

# THE CHINA AND EURASIA FORUM QUARTERLY

---

Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program

---

*Volume 7, No. 3*

*October 2009*



*Central Asia- Caucasus Institute  
Silk Road Studies Program*



# THE CHINA AND EURASIA FORUM QUARTERLY

*Volume 7, No. 3*

*October 2009*

Editor-in-Chief

Niklas Swanström

Institute for Security and Development Policy



*Central Asia- Caucasus Institute  
Silk Road Studies Program*

The *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* is a publication of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program.

The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program is a joint transatlantic independent and externally funded research and policy center. The Joint Center has offices in Washington and Stockholm, and is affiliated with the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of Johns Hopkins University and the Institute for Security and Development Policy (ISDP). It is the first Institution of its kind in Europe and North America, and is today firmly established as a leading center for research and policy worldwide, serving a large and diverse community of analysts, scholars, policy-watchers, business leaders and journalists. The Joint Center aims to be at the forefront of research on issues of conflict, security and development in the region; and to function as a focal point for academic, policy, and public discussion of the region through its applied research, its publications, teaching, research cooperation, public lectures and seminars.

**The China and Eurasia Forum** is an independent forum which seeks to bring together regional experts, academics, government policy makers, and business leaders with an interest in the growing relationship between China and Eurasia. Focusing primarily on Sino-Central Asian, Sino-Russian, and Sino-Caucasian relations, the aim of *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* is to foster discussion and information sharing between a geographically distant community that recognizes the significance of China's emergence in this important part of the world. The journal aims to provide our readers with a singular and reliable assessment of events and trends in the region written in an analytical tone rather than a polemical one.

### **Abstracting Services**

The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly is currently noted in the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS) and is also available through EBSCO Research Databases.

### **Subscriptions**

Subscription inquiries and requests for hard copies should be addressed to: The China and Eurasia Forum, The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, 1619 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 20036, United States or The China and Eurasia Forum, The Silk Road Studies Program, Institute for Security and Development Policy, V. Finnbodav. 2, 13130 Nacka-Stockholm, Sweden. E-mail: [nnorling@silkroadstudies.org](mailto:nnorling@silkroadstudies.org)

Visit our Website at: [www.chinaeurasia.org](http://www.chinaeurasia.org)

The statements of fact or opinion expressed in the articles and commentaries do not necessarily reflect those of the publisher and sponsors.

Printed in Singapore by Stallion Press Ltd. © Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 2007. The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly (ISSN 1653-4212) is published by the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program <[www.silkroadstudies.org](http://www.silkroadstudies.org)>.

Map used in the cover design is courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

This publication was made possible with the support of



The Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs

and



Vetenskapsrådet

The Swedish Research Council

# THE CHINA AND EURASIA FORUM QUARTERLY

## EDITORIAL BOARD

### Editor-in-Chief

**Niklas Swanström**

*Institute for Security and Development Policy, Sweden*

*E-mail: nswanstrom@silkroadstudies.org*

### Managing Editor

**Sébastien Peyrouse**

*Institute for Security and Development Policy, Sweden*

*E-mail: speyrouse@silkroadstudies.org*

### Associate Managing Editor

**Christopher Len**

*Institute for Security and Development Policy, Sweden*

*E-mail: clen@silkroadstudies.org*

### Senior Advisors

**Daniel L. Burghart**

*National Defense University,  
United States*

**Svante Cornell**

*Director, Institute for Security and  
Development Policy, Sweden*

**David M. Finkelstein**

*The CNA Corporation, United States*

**Pan Guang**

*Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences,  
China*

**Bates Gill**

*Director, Stockholm International Peace  
Research Institute, Sweden*

**Zhao Huasheng**

*Fudan University, China*

**James A. Millward**

*Georgetown University, United States*

**Malia K. Du Mont**

*Co-Founder of the China-Eurasia Forum  
and Former Associate Editor of the CEF  
Quarterly, United States*

**Matthew Oresman**

*Co-Founder of the China-Eurasia Forum,  
Former Director of the China-Eurasia  
Forum and Former Editor of the CEF  
Quarterly, United States*

