

## REGIONAL INTEGRATION IN CENTRAL ASIA– A PATH TO GEOPOLITICAL AUTONOMY

Felix-Corneliu Ardelean

National School of Political Science and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania

*Corresponding Email:* ardelean.felix@yahoo.com

### Abstract

The multipolar characteristic of the current system of international relations guarantees an upheaval of the classic spheres of influence which unavoidably will cause power voids at the intersections of interests between major and regional powers. Through an analysis of the various paths towards regional cooperation in Central Asia, this paper determines the possibility of the region to escape the narrow orbit of said powers and enjoy a certain degree of geopolitical autonomy. In order to succeed at fostering regional cooperation, the countries of Central Asia need to act on many levels – economic, politic, social and cultural ones, as to surpass the nationalistic fervor that rose recently as a counter-reaction to the optimistic and triumphalist globalization theory which dominated the first decades after the end of the Cold War. While it is obvious that we are not yet at the end of history, a return to local factionalism will only slow down any form of regional development. The conclusion is that while a narrow path towards Central Asia becoming a significant factor in the geopolitical game exists, the challenges stemming from internal politics, ethnic divisions and external powers meddling in the area will be too difficult to overcome in the near future.

**Keywords:** Central Asia, Geopolitics, Regional Integration.

### 1. Introduction and Purpose

The current system of international relations is changing and we are not talking about the constant evolution that characterizes any dynamic system. The circumstantial evidence is that the current paradigm of one superpower dominating the international relations system is being replaced by a new paradigm of a multipolar world, in which, though it remains the preeminent power, the United States is unwilling or unable to impose its will on the world. We use the word circumstantial because this new paradigm is not yet formalized. New decision making institutions and bodies are being drawn up and old ones are evolving, however the current system still empowers the old paradigm.

On the international stage, both in absolute and relative terms, there is an obvious and measurable decline of the western powers with a corresponding rise of non-European or non-American international actors. Power in international relations is directly proportional with the available resources, be they human, financial, material or political ones. To any objective observer such a change in paradigm is therefore not surprising and actually to be expected when analyzing the resources of the various actors on the international stage. It follows therefore that a new ever-evolving balance will become the focus point of actions and activities by the powers that are trying to shape this balance.

It is also obvious that new fault lines are being drawn up as revisionist powers – and by revisionist, we are simply referring to rising powers who are not accepting the current status quo of western dominance in international relations – are trying to take advantage of the new power voids that have arisen between the former spheres of influence. Due to various economic, social and political factors, all great powers are at a low point in their power-projecting capabilities and actual influence on the world stage and that includes The United States, the European Union, Russia and China. Of course, the trends are inversed as the western powers are on a descendent one and the Asian powers are on an ascendant trend, however the present day capabilities of all the major powers are at a relatively low standard compared to any point in their past.

The power voids created by the new dynamics in international relations have allowed countries with regional ambitions to have real influence on an international scale thus defining the new paradigm of a multipolar system on international relations. While this multipolarity can be observed on all continents, it is nowhere more visible as in the Asian Continent. Turkey, Iran, India and Pakistan have all staked their claims, some more forcefully than others to occupy what they see as their rightful place in the international system. Between major powers and regional powers, in what was often defined as a key strategic position lies the territory of what is commonly named Central Asia.

The purpose of the article is to identify the various paths – economic, political, social and cultural ones – of regional cooperation open to the countries of Central Asia and to determine if any such path can ensure a level of geopolitical autonomy that can surpass the current status quo of the area as a stage on which various powers are vying for influence. The main challenges for such an approach stem from the both internal and external factors that significantly limit the countries maneuverability on the international stage.

## **2. Research Framework and Methodology**

Central Asia is probably one of the most under-represented subjects of research in the field of modern international relations. As a focal point of influence for both major and regional Asian powers and western great powers, the countries of Central Asia have been the subject of several studies in the last few years, mostly due to the ever-increasing role of Asia in international relations.

Any research in the field of international relations implies a global perspective in order to identify the systemic processes and the cause-effect relations that are applicable. Taking into consideration the three major methodological approaches: case-studies, quantitative analysis and formal methods, we argue that an inter-methodological approach is needed for any complex theme of such a nature.

