

Geopolitical orientation of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan after 11th September 2001 (until 2007). Plamen Dimitrov



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I. Introduction

The disintegration of the USSR and the declarations of independence of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan brought about the reopening of the so called Great Game in Central Asia. The states in this region were involved in geopolitical struggles in which the USA, Russia, and in the recent few years, China play the main roles. The rich in energy resources Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are a part not only of the Central-Asian but also of the Caspian geopolitical game. The vector of their foreign policy orientation depends mainly on the potential export routes of oil and natural gas. Tajikistan on the other hand, is a country where no dramatic turns in its internal policy or geopolitical orientation have taken place during the last ten years.

Subject to the present analysis are Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. These countries are of special interest for different reasons. Kyrgyzstan is the only ex-Soviet republic in Central Asia in which over the course of the last 16 years the president in power was overthrown and compelled to flee to Russia. Uzbekistan is

interesting with the sharp geopolitical turn that its president, Islam Karimov, accomplished in the years 2004-2005. The natural chronological dividing line is 2001 when the USA began the war in Afghanistan which changed the geopolitical frame of Central Asia in its entirety. Subject of this analysis is also the link between the internal policy dynamics and the geopolitical orientations of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. In this relation a comparison between these two states might be rather helpful. Besides, the work on these two case studies offers the possibility for drawing certain conclusions in regard to the local political player's roles in the big geopolitical battle, taking place in Central Asia. There are a lot of publications regarding the geopolitical confrontations in Central Asia. However, they usually concentrate on the strategies and actions of the Great Powers: Russia, the USA, China, the EU, Japan or India. The studies on the particular geopolitical orientation of the ex-Soviet republics in the region are considerably less numerous. To a certain extent the only exception in this respect is Kazakhstan.

II. Two landlocked countries - the geopolitical position of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan

Kyrgyzstan is a landlocked mountainous country with a territory of 198 000 square kilometers. Its main natural resources are water, energy and gold. However its deposits of oil or natural gas are of no particular importance. The country has many places of outstanding natural beauty which suggests good possibilities for international tourism but the main world tourist destinations are too far away from Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan has borders with three of the other Central-Asian republics - Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan; it also has a border with China. No important transport or energy supply routes pass through Kyrgyzstan. The population of the country is slightly over five million people and the birth rate is comparatively high but the demographic situation is getting worse owing to the mass immigration predominantly of young people. From an ethnical point of view Kyrgyzstan is rather variegated. Nearly two thirds of the population is Kyrgyz, but there are also considerable Uzbek (13.8%) and Russian (12.5%) minorities. From 1864 to 1991 the Kyrgyz territory was a part of Russia and subsequently - of the Soviet Union. That is why the bigger part of its elite is russified. Kyrgyzstan is a poor country. The occupation of half of its population is agriculture and its production is used mainly for meeting its own needs. The gross national income is barely half a billion dollars, and the trade balance of the country is negative. The investment climate is not favorable and the foreign companies are mainly interested in gold mining.

Uzbekistan is a considerably bigger country, its territory being 447 000 square kilometers. Uzbekistan has borders with all other four Central-Asian republics and a 137 km long border with Afghanistan. The country is doubly landlocked which means that none of its neighbors has a sea outlet either. The greater part of the territory of Uzbekistan is covered by a desert and the majority of its population is mainly concentrated in the Ferghana valley, in the capital Tashkent and in the oases around Samarkand and Buhara. Uzbekistan has significant deposits of oil and natural gas which have not yet been properly developed. Apart of that there are uranium and gold in Uzbekistan. At the same time Uzbekistan is very short of water supply. The population of Uzbekistan is 27 million people which makes it the largest country in Central Asia. Its birth rate is high and its demographic growth creates social tension in the country. Ethnically regarded, Uzbekistan is of more homogeneous population. 80% of its population is Uzbeks and the most considerable minorities are Russians and Tadjiks - of 5% each. From the end of the 19th century to 1991 Uzbekistan was also a part of Russia and then of the Soviet Union and its elite is also partially russified. Uzbekistan is also a poor country and the greater part of its population is occupied with farming. 41.5% of its export is cotton. The authorities in Tashkent succeeded somehow to keep some of the industrial units built during the Soviet regime which makes the Uzbek economy more diversified than that of Kyrgyzstan.