**S. Frederick Starr**

*Chairman of the Central Asia-Caucasus  
Institute, United States*

**Farkhod Tolipov**

*National University of Uzbekistan,  
Uzbekistan*

**Dmitri V. Trenin**

*Carnegie Endowment for International  
Peace, Russia*

THE CHINA AND EURASIA FORUM QUARTERLY

Volume 7, No. 3

October 2009

Contents

|                                                                                                                                  |    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Editor's Note .....                                                                                                              | I  |
| Presidential Elections in Kyrgyzstan: Strategies, Context, and Implications                                                      |    |
| <i>Asel Doolotkeldieva</i> .....                                                                                                 | 5  |
| Stabilization of Afghanistan: U.S./NATO Regional Strategy and the Role of SCO                                                    |    |
| <i>Simbal Khan</i> .....                                                                                                         | II |
| Reassessing the SCO's Internal Difficulties: A Chinese Point of View                                                             |    |
| <i>Yang Shu</i> .....                                                                                                            | 17 |
| Iran and India's Cooperation toward Central Asia                                                                                 |    |
| <i>Mahmoud Balooch</i> .....                                                                                                     | 25 |
| Revisiting Female Suicide in Muslim Tajikistan: Religious, Cultural, and Public Health Perspectives                              |    |
| <i>Alisher Latypov</i> .....                                                                                                     | 31 |
| Perspectives on the SCO: Images and Discourses                                                                                   |    |
| <i>Selbi Hanova</i> .....                                                                                                        | 63 |
| The Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and Russia's Strategic Goals in Central Asia |    |
| <i>Alexander Frost</i> .....                                                                                                     | 83 |

|                                                                                            |     |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| India's Approach to Central Asia: Strategic Intent and Geopolitical Calculus               |     |
| <i>Jagannath P. Panda</i> .....                                                            | 103 |
| The Dynamics of Bilateral Relations in the South Caucasus: Iran and its Northern Neighbors |     |
| <i>Farhad Atai</i> .....                                                                   | 115 |

## Editor's Note

---

Dear Readers,

The summer of 2009 was marked by several notable events in Central Eurasia: the elections in Afghanistan and in Kyrgyzstan, a revival of Islamist activities in the Fergana Valley as well as in Tajikistan, riots in Xinjiang, and a renewed American interest in Uzbekistan.

In Kyrgyzstan, the presidential elections of July 23 allowed the incumbent president Kurmanbek Bakiyev to win a new mandate, with 76 per cent of the vote. The geopolitical success of the negotiations over the military base at Manas had served to strengthen his popularity. Bakiyev, in fact, managed the *tour de force* of increasing the rental price of the American base from US\$17 to 60 million per year, even though its status will be lowered to that of a transit zone for the coalition forces in Afghanistan. He also extracted a promise from Moscow to invest nearly US\$2 billion in the country's economy, principally in the Kambarata hydroelectric station. The numerous constitutional and legislative revisions carried out beforehand also enabled Bakiyev to consolidate his success, as did the decision to hold the elections in mid-summer, a time when much of the population retreats to the high-altitude pastures and when nearly half a million citizens of voting age are abroad, working in either Russia or Kazakhstan. These elections thus point to a new step in a concentration of power inspired by the model of Putin's Russia, but they do not bring any viable solution to the deadlock in which the country finds itself, including an unprecedented energy crisis, the criminalization of the economy, a revival of Islamic activity, and above all the disintegration of the state.

In Afghanistan, one can only wonder about the long-term significance of Hamid Karzai's re-election. It is to be hoped that it enables a real political dynamic to be established around the stabilization of the Afghan state, even though the authorities have been massively discredited by corruption. In addition, the events in Xinjiang in July made the international headlines. Despite China's desire to appear as a pole of

stability, the Uyghurs stood up to remind them, one year after the Tibetans, of their discontent with the status quo and their ability to unsettle Beijing's optimism. Today's Chinese authorities must reflect on their long-term strategy: while an education policy was implemented in the early 2000s to strengthen the Uyghurs' cultural and linguistic assimilation, in the hope of winning over the middle classes concerned with social promotion and material well-being, part of Uyghur society seems to be opposed to this acculturation policy.

Lastly, the prospects of regional stability were dealt a blow by the multiple acts of violence committed by clandestine groups linked to Islamist movements. Since mid-May, the Tajik Interior Ministry has been conducting an operation to neutralize the forces of the commander Abdulloh Rakhimov, known as Mullah Abdullo, a former Islamist warlord won over to the Taliban, who has been established in Afghanistan for several years now. The revival of Islamist activities in the region comes at the same time as Tajikistan's domestic situation is deteriorating, with former warlords becoming increasingly critical of the central state.. As for the regional environment, it also presents a challenge: at the end of May, Uzbekistan experienced terrorist attacks in Khanabad, while at the end of June, the Kyrgyz law and order forces clashed with armed Islamists, leading to the deaths of ten persons. It thus seems likely that these events mark the zone's entry into a new period of instability, in part – but not exclusively – due to the military actions taking place in Pakistan, which has pushed Central Asian militants to leave the tribal areas and return home.

