Russia-US power struggle for unpredictable Central Asia

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Abstract: *The article focuses on a struggle between the Russian Federation and the US for Central Asian countries states — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The time settings of the topic encompass period between the collapse of the Soviet Union and the year 2011. The paper focuses on a development of a politico-military dimension of the relation between the two Cold War adversaries and Central Asia. It is divided into six parts which deal cover milestone events and issues which influenced the dynamics of the competition of Russia and the US in Central Asia. It is concluded that despite of the active engagement of Russia and the US neither of them has been able to gain loyalty of Central Asian countries.*

Keywords: *Central Asia, Russia, the US, military base, security, struggle*

Introduction

A struggle of the Russian Federation and the United States for independent countries in Central Asia — a new Great Game[1] — has sparkled after the end of the Cold War. The rivalry is characterised by Russia's efforts to maintain the influence on its former Soviet satellite states — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan — and the US interest in building yet another of its power bases — this time in the Central Asian region. The main goal of the article is to analyse this struggle of Russia and the US in Central Asia with a focus on the politico-military

dimension in the timeframe which takes into consideration a period from the end of the Cold War until 2011.

In order to grasp the topic in a comprehensive manner, the article is divided into six parts which reflect the most important developments in the given time. The last part than showcases a country example. The first part of this article describes the situation after the collapse of the Soviet Union when politically and geographically weakened Russia had to deal with newly emerged independent Central Asian countries. The main aim of this part is to find out what sort of strategy Russia sought in relation to its former vessel states. Therefore the following part analyses an establishment and functioning of the Collective Security Treaty (CST) in 1992 as a military-security successor of the Soviet Union and analyses Russia's strategy in the first half of the 1990s. In the third part, the article follows change of Russia's strategy in its Near abroad[2] and introduces the US entry to Central Asian politics in the second half of 1990s. Establishment of GUAM Organisation for Democracy and Economic Development and accession of Uzbekistan is analysed as a response to Russia's growing assertiveness in the Central Asian region in the given period. The fourth part of the article analyses an effect of a perceived terrorist threat on the relation of Russia and the US in Central Asia. It presents how the two countries oscillated between cooperation and competition. This is also demonstrated on developments of both Russian and the US military bases in Central Asia. Furthermore, this subchapter analyses transformation of the Collective Security Treaty into Collective Security Organisation as Russia's step towards strengthening of its position in Central Asia.

An escalation of the rivalry between Russia and the US went hand in hand with rising self confidence of Central Asian countries. Therefore the fifth part describes how neither Russia nor the US can rely on loyalty of Central Asian countries. In the sixth part, the case of Uzbekistan is presented in order to further emphasise unpredictability Russia and the US face when trying to gain Central Asian countries in favour of their respective agendas.

1. Central Asia after the Cold War

In this section, the article briefly explores relation of Central Asia on one side and Russia and the US on the other side after the end of the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union meant that Russia, as its successor state, lost a superpower status and other former Soviet republics gained independence from Kremlin. It is an impossible task to define general directions of Central Asian countries' foreign policy after 1990. Yet, at least one unifying point of departure was shared by all of them. All of them had in common a reluctance and aversion towards intervention of external powers as a legacy of the Russian imperial domination (Cutherbertson 1994: 32).

At the beginning of 1990s, strategy towards Central Asia of neither the US nor Russia was based on intensive involvement. Of course, Russia had to deal with the Soviet legacy but it proactively focused on an integration with the West. Russian desire to belong to the Western community strongly outweighed Russia's relation with the post Soviet countries that in 1991 established a loose association of countries under the Russian leadership — Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)[3]. British political scientist Mark Webber argues that Russian, seemingly indifferent, approach towards former Soviet republics was driven by a belief that the successor states would naturally gravitate towards Russia as a consequence of their shared military and economic interdependencies and common experience of post-communist transition (Webber 2000: 247). Despite of this assumption, Russia had to face reluctance from the CIS countries which did not want to give their new sovereignty away — again.