III. Russia, USA and China - the three reference axis from which the lesser players have to make their choice

Neither Kyrgyzstan nor Uzbekistan can be equal partners to the great powers in the Central-Asian geopolitical space. Both countries can be perceived rather as an object than a subject of geopolitical impact. For this reason it is important to define the instruments of the possible geopolitical influence on the part of the USA, Russia and China on the countries in the region of Central Asia and on Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in particular.

From geographical point of view Russia having borders with Central Asia, is closest to both countries. Besides, in their newest history Russians, Kyrgyzs and Uzbeks were citizens of the same state for more than a century. Nearly all contemporary Uzbek and Kyrgyz leaders developed as personalities in the Soviet time and they use the Russian language as their first language not only for their political contacts but also in their everyday and family communications. For years Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan were integrated within the Soviet economic area whose center was Moscow. There are millions of gastarbaiters from the ex-Soviet republics working now in Moscow and in other cities in Russia, and they create and maintain an extremely strong and vital relation between Russia and Central Asia. Some data show that one fourth to one fifth of the population of Kyrgyzstan has turned into economic immigrants, working in Russia. According to data from other sources there are about half a million citizens of Kyrgyzstan and nearly one million citizens of Uzbekistan working in Russia^[1]. Finally, regardless of its loss of the Cold War, Russia is still an important military power. And Kremlin's political power keeps on growing proportionally to the increase in oil and natural gas prices on the world market.

The USA are situated thousands of kilometers away from Central Asia but they are the only country in the

world with global military and political interests. Therefore, no geographical consideration can become an obstacle to the interest of Washington in the Central-Asian region. The USA are military and political power number one on the planet and their colossal economic capacity permits them to be generous enough whenever they need to attract valuable allies to their side. China is a comparatively new player in Central Asia. However, its influence in the region keeps on growing very fast. China is privileged from geographical, demographic and economic points of view.

In the decade from 1991 to 2001 the struggle for domination in Central Asia was carried on with variable success. Russia kept on losing its privileged position because the country was in a period of recession. Besides, the leaders of the newly independent Central-Asian republics used nationalism as the most important ground for strengthening their legitimacy. This subsequently led them to alienation from Russia and even a full rejection of the Russian and Soviet periods in the history of the Central-Asian nations. That was also the period in which the USA tried to introduce political pluralism in Central Asia and to help with the development of democracy and economic reforms in the region.

The terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001 radically changed the geopolitical situation. Central Asia had turned into the Frontline of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. At that time the USA Central-Asian policy was focuses on security problems rather than matters of democracy and economy. As the importance of the Central Asian states kept on growing they had to choose at the same time whether they would support the USA in their fight against the Taliban or stay neutral. Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan were resolute in their choice – they stood firm supporters of the USA. There were several reasons for this geopolitical decision. First of the all, the authorities in Bishkek and particularly those in Tashkent, were worried about the Islamist threat too and they considered the destruction of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in their interest. Second, it was difficult to say “no” to a political proposal coming from the most powerful state of the world. Third, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan were not required to engage actively at all – all they were asked to do was to let some of their territories to be used for establishment of American Military Air Bases. Fourth, they were to be paid for the presence of those bases on their territories. Fifth, Russia had also joined the fighters against the terrorism and that eliminated, temporarily at least, the danger of further deterioration of Kyrgyzstan’s and Uzbekistan’s relations with Moscow. Actually, the appearance of American military forces in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan became possible after Russia had withdrawn its ban on third countries’ military bases on the territories of the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (ex-Soviet republics) in the autumn of 2001. After the overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan the USA turned toward “opening” the region of Central Asia from its south, their target being to form the so-called Greater Central Asia. Frederick Starr, the chairman of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute at Johns Hopkins University, offers the most clear definition of this idea. He proposes the creation of as close as possible economic, political and military relations of the ex-Soviet Central Asian republics with Afganistan and Pakistan. Thus the Central Asian political vector will be redirected vertically southward. Its present horizontal orientation has been working in favour of binding the ex-Soviet Central Asian republics to Russia and China^[2]. However, owing to the never-ending chaos in Afganistan, the USA have not been particularly successful with their plan of a Greater Central Asia.