In this issue, several articles are devoted to analyzing these contemporary developments. In the framework of a reflection on the social roots of Islamism, it is useful to examine the question of female suicide in post-Soviet Tajikistan not only as a religious and cultural stake, but as a problem of public health, and as evidence of strong social tensions resulting from male labor migration (Alisher Latypov). Other articles address the issues of regional institutions and multilateral relations. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization appears as one of these organizations that does not quite fit into a classic definition of regional security organization. Its purpose and functions have therefore been analyzed in a variety of ways (Selbi Hanova). Moreover, despite the

furthering of the Russo-Chinese partnership in Central Asia, relations between the CSTO and the SCO remain tense. Indeed, Russia does not conceal the fact that it gives priority to the former organization in order to weaken the military potential of the latter, and to curb Chinese strategic settlement in Central Asia (Alexander Frost). Iran is also a potentially key actor in the arena of Central Asia, yet it will not see this potential realized in the short term. However, although impeded by American pressures, Tehran is seeking to ally with Russia in the Caucasus and in the Caspian Basin and to improve its relations with its three Caucasian neighbors: with the exception of relations with Armenia, which are cordial, Iran's relations with Azerbaijan are difficult, a result of mutual suspicion and mistrust, and it will have a hard time building long-term relations with a Georgia that it denounces for its pro-Western stance (Farhad Atai). India also presents itself as a key actor in the Central Asian game: though Indian presence has remained limited in economic and strategic terms, new agreements on nuclear cooperation have recently been signed with Kazakhstan as well as with Mongolia. Moreover, the focal point of Delhi's massive involvement in Afghanistan is not only the stability of its northern neighbor, but its dual rivalry with Pakistan and China (Jagannath Panda).

After having been briefly interrupted, the section of this journal devoted to short articles analyzing current issues has been re-launched. The journal's aim is indeed to become a forum of exchange between academic milieus and decision-making circles, as promoting fruitful discussion between them will make it possible to address the region's rapid evolution. In this issue, a platform has been given to scholars from Central Asia, China, Pakistan, and Iran dealing with fundamental issues such as the elections in Kyrgyzstan (Asel Doolotkeldieva), the establishment of regional instruments to stabilize Afghanistan (Simbal Khan), the internal difficulties of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and its projects for a highway linking the region's capitals (Yang Shu), and the potential for strengthening ties between India and Iran (Mahmood Balooch).

Sébastien Peyrouse, Managing Editor

# CHINA SECURITY

*Bringing Chinese Perspectives to Washington*

A policy journal on  
China's strategic challenges

**Subscribe now!**  
[www.wsichina.org](http://www.wsichina.org)

中

國

安

全



# Presidential Elections in Kyrgyzstan: Strategies, Context, and Implications

*Asel Doolotkeldieva*<sup>\*</sup>

## Introduction

On July 23, 2009, Kurmanbek Bakiev was re-elected for a second term with an overwhelming 76.12 per cent of the vote, leaving the opposition leader Almazbek Atambaev (8.41%) and the other four candidates, Temir Sariyev (6.74 %), Toktaim Umetaliyeva (1.14%), Nurlan Motuev (0.93%), and Jinishbek Nazaryaliev (0.83%), trailing far behind.<sup>1</sup> At first glance, it would seem that the election results confirmed Kurmanbek Bakiev's greater popularity among the population over that of his rivals, not uncommon for acting presidents. The opposition claimed, for its part, that Bakiev's victory rested in great part on large-scale fraud on Election Day and on stolen administrative resources. In reality, Bakiev's electoral success was rather a result of a divided opposition, a skilful electoral campaign, and reorganized institutional design.