2. Establishment of Collective Security Treaty in 1992

This part of the article analyses development of Russian strategy towards Central Asia in a framework of the Collective Security Treaty (CST). Established in 1992, the organisation was the first organisation on the territory of former Soviet Union and its main purpose was to manage Soviet security and military legacy. All former Soviet republics — apart from Moldova, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and the Baltic states — signed the document which could hardly stand its name because of the following reasons. First, cooperation reflected Russia's unwillingness to effectively engage with the CIS countries which meant that it failed to be an effective political agenda setter. Second, differences in interests and inability of participating countries to identify common threats resulted in a cooperation which has been typical in this post Soviet area — a great number of promises and declarations on a paper with hardly any practical impact.[4]

Yet, Russian involvement in Tajikistan's bloody civil war in 1992 was a clear demonstration of its political and military interference. Presence of Russian soldiers in the country was a result of poor development of the CST institutional framework and Russian conviction about a right to interfere militarily in its Near abroad and pursuit for its own security. Eventually, a CIS peacekeeping mission under the Russian command was deployed at a Tajik-Afghan border to stop influx of fighters and military material from Afghanistan. The conflict showed that right after the break-up of the Soviet Union, Russia was the only viable provider of military security in the region and its action was inevitable. In that period the US had no vital interests in Central Asia. Therefore Russia did not have to compete.

3. Response to Russia's growing interest in Central Asia: Establishment of GU(U)AM and engagement of the US

The third section of the article explores how the state of a play in Central Asia changed by mid 1990s. Furthermore, it concentrates on engagement of Uzbekistan in anti-Russian international organisation supported by the US.

By mid 1990s, Russian interest in its Near abroad showed an increasing tendency. It was fuelled by a rise of nationalist political forces in Russia and its dissatisfaction with inability of the West to offer Russia a membership in its community. In 1994 at the United Nations, Russian President Yeltsin labelled the CIS as an area of Russia's pivotal interests. According to Smith, the shift was decisively influenced by "anxiety about the growing influence of some Far Abroad […] besides the security of its Western borders in relation to NATO expansion, Russia fears the growing influence of Islamic fundamentalism on its southern rim" (Smith 1990: 489). In 1996, the then Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Jevgenij Primakov explained that NATO enlargement was deemed negative both in traditionally conservative and among liberal politicians who were both represented in the Russian Parliament (Friedman 1996).

As a response to Russia's increasing assertiveness and interest in the post-Soviet space, Georgia, Ukraine, Armenia and Moldova established Organisation for Democracy and Economic Development (GUAM) in 1997. Presidents of the four countries declared their interest in cooperation with the EU and NATO and especially a "need for combating aggressive nationalism, separatism, and international terrorism" (Joint Comunique of the GUAM presidents 1997). Uzbekistan joined in 1999 during the NATO summit in Washington. The organisation changed its name to GUUAM and was granted an official US support and recognition of the United Nations. Uzbekistan's foreign policy was in correspondence with stances of other member states. Especially, the country's political elite rejected a possibility of growing Russian influence in Central Asia. Consequently, it resulted into reluctance of Uzbek President Karimov to sign extension of the Collective Security Treaty.

The US was aware of a changing vector in Russian foreign policy. Therefore, it begun to engage with Central Asia more actively. As a result of that, the second half of 1990s was a time when the US finally started to formulate it policy towards Central Asia. Before establishment of GUAM, NATO supported the decision by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to create Central Asian battalion (Centrazbat). At the same time, Uzbekistan was granted a status of a strategic partner and Kazakhstan followed the suit in late 1990s (Amineh 2007: 102-104).

To ensure that Central Asian leaders would turn to Washington rather than to Moscow or Beijing (Lafeber 2006: 443), was just one reason for the US active engagement in Central Asia. Asia. In addition to that, the US started to cooperate militarily with the Uzbek president Karimov in order to help putting down the Is-

lamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Secondly, the US wanted to be part of the international actors who were interested in the region's oil wealth. Yet, the US was not able to give neither Uzbekistan nor other Central Asian countries such a support which would ensure its independence on Russia. In fact, it is not clear that Central Asian countries desire or can afford independence on Russia. As an example of this, see the case of Uzbekistan below.

In spring 2001 Russia and Uzbekistan negotiated a barter. The deal implied that Russia started to supply Uzbekistan with guns to fight IMU in an exchange for commodities such as gas and cotton (Lelyveld 2001). Following year, Uzbekistan suspended its membership in GU(U)AM as a signal of its affiliation to Russia. At the same time, the country was forging bilateral relations with the US and receiving financial aid for enhancing Central Asian security (Kuzio 2002). Uzbekistan shows the unpredictability of Central Asian countries with respect to different international partners. Both Russia and the US, have to cope with the fact, that patterns in Central Asian foreign policies are blur even in the present time.