Due to the high degree of speculation concerning international actors and the relations between them, quantitative research seems the most viable method though the descriptive historical approach offers an invaluable temporal perspective on the evolution of the system of international relations. A probabilistic analysis of the evolution of international relations in Central Asia needs a basis in statistic data.

Any quantitative method requires a statistical analysis starting from available economic, political and social data in order to infer probabilistic results concerning the actions and activities of both the countries of Central Asia and the international actors involved. The purpose of using such a method is to reduce a large amount of information into an accessible form as a usable database. Concerning the application of formal methods and admitting the simplification tendency, inherent to established models we can state their utility in the study of international relations due to the relatively low number of involved actors and a longer strategic evolution which allows a greater validity of the utilized statistical models.

Research methods are in general techniques for collecting data. Once collected, such data must be interpreted in order to identify a common rationality behind the actions of international actors while accepting at the same time the empirical relativity of the analyzed events. We highlight the need for a methodological approach that combines various paths in order to fully understand the evolution of the international relations in general and in Central Asia in particular. Such an approach is necessary as the field of international relations expands from a simple definition in terms of power projecting and spheres of influence to an extended definition that takes into consideration the various systems of norms and values that have come to define the modern world.

As such, for a historical perspective, we highlight Peter Frankopan's "*The Silk Roads*" (2105) which reassesses the world history from the point of view of the rise of Asian countries that will come to define more than ever the new system of international relations. At the same time, the historical connections are made by Nick & Savara (2013). The volume tracks the evolution of the ideas presented by Halford Mackinder more than a century ago and their various interpretations in present times, creating a sort of red wire through the evolution of the area. The new great game of international relations is the subject of several studies with either a narrower focus on specific issues like China's and India's roles in Central Asia for Laruelle et al, (2010), respectively the connections between Xinjiang, China and Central Asia for Mackeras and Clarke (2009) or a more inclusive approach that treat Central Asia as a geopolitical unit and a stage for the major powers vying for influence. As such, the regional contests of a multipolar world and the geopolitical competition are presented by Cooley (2012), the challenges of economic development and their influence on the geopolitics of the area are analyzed by Laruelle and Peyrouse (2013) and the argument for regional cooperation as a condition for an increase in security is made by Patnaik (2016).

The recent studies on Central Asia focus mostly on the new great game and the possible evolution of the countries involved, depending on the winning influences. This paper contends that regional integration based on economic cooperation is the sole path towards geopolitical autonomy and self-determination from an international relations point of view.

### **3. The Paths Toward Regional Cooperation in Central Asia and Their Challenges**

The present system of international relations promotes cooperation between various countries based on the axiomatic concept of its preference compared to a system in which the lack of rules allows unilateral action as the basis of an external activity. However, as history has shown us over and over again, any actor on the international stage acts in their own self-interest at all times. By definition international cooperation requires a certain level of compromise and a certain renunciation of short-term interests in favor of long-term gains. Also, if we understand cooperation as a first step towards integration, it will impose a limitation of national sovereignty. Though from specific points of view we can argue that the Central Asia area includes Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan – also parts of Russia, the Xinjiang province of China, northern Pakistan and Afghanistan, we will focus in this article on the political realities on the ground and limit our analysis to the five countries mentioned above.

As a first set of relevant economic data we will focus on the import-export statistics of the Central Asian countries, noticing that there is a surprising equilibrium between trade partners at continental level with the specific exceptions of Turkmenistan exports and the even more surprising Kyrgyzstan exports which reverse the general aspect of the area.

Table 1: Import export partners of Central Asian countries by continent – 2015 data

	Imports from Asia (excluding Russia)	Imports from Europe (including Russia)	Exports to Asia (excluding Russia)	Exports to Europe (including Russia)
Turkmenistan	58%	40%	93%	5,9%
Kazakhstan	63%	30%	70%	27%
Uzbekistan	57%	41%	51%	48%
Tajikistan	70%	29%	59%	31%
Kyrgyzstan	65%	30%	38%	62%

*Source of data: AJG Simoes, CA Hidalgo. The Economic Complexity Observatory: An Analytical Tool for Understanding the Dynamics of Economic Development. Workshops at the Twenty-Fifth AAAI Conference on Artificial Intelligence, (2011). Author's own interpretation of data.*

We notice a relative balance and diversity between of Central Asian economies concerning import-export data. Of course it is less surprising the fact that most of the exports include raw materials and petroleum products while the imports include equipment and machinery and finite products. The lack of a more advanced industry is an important cause for the lack of any significant trade between the countries of Central Asia themselves.