IV. Uzbekistan - from American ally to country with “russificated” foreign policy

Uzbekistan signed an agreement with USA for the establishment of the Karshi-Khanabad airbase on 7th October 2001, less than a month after the events of September 11th. Soon afterwards a squadron of American military C-130 air-transports was transferred to an ex-Soviet military base together with 10 American helicopters and 1500 American troops. In December 2001 the Americans were given an airbase in Kyrgyzstan too. It is situated at the international airport of Manas and it has turned into a key point of the air route for carrying cargoes and passengers to and from Afghanistan.

Though Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan had identical attitude to the American operation in Afghanistan, in the period 2001-2004 their political approach toward Russia differed very much. The President of Kyrgyzstan, Askar Akaev continued to treat Moscow as his country’s main ally. In October 2003 on Kyrgyz territory a Russian airbase (Kant) was built. It is situated only 30 km from the American one.

During the same period there is significant chill on the relations between Tashkent and Russia. As early as 1998 Uzbekistan discontinued its participation in the dominated by Russia Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). At that time Tashkent entered the GUUAM, an organization, considered to be a promoter of the American interests in the post-Soviet political area. In the period immediately after 2001 Uzbekistan was the USA’s key ally in Central Asia. Some political researchers in Tashkent had started to talk of turning Uzbekistan into USA’s “pivotal” state in that area^[3]. Karimov’s ambition was to make Uzbekistan a leading local power which would correspond to the size and historical traditions of the country. In March 2002 Islam Karimov was received by the President Bush in Washington where they signed a treaty on strategic partnership^[4]. The military-strategic considerations prevailed despite the fact that even at that time influential human rights protection organizations sharply criticized the friendship of the White House with Karimov. The American financial aid for Uzbekistan was doubled and in 2002 it reached the amount of US\$ 155 million.

As early as 2003 the relations between Uzbekistan and the USA began to gradually cool off. Karimov did

not keep his promise to improve the human rights situation in Uzbekistan, and after the war in Iraq had begun, Afghanistan ceased to be the main military concern of the USA. In a report of the State Department of 2003 Uzbekistan was pointed out as a country that "has no independent judicial or legislative system, no legal opposition, and no free media". Thus the first problems in the marriage of convenience between Tashkent and Washington were caused by the sins of the Uzbek partner. However, two events which took part at the end of 2003 and in 2004 shook Islam Karimov's trust in the selfless friendship of the USA. Those two events were the so-called "colour revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine. They happened with the active involvement of the West and brought about a cardinal change in authority in both Tbilisi and Kiev. Karimov assumed that his authority could also be wiped out if the West chose to support a "colour" revolution in Tashkent. Therefore, he changed his orientation starting rapprochement with China and even stronger with Russia. In June 2004 Uzbekistan and Russia signed a Treaty on Strategic Cooperation. At the same time the regular meeting of the leaders of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) countries was taking place in Tashkent. At it Karimov straightforwardly expressed his discontentment with the West constantly criticizing him for violating human rights and not introducing any economic reforms. The publicly announced large investments of Gasprom and LUKoil in the Uzbek energy sector were a sign indicating the beginning of Tashkent's geopolitical re-orientation.