4. Honeymoon period of the Russian-US relation and a swift divorce

Beginning of the third millennium can easily be compared to an earthquake in the security situation in Central Asia. The main reason for such a situation was a perception of an intensive terrorist threat. Therefore this section analyses how international actors responded to such a security challenge and how the relation between Russia and the US developed. Furthermore, it is important to analyse development of the CST and its transformation into the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) in 2003 in order to capture dynamics of the institutionalised partnership between Russia and Central Asia.

Terrorist threat spreading from Central Asia started to alarm international community after Islamic extremists from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan allied under the leadership of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). This group set a goal to create an Islamic Caliphate which would stretch from Chechnya to Xinjiang[5] in China and was gaining power in the late 1990s. Also, it was accused of cooperation with Taliban as well as Al Qaeda (Gleason 2005: 280). At that time, international terrorism and crime became challenges of the 21st century where both Russia and the US sought multinational cooperation (National Security Concept of the Russian Federation 2000, Ikenberry 2001). Short lived anti-terrorist alliance between Russia and the US experienced a momentum after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York and Pentagon.

Russian president Putin was the first to call the former US president Bush after 9/11. He delivered Russia's sympathy and expressed a full support for a military operation in Afghanistan which was supposed to fight international terrorism. In addition to that, Russia protested neither against establishment of new US military bases at Manas, Kyrgyzstan and Karshi-Khanabad, Uzbekistan in 2001 nor to the US financial support and arms deals with Central Asian countries. Contrary to that, president Putin promised intelligence and logistical support to the US while not committing Russia to a physical presence in Afghanistan (Lafeber 2006: 437–438).

Russia's attitude to the US presence in Central Asia accentuates Putin's foreign policy strategy of pragmatism and short term strategic planning. The alliance with the US allowed Russia to advance its re-conquest of Central Asia. It helped to justify Russia's military presence in the region and at the same time pursue its own security goals.[6] From the Central Asian perspective, the security situation represented an opportunity to enhance a partnership with an external superpower — the US — which balanced Russian military embrace of the region.

Relation of Russia and the US began to change by 2003. Two year after the 9/11, an ephemerality of the Russo-US alliance became apparent for several reasons. One of them was Russia's raising self confidence driven by its internal political consolidation under Putin's rule. Russia started to blame external actors for undermining its role in Central Asia and consequently used the transformed security climate for enhancing cooperation in the framework of CST. In 2002, president Putin announced that cooperation and further integration with former Soviet states is his top priority (Putin 2002). One year later, the CST was transformed into the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan refused to join. To a great extent, it was a reaction to Russia's assertive foreign policy.

Despite of its declaratory tone, the Charter of the CSTO (CSTO 2002) helped to give Russia a necessary legitimacy for an attempt to regain a regional power status. One of the main developments on the CSTO agenda, was a gradual upgrade of facilities at Kant military base, Kyrgyzstan, which was opened in 2003. This move was widely interpreted as a reaction to establishment of US military air bases in Central Asia. Contrary to the US, Russia is exempted from paying a rental fee for the base and is only obliged to fund its operation (Nyrgen 2008: 35). The double standards came to a surface again after the 2005 Tulip revolution in Kyrgyzstan.[7] As a result of the political change, pro-Kremlin political forces have been dominant on the Kyrgyz political scene (Olcott 2005). Compared to 2001, Russia started to use loyal Central Asian rulers as its proxies in a campaign against the US. The Kyrgyz leadership placed new demands on the US administration. Consequently the US was forced to make a financial concession and accept increased fees for renting Kyrgyz military facilities' (RFE/RL 2006).

Apart from the CSTO political massage, the organisation has military capabilities at its disposal. 1500 troops strong rapid deployment force and an anti-terrorism centre located in Bishkek are both under Russian supervision as majority of staff is Russia. In addition to that, Russia bears 50 % of the common budget (Cohen 2005: 87). In 2009 the former Russian president Medvedev characterised "[the forces] reflect some fairly fundamental changes in how we see our collective forces" and described them as "sufficiently large to face the most essential, most important, and most sophisticated threats, such as terrorism, crime, and other regional challenges and conflicts" (CSTO Council session results 2009). Apart from being able to counter the shared threats, Russia claimed that the CORF would be no worse than NATO forces. Yet, operability of the project is highly questionable mainly due to the reluctance of some CSTO members (such as Uzbekistan) to participate in the developments and to a small size of the reaction forces units.