Table 2: Import export trade relations between Central Asia countries – 2015 data

	Imports from Turkmenistan	Imports from Kazakhstan	Imports from Uzbekistan	Imports from Tajikistan	Imports from Kyrgyzstan
Turkmenistan		2,1%	Below 1%	Below 1%	Below 1%
Kazakhstan	Below 1%		2,3%	Below 1%	Below 1%
Uzbekistan	Below 1%	9,4%		Below 1%	1%
Tajikistan	Below 1%	12%	Below 1%		Below 1%
Kyrgyzstan	Below 1%	17%	1,8%	Below 1%	

*Source of data: AJG Simoes, CA Hidalgo. The Economic Complexity Observatory: An Analytical Tool for Understanding the Dynamics of Economic Development. Workshops at the Twenty-Fifth AAAI Conference on Artificial Intelligence, (2011). Author's own interpretation of data.*

It is obvious that the more advanced economy of Kazakhstan offers the largest connection for the national economies of Central Asia, however in the absence of more specialized and developed economies, it is hard to expect anything else. Simply put, they all offer the same products for use in advanced industries which are not being developed enough in Central Asia. Herein lies the main economic argument of this paper. Not one Central Asian country, with the possible exception of Kazakhstan, has the economic strength to rapidly evolve into an advanced and diversified economy so the only successful option in the short and medium term is specialization. However specialization has its drawbacks concerning the diversification of products which is needed for any sustainable economy. The solution is economic integration characterized by specialization at national level and diversity at regional level. Such a solution will clearly create true interdependent economies between these countries which will offer a sustainable economic model at a regional level however at a price – the limitation of economic independence.

Though the economic aspects should form the basis of any serious discussion toward regional cooperation, the political factors are the decisive ones. In March 2018, at the first summit of Central Asian countries since 2009, when the topic of conversation was focused solely on the Aral Sea, there were discussion on regional trade, regional security, water and electricity sharing and the possibility of increasing trade of goods rather than importing them from other countries. The key phrase of “uniting our countries potentials” from the Kazakh president may



usher a new period of real cooperation after the strained relation with the former Uzbek leadership.

A key element for any economic cooperation is understanding the needs stemming from the current economic structure of the five economies. Thus, according to the latest data from 2015, the export structure of the five economies implies an overreliance on a few raw products. For Turkmenistan, 80% of their exports are petroleum gas followed by refined petroleum at 5%, peat at 2,8%, crude petroleum at 2,7% and raw cotton at 2,6%. For Kazakhstan, 53% represents crude petroleum, followed by refined copper at 5%, petroleum gas at 4,7%, ferroalloys at 3,8% and refined petroleum at 2,2%. In the case of Uzbekistan, 32% of exports are represented by gold, followed by 9,9% petroleum gas, 8,3% pure cotton yarn, radioactive chemicals at 7,4% and refined copper at 5,8%. For Tajikistan, raw aluminum represents 30% of exports followed by 17% gold, 9,8% raw cotton, 6,7% lead ore and 6,6% zinc ore. Finally, for Kyrgyzstan, gold represents 49% of their exports, followed by precious metal ore at 4,8%, dried legumes at 3,9%, planes and helicopters at 3% and refined petroleum at 2,8%.

Analyzing the structure of the export data, we can distinguish an expected reliance on raw materials, however also a potential complementarity in the use of such resources. Of course exporting petroleum products and raw materials for high-tech industries is the mainstay of these economies, but the key element of any developing economy is the need for energy. If, through regional cooperation the Central Asian countries can solve their water and electricity issues, the benefit from an overabundance of energy as the primordial element for any jump in productivity.