## A Reassessment of Presidential Elections in Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan's post-revolutionary context, characterized by a deep economic crisis, political instability, and a rapidly declining legitimacy of the acting president Kurmanbek Bakiev, was favorable to strengthening the opposition and securing its victory during this election. Yet, personal ambitions and a longstanding struggle for power between the two major opposition leaders, Omurbek Tekebaev, Ata-Meken Party's head, and Almazbek Atambaev, head of the Social Democratic Party, thwarted the forging of any desirable alliance between them. Mr. Atambaev's last-minute formal nomination as a united candidate from the opposition did not manage to mask disunity and win greater electoral support by uniting two parties. Also, Atambaev's profile was ambiguously received by

---

<sup>\*</sup> Asel Doolotkeldieva is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Political Science, Paris, France (Sciences-Po Paris). She holds an M.A. degree in International Relations and an M.A. research degree in Post-Soviet studies from the same institute. Her latest thesis is entitled "Post-colonial migrations: the case of circulations of the Kyrgyz population to Russia." Her research interests concern social and political transformations in Central Asia.

<sup>1</sup> Source: Central Electoral Commission, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 2009.

Kyrgyz society. On the one hand, he won support as a former manager, *khozaistvennik*, something which is appreciated in the post-Soviet semi-collapsed economy because it symbolizes energy, efficiency, and proficiency. He had also served earlier as the director of a large machine plant, the minister of industry, and finally as a prime minister. But, on the other hand, people judged him to be too young a politician, lacking public experience and self-control. Lastly, Atambaev is a northern native and had to face strong resistance from southern regions, which would not want to give up recently gained power.

Furthermore, Atambaev's campaign focus on strong civil control over the authorities and the fight against tribalism and regionalism was a failure. In fact, the latter have been constantly leveled as charges against the incumbent regime, and they were consequently believed by the opposition to serve as an advantageous basis for their electoral program. However, the campaign was perceived as a criticism of the authorities and not as an alternative agenda, which represented the opposition, again, as a non-constructive actor. Moreover, despite the actuality of proposed issues, they did not find resonance among the population which is largely embedded in clan politics. In short, the message was too far removed from everyday popular concerns.

Other events discredited the opposition on the eve of voting. One of Atambaev's regional campaigns, during which he appeared before the public while drunk and the inability of his team to handle this situation, gave his opponents a sensational opportunity to undermine Atambaev's seriousness and professionalism. This episode became a favorite topic of all national TV stations and newspapers, which was savored right up until the day of the election.

But the most important shock came from another opposition leader, Temir Sariiev, who at first was a part of the OND, United People's Movement, but then withdrew and presented his independent candidacy to run for the election as head of the Ak-Shumkar Party. Born in 1963, this prominent businessman, a founder of the first market of raw materials in Kyrgyzstan, made his political career as a parliamentarian and one of the leaders of the Tulip Revolution. His departure from the OND raised far reaching suspicions as to his alignment with the acting president Kurmanbek Bakiiev, who allegedly offered him a ministerial seat. Nonetheless, he succeeded to present a viable electoral program with a strong emphasis on the rule of law, freedom of media, territorial integrity, etc. Sariiev's withdrawal served not only to deprive the opposition of numerous votes but also discredited the united movement as a non-viable institution.

Disunity among opposition leaders was, however, not the sole reason for their devastating failure. No less importantly, the reinforcement of the regime in Kyrgyzstan played a crucial role in weakening the

opposition and civil society. A number of important constitutional reforms that took place shortly prior to July 2009 best illustrate this trend. Thus, on January 27, 2009, President Kurmanbek Bakiev symbolically initiated a new era of dialogue and cooperation with the opposition. This strategy afforded him the image of a constructive social partner and allowed him to discredit the opposition's protest actions as backward and incoherent politics. One month later, an initiated draft law on non-commercial organizations and on the state registration of legal entities would equip the Ministry of Justice with extensive functions, namely, to track NGOs' internal documents, to check NGOs' budgets and possibly deny them receiving foreign funding, to hinder the transfer of finances and property from headquarters to regional offices, and to suspend or stop NGO activities at the ministry's sole discretion. The draft was suspended by the Presidential Secretariat for inconsistency of certain provisions, but it nonetheless had the effect of limiting the election-related activities of NGOs. Amendments to another important law on peaceful rallies made in 2008 led to the limitation, if not impossibility, for NGOs, political parties, and the opposition of mobilizing protests. These reforms made clear to everyone that Bakiev would not hesitate to employ repressive means, unlike his predecessor, and even prevented civil society from undertaking post-election rallies. Lastly, changes made to the Electoral Code in January 2009 contain certain provisions that according to various experts favored deception during the election. For instance, the cancellation of voters' ink marking and the possibility to vote by various ID cards such as a military card or a pension card were used by the authorities to create "carousels," a mechanism allowing for one person to vote for the rest of his family.