In 2010, religious pogroms in Fergana Valley, Kyrgyzstan, were a test for the CSTO and for Russia. The CSTO failed to stand its promoted reputation of a regional security guarantor. Despite the fact, that Kyrgyz authorities asked for a military intervention, Medvedev declared that Russian peacekeepers were not needed. In addition to that several CSTO members (including Uzbekistan) would have been reluctant to support a deployment that could set a precedent for Russian intervention in their countries (Crisis Group Asia Report 2010). This particular situation showed how diverse the CSTO bloc is and that the CSTO Charter does not guarantee a consensus neither in peace nor in emergency situation. Also, it is a clear signal that the Central Asian bloc does not want to grant Russia a green card for intervening in its Near abroad. Russia might find it difficult to find support for its long term plans because the CSTO rejection of NATO presence in Central Asia is not a sufficient precondition for accepting an umbrella of Russian influence. Over all, international recognition together with Russia's interest in enhancing the military capabilities of CSTO "demonstrate Russia's resolve to support the existing status quo in these countries and their neighbours and to prevent re-connection" with the West, be it the EU or the US (Blank 2008). In addition to that, especially since the economic crisis, Russia cannot afford to fund all its vested interests in the region. Malashenko believes that Russia should be more strict and consistent towards its Asian allies. "Russia has finally stopped lending large sums of money to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which is only natural because economic and political returns have been so negligible" (Malashenko 2011). As Russia's efforts to be the power centre of the region continue, further proposals for common action will probably come.

Despite the ruptures in cooperation between the CSTO member states, relative progress made by the CSTO was recognised by the UN in 2010. Confidence of the CSTO member states was echoed in words of the CSTO Secretary General Bordyuzha. He complained that the US led NATO "evidently does not wish to sup-

port integration processes in the post-Soviet space" (Socor 2010). Seemingly, Central Asian countries are sometimes willing to provide a support to Russia but often they opt for pursuing its own interests.

5. Russia and the US face self confidence of Central Asian partners

Over the past two decades, the countries in Central Asia developed a higher level of self confidence which allows them to behave in a pragmatic manner. Therefore this section analyses military cooperation of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan with regards to their military facilities rented by Russia and the US.

Central Asian countries show a tendency to escalate their demands and try what pressure they can exert on both Russia and the US. In 2009, the Kyrgyz government demanded and received higher rent for the Manas air base. According to the then Kyrgyz president Bakiev, the US shown no understanding for the purely economic issue. In addition to that new president-elect of 2011 Almazbek Atambayev urges the US (Bumiller 2012) to leave the airbase at Manas by 2014 when the lease contract expires and the US plans to withdraw from Afghanistan (RIA Novosti 2011). President Obama and his administration are engaged in a negotiation process and try to persuade Kyrgyz government to prolong this period. Yet, there are no signals which would indicate a development in favour of the US. The then Russian president Medvedev strongly endorsed Kyrgyz approach. In order to support the local government he offered financial help in areas such as environmental revitalisation where the US military failed completely (Nichol 2009: 6). In this context seemingly minor issues (such as environmental concerns) serve as an excuse for Russian involvement with Kyrgyzstan. Furthermore, Russia's relation with the US shows that Russia acts very pragmatically and is willing to allow US presence in the region only for a temporary period.

Russia's military bases are a target of Central Asian pragmatism as well. Tajikistan was no longer satisfied with a status of the 201st military base which is in operation since the 1992 Tajik civil war. In 2004 this previously CST base became the first permanent Russian military base in Central Asia (RFE/RL 2004). Five years later president Medvedev and Tajik president Rahmon signed a deal by which the countries agreed to equal rights in their mutual military cooperation. From that time on, Russia is obliged to pay a regular rent for its military base. In return it sells military equipment to Tajikistan at a market price and conducts military trainings for a fee (Majidov 2009). The second Russian military base at Kant, Kyrgyzstan is according to Stephen Blank of utmost importance "because it is the main basis for Russian power projection into Central Asia and for the attempt by Russia to organise the

CSTO, which is Russia's attempt to create a military bloc in Central Asia" (Blank 2006). Russia has a clear comparative advantage to the US. Russian bases are set up for an unlimited time which gives it a space for manoeuvring and a freedom to pursue its mid to long term interests.