The main challenges towards any form of regional cooperation stem from the internal politics of the five countries. Solving the ethnic factionalism of the area while maintain intact the power structure can only be done through active cooperation and compromise. Under the best conditions solving the ethnic and religious issues would be a major challenge for these countries with weak economies and whose main economic problems involve sharing of basic resources like water and electricity. However, not only these issues need to be solved in a bad economic climate but also under the threat of external meddling.

We consider it a given fact of the international relations system that any action of a great power is guided by the self-interest of that respective country. At best, any given proposal of a major power for the countries of Central Asia will benefit both the major power and the area itself with the majority of the benefits coming on the side of the major power.

Central Asia represents, at this point in time, a power void in international relations. There is no obvious hegemon of the area with Russia being unable to dominate as in the past and China trying to expand economically, while retreating western powers are still involved from the point of view of regional security and though with a relatively low impact their soft power initiatives are consistent.

Between Russia's autocratic policies and China's economic ones, the western powers offer an alternative vision though there is a marked lack of interest from both European countries and Central Asian ones in any strengthened cooperation. While authoritarian political regimes see democratization and similar conditions imposed by the western powers for any aid or cooperation as an existential threat, from an economic point of view there are significant opportunities for cooperation. The main investment that can easily be obtained without any significant drawback is concerning educational policies. Designing such policies that avoid the brain drain phenomenon, but allow competitive and modern education for the average citizen is a relatively easy achievable goal for the countries of Central Asia.

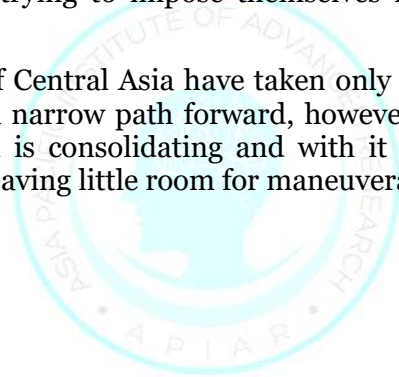
The name of the game for smaller countries was always of playing the major powers one against each other while obtaining either economic gains or security guarantees. This new “*great game*” is rising in complexity with the involvement of regional powers like Iran and Turkey which see Central Asia or parts of it as rightful areas of interest.

Any form of political integration is simply not realistic at the moment in Central Asia, however significant economic cooperation as a first step towards a regional economy is definitely possible. The social and cultural challenges represent the economic opportunities that can be used to increase the level of cooperation.

### **Conclusions**

We started this paper under the axiomatic view that geopolitical autonomy on the international stage is to be preferred to the status of satellite countries. In order to obtain this autonomy, an independent, sustainable economy is paramount. Any such economy simply cannot be accomplished at national level in Central Asia for the foreseeable future. The high degree of complexity of modern advanced economies and the wide gulf between the development levels in the five Central Asian countries imply that only through the regional integration of their economies can these countries maintain and increase their geopolitical independence. However, economic integration has two major challenges. On one hand from an internal point of view, cooperation on socio-cultural and political issues is needed in order to transcend historic divisions and on the other hand political cooperation is key in resisting the influence of major and regional powers that are trying to impose themselves in this new multipolar system of international relations.

Until now, the five countries of Central Asia have taken only minor steps towards the required level of cooperation. There is a narrow path forward, however sustainable action is needed, as the new geopolitical paradigm is consolidating and with it the surrounding powers are also consolidating their influence, leaving little room for maneuverability at an international level.



## References

- i. Cooley A., 2014. *Great Games, Local Rules*. sl.: Oxford University Press.
- ii. Frankopan, P., 2015, *The Silk Roads*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- iii. Laruelle M., Huchet J., Peyrouse S., & Balci B., 2010. *China and India in Central Asia*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- iv. Laruelle M., & Peyrouse S., 2015. *Globalizing Central Asia*. New York: Routledge.
- v. Megoran N., & Sharapova S., 2013. *Central Asia in International Relations*. London: Hurst & Company.
- vi. Patnaik A., 2016. *Central Asia-Geopolitics, Security and Stability*. New York: Routledge.
- vii. Simoes A., Hidalgo C., 2011. The Economic Complexity Observatory: An Analytical Tool for Understanding the Dynamics of Economic Development. *Workshops at the Twenty-Fifth AAAI Conference on Artificial Intelligence*.