The incumbent regime did not resort to such legislation by mere coincidence. In fact, since his first election in July 2005 when he gained post-revolutionary popular support, Kurmanbek Bakiev had to face harsh criticism from the opposition and the former political elite for his inconsistent nomination policy, the proliferation of organized crime and corruption, and betrayed revolution goals before late 2007. To address his rapidly declining legitimacy he decided to dissolve a conflicting parliament and establish a loyal party-based parliament with a pro-presidential majority in December 2007, which would implement reforms aimed at guaranteeing his political succession. He also managed to secure support from the army and law-enforcement bodies by staffing these institutions with southern natives. This strategy allowed establishing a southern majority and thus prevented any possible internal split and deviation; during the 2006 opposition rallies some northern native officers had resisted Bakiev's repressive actions.

To complement toughened legislation and the alignment of law-enforcement bodies, Bakiev implemented a skilful electoral campaign.

Thus, new crucial ideological documents such as the 20-page “Course toward the country’s renewal” (*Kurs na obnavlenie strany*), or the President’s course, and the “Strategy of the country’s development for 2009-2011” (*Strategia razvitiia strany na 2009-2011*)<sup>2</sup> curiously started appearing toward the end of his presidential term which had the same content as his official electoral program. In the first document Kurmanbek Bakiev sets up long-term priority orientations for national development while in the last one he outlines the main vectors of socio-economic development and their implementation.

In addition to the preliminary ideological brainstorming, Bakiev’s electoral campaign was keen to convey to the population a portrayal of the acting president as “simple and accessible,” “close to people and hardworking”; this was done by emphasizing his extensive working experience in government and his major achievements in the field of economic development and security in the post-revolutionary context. These achievements were specifically highlighted during the last six months of Bakiev’s term. Salaries of law enforcement personnel, as well as teachers and pensions, were thus almost doubled during this period, and the loyal mass media strived to remind the population of this fact up until Election Day. Moreover, his extensive regional working visits always coincided with official openings of schools, factories, and industrial plants. This was seen by the OSCE observation mission as a failure to the “commitment to maintain a clear separation between party and state.”

The incumbent regime’s confidence was furthermore enhanced by a number of successes achieved in foreign policy. Thus, a new deal reached with Washington on the Manas airbase turned the acting president into a keen strategist and Kyrgyzstan into a small but geopolitically important country. With the rent accrued from the Manas airbase rising from US\$17.4 million to 60 million annually and Russia’s US\$2 billion package of loans and aid arriving just when the economic crisis had severely hit the country, Bakiev’s popularity received a boost. Contrary to his predecessor, he appeared as an efficient international and regional player, able to position Kyrgyzstan at the same table as Russia, Kazakhstan, and the United States.

As one of the drivers of electoral revolutions was the failure of regime transition, another of Bakiev’s major concerns was to avoid any possible repetition of the events of 2005 – and thus the downfall of his regime. Therefore, his campaign worked to reassure the population about his intention to leave the post of president after his second term.

---

<sup>2</sup> Both documents are available on the Kyrgyz President’s website: [www.president.kg](http://www.president.kg) (September 1 2009).

It is also worth mentioning that the election was scheduled for the hottest part of the summer; it would have been possible to schedule the election for the autumn instead. In fact, during the summer a large part of the population is occupied by work in the fields and by seasonal contracts at home and abroad. In addition, Thursday, a working day, was chosen as the day for the election instead of the traditional Sunday. These circumstances, according to various experts, were ideally suited for a low level of attendance and consequently increased the possibility of potential violations of the electoral code. Furthermore, the total number of the population eligible to vote was equal to 2,000,700 people, 102,000 of whom were officially reported as living outside of country.<sup>3</sup> This figure is actually closer to one million persons according to expert estimates. And 49 external polling stations organized mainly in Russia, Kazakhstan, the U.S., and Germany hardly compensated for a low voter turnout, due to the fact that emigrants were scattered in far-flung locations, but also because of a general disillusionment and apathy towards politics that had taken root in the population.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, Bakiev's campaign and his pre-election maneuvering afforded him the image of a self-confident and solid politician who had managed to restore political stability at home, enhance economic parameters, and advance Kyrgyzstan's standing on the international stage. Thus, Marat Kazakpaev, a Kyrgyz expert, puts forward the idea that Kurmanbek Bakiev could have won the election even without the recourse to notorious "administrative resources" because "people voted for stability and peace."<sup>4</sup> Another pro-Russian expert, Alexander Knyazev, completes the aforementioned statement saying: "People are satisfied with predictability and stability which are associated with Kurmanbek Bakiev."<sup>5</sup> Stability to the detriment of freedom?