China joined the scene as well. On the occasion of the SCO meeting, the Chinese President Hu Jintao made a five-day official visit in Uzbekistan. He announced that Beijing was going to provide Uzbekistan with 350 million dollars in the form of donations and advantageous credits.

On 13th July 2004 the State Department officially announced that the American aid for Uzbekistan will be discontinued because Uzbekistan was not observing the provisions of the Frame Treaty for Strategic Partnership signed by the two countries in the beginning of 2002. In its report on human rights made in the beginning of 2004 the State Department characterized Uzbekistan as "an authoritarian state with limited civil rights[5]".

In March 2005 much to Karimov's dismay the fashion of "colour" revolutions, typical of the ex-Soviet republics, reached Central Asia. Askar Akaev, Kyrgyzstan's president of many years was deposed through street riots. The lesson learned from the events in Bishkek was that in cases of certain instability the easiest to fall are the most liberal regimes in the region. That absolutely convinced Karimov that any liberal treatment of the opposition would lead directly and definitely to losing the authority. That was what predetermined his attitude to the Andijan riots which started in May 2005. The Andijan protesters were lead by clannish, economic and religious reasons and not by geopolitical ones. Nevertheless their defeat had very serious geopolitical effects. The USA and the EU denounced Karimov's regime for its brutal actions in Andijan while the SCO countries characterized the revolt as a terrorist plot. Washington insisted on international investigation of the Andijan events but the authorities in Tashkent rejected this. According to the rather suitable definition of an American analyzer, after the Andijan riots Karimov developed siege mentality. His ultimate conclusion was that he should rely on Russia and China, and by the end of May 2005 Karimov visited Beijing. On 29th July 2005 Islam Karimov took his last step toward full obliteration of his friendship with the USA. He gave the Americans a six month notice for their evacuating Karshi-Khanabad airbase. The term was observed and in November the last American soldier left the territory of Uzbekistan.

By the middle of 2006 when Tashkent once again jointed the CSTO the geopolitical turn, defined by a Russian analyzer as Uzbekistan's foreign policy "russification"[6], was finally completed. Before that, in November 2005 Russia and Uzbekistan signed a treaty of alliance binding Moscow and Tashkent to help each other "in case of aggression against any of the countries" and giving each one of them the right to use the military facilities of the other party of the treaty. In the meantime Uzbekistan had withdrawn from GUAAM.

As time goes by, the echo of the events in Andidjan fade away, and in the USA as well as in the EU voices are heard to claim that the policy of full isolation of Uzbekistan is counter-productive. In 2006-2007 the West gave signs that it hadn't fully given up the struggle for geopolitical influence on Tashkent. In August 2006, Richard Boucher, the Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, visited Tashkent, which could be taken as an indication of Washington's willingness to resume the dialogue with the Uzbek authorities. In October 2007 the EU lifts the travel restrictions on Uzbek officials for a provisional six month period in view of the "increased willingness of the Uzbek authorities to engage in dialogue with the EU." This resolution was passed under the strong pressure on the part of Germany which has always kept good relations with the rich in energy resources ex-Soviet republics and Russia itself. EU external relations commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner announced to press that the move is a "carrot and stick policy" instrument that ends the "total isolation" of the country in favour of "engagement, on our own terms.[7]"

V. Kyrgyzstan - how to succeed in simultaneously being a host to a Russian and American airbases

There were no such sharp turns in the geopolitical orientation of Kyrgyzstan. From 2003 on, it was the only country in the world in which a Russian and an American bases co-existed without any problem. However, in March 2005 an internal political drama took place in Bishkek. The authority of the president Askar Akaev was swept away with surprising ease by the street riots, accompanied by violence and looting. At first sight, this was a typical "colour" revolution but the fundamental difference between it and the events in Georgia and Ukraine was that both - the previous president and the new one, were pro-Russian. After March 2005 Kyrgyzstan entered a period which can be defined as a "democracy of the chaos". The country became a world champion of political demonstrations per year. The political life in Bishkek is extremely dynamic. The struggle for power is conducted with populist rhetoric in which the geopolitical motives are pushed at a side-line. The new president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, declared the existence of the American airbase in Manas under question. However, the true reason is not at all related to the fears for possible USA's interference in the internal affairs of Kyrgyzstan. All the Bishkek authorities wanted was to get more money for the hospitality they had been extending to the American military. After prolonged negotiations in July 2006 an agreement for a considerable increase in the lease paid for the Manas airbase was reached at last, the total compensation package agreed amounted to 150 million dollars[8].