6. Unpredictability of partners in Central Asia as a challenge for Russia and the US

While not taking into account isolationist Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan proved to be the most unpredictable partner for Russia, the CSTO and the US. After the period of unstable cooperation with both, Russia and the US, events of 2005 had a decisive effect on future of Uzbekistan's foreign policy orientation. In May 2005, Uzbek security forces violently suppressed opposition uprising in Andijan city (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights 2005). Despite the lack of clarity of what actually happened, the Western community strongly condemned Uzbek government's reaction. As a consequence, after a period of isolation between 1999–2006, Uzbekistan rejoined the CSTO. Both Uzbekistan and Russia found a common ground in despising coloured revolutions[8] and Western attempts to democratise the post-Soviet space (Burnashev 2007: 72).

While Uzbekistan is willing to cooperate with Russia and the CSTO in spheres where they face similar threats, i.e. terrorism and a rise of opposition movements, Uzbekistan has not yet ratified the agreement constituting the CSTO armed forces. There are different reasons explaining the Uzbek position. First, the country is concerned about Russia's dominant position within the CSTO. Second, it is alarmed by Russian intention to establish a CSTO base in Osh, Kyrgyzstan. The city is close to the Uzbek border and therefore a base for possible projection of Russian power into the region (McDermott 2009).

Conclusion

The main aim of the article was to analyse a power struggle between Russia and the US for Central Asia by focusing on the politico-military dimension. The period of time which was taken into account — end of the Cold War until the year 2011 — shows that development of the relation between Russia, the US and Central Asia was not continuous. On contrary, the record shows discontinuity, shifts and turns.

Neither Russia nor the US was able to win loyalty of Central Asian states and at different points in time one was better off at the expense of the other and vice versa.

Yet, there were — rather shorter — periods of time when Russia and the US were in a cooperative relation with regards to Central Asia when their interests overlapped.

What best characterises relation of Central Asia to both Russia and the US is an unpredictability of Central Asian countries. Carnegie Institute researcher Alexey Malashenko sums it up into the following: "[interests] may overlap, but they may also be mutually exclusive. One Central Asian vector is directed at Russia, another at China, and there are also American and Muslim vectors" (Malashenko 2011). Therefore identifying a victor of the struggle is premature and probably impossible as Central Asian countries, on many occasions, fuel the struggle themselves in order to satisfy their own needs and interests.

Notes

1 The concept of the Great Game received a new wave of popularity as a term describing geopolitical competition of major powers in Central Asia at the end of 20th century. One of the first ones to use the term was Ahmed Rashid in 1997. In his later book and New York Times bestseller *Taliban: Islam, oil and the new Great Game in Central Asia* Rashid explains that the current Great Game is even larger complex of competing interests. Journalist Lutz Kleveman in *The New Great Game* writes: "Now, more than a hundred years later, great Empires once again position themselves to control the heart of the Eurasian landmass, left in a post-Soviet power vacuum."

2 In Yeltsin's 1994 speech at the United Nations, the CIS was labelled as the area of Russia's pivotal interests. The policy reorientation is has been known as the Yeltsin's Doctrine. Putin continued established foreign policy line; he stressed importance of Russia's near abroad: "Our efforts to activate work within the CIS are dictated not only by our historic closeness but also by obvious practical considerations. Russia is the nucleus of integration processes in the CIS." (Putin: 2001).

3 The CIS was supposed to serve as a successor of the Soviet Union and has been an umbrella organisation for political developments on a the previously united territory and was supposed to ensure a peaceful settlement of the Soviet legacy.

4 Besides all problem areas and empty speeches, a relatively successful exception of cooperation within the CST framework can be seen in the working of joint air defence system, which was approved in 1995. Yet by 2011 only Kazakhstan and to some extent Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are involved in the project (Afzal 2011).

5 Xinjiang is the largest autonomous province in Western China. Ethnic tensions are frequent in this region and nationalist feelings of the Uyghur majority population is high. Xinjiang has been causing problems to Chinese government. Muslim separatist militants are major source of terrorism in China. For detailed information see Milward, James (2007).

6 Russia struggles in its fight against religious terrorism for a long time. Increased Islamist activity in Central Asia is therefore perceived as a threat directly connected with Russian national security. For more information on this topic see Hahn, Gordon (2007).

[7] Tulip Revolution was one of the more or less peaceful revolution which were taking place in the former Soviet Union space after 2000. Demonstration of political dissatisfaction with a corrupt Kyrgyz government resulted into election of Kurmanbek Bakiev into a presidential seat. See Radnitz, Scott (2006).

[8] It was expected that the Andijan uprising could spill over to a coloured revolution. The term labels opposition movements in post-Soviet republics. Ukraines Orange revolution or Georgia's Rose revolution. Both removed the old cadre elites from power. See Beacháin, Donnacha Abel Polese (2010).

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