---

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Daniar Karimov, "Vtoroi srok vtorogo presidenta" [A second term of the second president], July 27, 2009, <<http://www.24.kg/election2009/53653-20090727116718.html>> (September 5 2009).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*



# Stabilization of Afghanistan: U.S.- NATO Regional Strategy and the Role of the SCO

*Simbal Khan*<sup>\*</sup>

## Introduction

In March 2009, President Obama presented the draft of a new U.S. policy on Afghanistan and Pakistan, which aimed to address the security slide in Afghanistan with a spate of new strategies. One aspect of this new thinking was to address the increasing instability by addressing the regional dynamics and engaging the main regional actors.

## Geopolitics of Afghanistan: The Regional Security Complexes

Geopolitically, Afghanistan straddles three critical regional security complexes: the Central Asian subsystem dominated by Russia, the South Asian security complex structured around India and Pakistan's intense security dynamics, and Southeast Asia, dominated by the great emerging global power of China. The U.S.-led Afghan war that deposed the Taliban government in 2001 has led to growing levels of military engagement by the U.S. and NATO. This intervention in turn is countered by a number of non-state forces which are resisting domination and marginalization through unconventional strategies, both military and economic. This conflation of the system level with the regional has had a profound impact on the security of regional states and also on their bilateral relations.

On the south-eastern borders of Afghanistan, the trans-border nature of the militant movements and terrorist networks has engulfed Pakistan in a vicious spiral of instability and insecurity. While in the north, the Central Asian neighbors and Russia are threatened by an influx of narcotics and organized criminal networks, which are an endemic feature of such ungoverned spaces as those that straddle much of Afghanistan's porous borders. The region's states have long insisted that they must be

---

<sup>\*</sup> Simbal Khan is Policy Analyst from the Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad, Pakistan.

included in devising strategies for the stabilization of Afghanistan. However, the troop surge and the continued military engagement of U.S./NATO forces in Afghanistan are likely to provide for clearly delimited and moderated levels of regional engagement. The space for regional input exists, as long as these interventions by regional states resonate with the larger objectives that have been outlined in the new U.S./NATO strategy for Afghanistan.

### **U.S.-NATO New Regional Strategy - Three Core Objectives**

The primary regional objective for the U.S. and NATO is to contain and neutralize the Taliban insurgency in the arc of instability that stretches across Afghanistan's western and southern borders. Along the south and eastern borders this has meant a practical extension of the theater of war into Pakistan as the country reels from terrorist strikes by such home grown militant organizations as the TTP (Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan). Whereas on the western borders, the regional strategy envisages a possible strategic re-engagement with Iran to neutralize the challenge of growing insurgency. At the same time there is a realization that bilateral channels alone are inadequate in addressing the whole spectrum of such issues with Pakistan, while with Iran no such bilateral channels exist.

The second objective deals with the trilateral context where the concerns of Pakistan's security establishment are addressed with reference to both India and Afghanistan. Lately there is a realization that any attempt to attach conditions that aim to change or restructure Pakistan's security calculus without affecting a change in its security environment is bound to be resisted. The unmediated involvement of India in Afghanistan has added another dangerous dimension and increased Pakistan's insecurities.

The third objective is to launch a broad multilateral initiative where regional countries such as China, Iran, Russia, and the Central Asian states and Pakistan's other strategic partners such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE are brought on board to stabilize Afghanistan and Pakistan. Within the regional scenario the potential role of China in stabilizing both Afghanistan and Pakistan is assuming greater prominence. China who is Pakistan's largest investor is poised to become the largest investor in Afghanistan as well with a US\$3.5 billion dollar stake in the Aynak copper mines south of Kabul.

Creating space for multilateral cooperation over Afghanistan has also acquired greater significance, as there is a greater urgency in securing alternate transit routes for military and non-military supplies to U.S./NATO troops stationed in Afghanistan. Currently the two transit routes through Pakistan supply 40 per cent of the fuel and 80 per cent of

non-fuel supplies for the war effort in Afghanistan. These routes are becoming more vulnerable to militant attacks.

