths present obvious threats to European actions. Competition with other great powers on their fields of interest is still doomed to failure. So, the EU is forced to run a "second-best" policy. It is unlikely that the Education Initiative of the EU might outweigh Russian cultural domination. Europeans cannot compete with the PRC for greater volume of investments and it is unlikely that they can provide Central Asia with security tools that the U.S. doesn't have. Finally, the sole factor of distance will make EU cooperation with Central Asia harder than with any closer neighbour. Hence, only a mix of European attractiveness, well-directed financial means and purposeful policy can be effective.

Here come opportunities. The latest developments of the External Action Service of the European Union might be fruitful in the long run. They should bring consistency of action and clarify the question of leadership. That is particularly important in Central Asia, where etiquette matters. Hopefully, the EU envoy will be considered as "a VIP who can be talked to," and especially as a person more important than any ambassador of a member state. With increased institutional effectiveness, the EU has to find its niche, which implicates selecting one or two promising fields of interest as written in the EU Central Asia Strategy.

Baby Steps Approach and the Water Method

The European Union is beyond the rivalry and day-to-day conflicts of the five "stans" because of its geographic distance. It is not perceived as an advocate of one country or another (whereas, say, Russia is considered to be relatively "anti-Uzbek"). The EU has large know-how and highly qualified personnel. It is prepared to organise ad hoc Fact Finding Missions and diagnose the problem better than anyone else, mostly because of a large degree of research freedom. Heidi Tagliavini's mission about the war in Georgia is a good example of valuable investigative work. Similar Fact Finding Missions might help to solve deeply rooted disagreements regarding border demarcation, gas and water supplies, enclaves and exclave status and the situation of ethnic minorities in Central Asia.

The European Union can be a good facilitator of discussion between countries of the region and, chances permitting, can be a broker of small agreements. Of course, the eventual improvement of relations between Central Asian states depends on the goodwill of local politicians. Nobody can force them into cooperation, so they have to be gradually convinced to bury the hatchet. The small disagreements on water present the larger possibility of constructive discussion between quarrelling leaders than a strategic rivalry between them or their economic policies.

Water management makes a particularly good case for European engagement. Water conflicts between "highlanders" (Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) and "lowlanders" (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) are going to escalate because of the resources' scarcity. The first group requires lots of investments in water power plants, which will enable them to improve energy balance and control over water flows. However, that is exactly what countries from the second group, situated in a semi-arid area, would like to avoid. They need to receive large amounts of water for irrigation in particular seasons of the year and are not happy to be controlled by foreign and potentially hostile men at the water gates. Not to mention that being flooded every spring when dams open their gates to feed a hungry electrical grid is obviously malevolent for agriculture in "lowlander" states. International organisations are paralysed by their members and unable to work out a consensus. European mediation then might be essential to keep the situation stable. The Rogun Dam affair might serve as a good example in the near future. While Tajikistan is trying to build the reservoir in the mountainous river Vakhsh, Uzbekistan is afraid of consequences for its Amu-Darya basin in the lowlands. Both countries are at odds, flooding European embassies with communiqués, throwing accusations at each other and blocking their common border, which hampers trade. This situation further worsens stability in an already volatile region. While the problem itself is far from being inextricable, the constructive mediation is needed.

However, solving problems case by case is not good enough. The EU has enough resources to propose complex solutions. Highlanders should invest in smaller water power plants instead of post-Soviet giant projects. "Baby reservoirs" have lots of advantages. Small dams require less capital outlay and can be built more quickly at smaller risk and without painful external costs. The EU might stimulate these investments by offering micro-grants for small water, solar or wind power plants. The additional advantage from the European point of view is that these micro projects concentrate rather on small

entrepreneurs than on large players, and activate local communities, which is beneficial for the promotion of a market economy and ecological awareness. The micro grants should become a priority area for European assistance in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which means a substantive increase in financing for the EU Central Asia Strategy within the 2014-20 financial framework.

The possibilities of acting in “lowlander” countries are even greater. At present, Turkmenistan is pushing large, harmful projects, such as “Golden Age Lake”, which was meant to irrigate the soil but which is very likely to salinate it instead. Uzbekistani ecological awareness is almost non-existent. Kazakhstan is willing to pursue the old Soviet idea of redirecting water from the Volga, Ob and Irtysh rivers, which might be an ecological falling out of the frying pan into the fire. Instead, the EU should more effectively promote economical approaches to water (drip irrigation for example), fight against squandering of water and finance sewage treatment plants. Though all these actions are not spectacular, they are the most-needed baby steps. Working out the solution of water problems in the new strategic situation will be a chance for the European Union not only to improve its position in the region, but also to increase stability and security in Central Asia.