In 2007, however, the SCO started challenging the American military presence in Central Asia more strongly and actively. Pushed by Russia and China, Kyrgyzstan signed the joint declarations which in a roundabout way requested the closing of the airbase in Manas. A number of small incidents in which members of the American military personnel were involved increased the negative feelings toward the USA's military presence in the country too. At the same time Russia announced a forthcoming increase in its military contingency in the Kant airbase. Even after the 'colour' revolution of 2005 pro-Russian feelings are still dominant in the Kyrgyzstanian society. An opinion poll carried out in May 2007 by the US International Republican Institute showed that, when asked towards which country Kyrgyzstan should orient itself, by far the top response was Russia - fully 88 percent of respondents said relations with Russia should be the country's top priority. The United States ranked seventh, with less than 1 percent of the population saying Kyrgyzstan should orient itself toward Washington. The United States finished behind Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkey, China and Germany[9]. Having this in mind it is not a surprise at all that some of the opposition parties are trying to gain votes by proposing much closer relations between Kyrgyzstan and Russia. In comments published on 1 June 2007 in the opposition Agym newspaper, Former Kyrgyz Prime Minister Feliks Kulov argued that a confederation with Russia would offer Kyrgyzstan a way out of two persistent problems - friction between the northern and southern portions of the country, and economic malaise[10].

At present it is not clear how long Bishkek will be able to keep the balance between the Russian-Chinese pressure and the USA's desire to keep their last military base in Central Asia. The outcome of this contradictory situation will depend on the extent of the actual Russian and Chinese investments in the Kyrgyz economy. For the time being the funds received are considerably less than the ones promised. Recently Kazakhstan's influence on Kyrgyzstan is growing stronger since Kazakhstan has emerged as the economic and political leader of Central Asia and is trying to play the part of an independent geopolitical center.

VI. Conclusions

The cases of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan show that the international orientation of the Central-Asian republics is first of all a function of the global geopolitical interests and possibilities of the great powers. In the second half of the 1990-ies Russia was in recession and consequently its influence in Central Asia declined while during the second presidency term of Putin the situation changed radically. In the period from 2001 to 2003 Central Asia was one of the main priorities of Washington's foreign policy which immediately had its reverberations in Tashkent and Bishkek. The specifics of the political regimes in the two countries have effect on their international orientation. Uzbekistan is a much more authoritarian state than Kyrgyzstan. When the president Karimov faced a potential threat to his authority, he chose to lean on those international powers which did not find the cooperation with authoritarian regimes a problem. The economic capacity of the country is very important too. For Uzbekistan a lease payment for a military base is not vitally important while for a country like Kyrgyzstan such an amount can reach the extent of one third of the income in its budget.

Owing to historical, ethno-linguistic, economic, political and military reasons in the foreseeable future the main vector of the Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan's geo-policy will be turned toward Russia.

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http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/CEF/Quarterly/August_2007/Laruelle.pdf

[2] For harsh critic remarks on the Greater Central Asia conception from pro-Russian point of view see: Князев, А. А. Проекты интеграции и безопасность Центральной Азии в контексте афганской военно-политической ситуации и современных геополитических реалий. В: Князев, А. А., ред. Проекты сотрудничества и интеграции для Центральной Азии: сравнительный анализ, возможности и перспективы. Бишкек, 2007, с. 242-244.

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