### **Multilateral Platforms and the New Regional Strategy**

There are a number of proposed multilateral platforms that are being discussed as likely forums to realize the abovementioned regional objectives.

#### *The U.S./NATO Sponsored Contact Group*

Even before the coming into office of the Obama administration, various stakeholders floated the idea of the formation of a UN authorized Contact Group on Afghanistan. Such a group would include all the five permanent members of the Security Council as well Afghanistan's neighbors including Iran. The proposed group was also to include India and Saudi Arabia and would be tasked to promote dialogue between India and Pakistan. India's unwillingness to discuss the Kashmir issue in any multilateral forum and Pakistan's disinterest in participating in a forum that limits its interaction with India only to the situation in Afghanistan, has prevented the realization of the Contact Group so far.

#### *The 6+3*

Another initiative for a proposed multilateral group was floated in 2008 by Uzbekistan and is known as the "6+3" contact group. This proposed grouping comprises the six neighboring states of Afghanistan along with three system level actors: the U.S., NATO and Russia. The group would function under the aegis of the UN. However, one factor that has hindered the realization of the group is that the proposed 6+3 group does not include Afghanistan. The group is fashioned on the format of the older 6+2 group, which was established under UN supervision in the late 1990s for mediation between various Afghan factions when most of the world refused to recognize the Taliban government. In its current incarnation the 6+3 group places a great degree of emphasis on seeking political solutions to the problems in Afghanistan. Although ambitious and bold in breaking away from militarized and force-based solutions to the Afghan problem, it is unlikely that without the inclusion of the Afghan government this proposal is ever going to become a reality.

#### *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization*

Formed as a confidence-building mechanism eight years ago to resolve border disputes, the SCO is comprised of six full members: China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and four observers: India, Pakistan, Iran, and Mongolia. Over the past few years, the organization's activities have expanded to include increased military

cooperation, intelligence sharing, and counterterrorism drills. The SCO has also intensified its focus on Afghanistan.

At the time of its formation, the SCO was perceived to be a reactive response of the two regional great powers – China and Russia – to the military intervention in Afghanistan by the U.S. and NATO. However, this growing and sustained military intervention has unleashed certain new and disruptive forces which are reacting either defensively to survive, or offensively, to maximize the opportunities created by the continued instability. The trans-border nature of these threats, which include, terrorism, Islamic militancy, organized crime, and narcotic networks, is creating serious security challenges as well as certain opportunities for the SCO to engage in cooperation with the U.S. and NATO in stabilizing Afghanistan.

Yet, the space created for the SCO to operate in Afghanistan's stabilization is limited in scope due to the U.S./NATO military presence inside Afghanistan as well as certain inherent organizational limitations.

### **SCO and the Afghanistan Action Plan**

The SCO Special conference on Afghanistan was held in March 2009 in Moscow. The participation of Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Mehdi Akhundzadeh along with the U.S. envoy at the conference was a testament to the fact that cooperation with the SCO offers the U.S. and NATO an acceptable format to bring Iran into the dialogue on Afghanistan.

The SCO-Afghanistan Action Plan called for joint operations in combating terrorism, drug trafficking, organized crime, and for involving Afghanistan in a phased manner in SCO-wide collaboration in fighting terrorism in the region.

The conference reiterated the SCO's known opposition to the expansion of U.S. military interests in Central Asia, but indicated its willingness to expand cooperation with the U.S. and NATO in Afghanistan albeit short of sending troops. Interestingly, President Obama announced a shift in U.S. policy emphasis on the same day as the SCO summit, promising greater consultation with Afghanistan's neighbors. Following this greater interaction, U.S./NATO have recently signed transit agreements with Russia and Central Asian states which allow for military and non-military supplies to transit their territories en route to Afghanistan.

However, on closer examination the scope of the Action Plan appears modest. It limits its focus to counterterrorism and counterinsurgency strategies with their tried and tested reliance on securitized approaches. The last two elements of the Action Plan focus on building state capacity to combat terrorism and organized crime. However, although international terrorist and criminal groups such as Al Qaeda remain an

active threat to the regional states, their proliferation inside Afghanistan is a symptom of the larger problem of ungoverned spaces, as is the escalating drug trade. Any serious plan to stabilize Afghanistan must provide a political road map for better governance and inclusive state building. There is a general consensus emerging among most stakeholders that the eventual stabilization of Afghanistan will involve some negotiated settlement. The fact that this new thinking is not reflected in the SCO action plan points to certain self-imposed limitations dictated perhaps by divergent views among the member states.



# Reassessing the SCO's Internal Difficulties: A Chinese Point of View

*Yang Shu*<sup>\*</sup>

## Introduction

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is composed of Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. They possess a great amount of resources, and there is a lot of room to enhance multilateral economic and social cooperation under the SCO framework.

However, integration among the SCO members remains weak. They have very diverse levels of economic development and of potential for development, which, to a great extent, restrains the utilization of the above advantage of SCO, particularly on the issue of economic cooperation. They also display cultures different from one another, which could constitute an obstacle to building mutual political trust. Moreover, the SCO region has a complicated periphery, which extends from Eastern Europe to West Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Pacific Ocean. SCO members have to face countries with different values, social systems, cultures, religions, and interests. This complication puts the SCO in a difficult situation when conducting external foreign relations as a regional grouping.

## Focus on Central Asia

The SCO bloc covers a wide geographical expanse because two of its member countries, Russia and China, are geographically large. It is not easy for the members to formulate agreements that could be applied uniformly throughout the entire SCO bloc. Instead, the SCO should, at least for the time being, focus its efforts on the development of Central

---

<sup>\*</sup> Yang Shu is the Director of the Institute for Central Asian Studies, Lanzhou University, People's Republic of China.

Asia, where all its members have important strategic interests. China and Russia should devote themselves more to promoting their interests in Central Asia. The development of Central Asia determines the future of the SCO. SCO members should work towards deepening political, economic, cultural, transport, and communication systems within the region. Once such linkages have matured, they can be expanded to other areas and be applied to the entire geographical bloc of the SCO.

Central Asia has its own unique geopolitical characteristics: it is landlocked and thus not easily accessible; it is far away from the major economic and political centers of the world, which makes it difficult for the countries in the region to develop external ties; and the lack of water resources has become an important source of tension between the member states.

**Table 1. Distance of the Capitals of SCO Member Countries from the Nearest Coastline (km)**

| Capital   | Pacific<br>(Shanghai) | Indian Ocean<br>(Karachi) | Black Sea<br>(Novorossiysk) |
|-----------|-----------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Astana    | 4400                  | 3300                      | 3000                        |
| Ashkhabad | 5400                  | 1600                      | 1600                        |
| Bishkek   | 4000                  | 2300                      | 2800                        |
| Dushanbe  | 4400                  | 1700                      | 2400                        |
| Tashkent  | 4400                  | 2100                      | 2400                        |

**Table 2. Distance between the Economic Center of Central Asia and Several Major Cities**

| Major Cities | Distance (km) |
|--------------|---------------|
| Teheran      | 1650          |
| Karachi      | 1925          |
| Moscow       | 2585          |
| Urumqi       | 1650          |
| Delhi        | 1595          |
| Average      | 1881          |

As an organization with only a few members, but covering a wide geographical area with multi-ethnic compositions and rich resources, relations between members of the SCO can be divided into four types:

1. China-Russia relations, the core factor for the existence of the SCO and which determines the value of the organization;
2. Russia-SCO Central Asian member countries' relations. Traditionally, Russia has exerted its influence and interests in Central Asia. Thus, these relations are of great importance to the cooperation of SCO in Central Asia.
3. China-SCO Central Asian member countries' relations: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan share borders with China (which is not the case for Uzbekistan) and have complex cooperation with China in areas of security, energy, and resources.
4. Relations among SCO Central Asian member countries. The relations are complex and variable. Since Central Asia is the "heartland" of the SCO, the inability to initiate cooperation in the Central Asian region would imply the end of cooperation within the SCO. Therefore, the relations among the four countries in this area are of great significance.

### **Relations between Russia and the Central Asian Countries**

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has maintained solid relations with the four SCO Central Asian countries. However, from 2007, tensions emerged in relations between Russia and Tajikistan. Moscow stopped investment in Rogun hydropower station,<sup>1</sup> while Dushanbe downplayed the status of Russian in its language system.<sup>2</sup> In February 2008, Russia declared that all airlines from Tajikistan would be banned from Russian airspace. Although the ban lasted only for one day, it had a symbolic influence. Russia condemned Tajikistan for not being able to control the flow of drugs, resulting in large volumes entering the Russian Federation. Tajik senators and citizens protested that Russian TV programs insulted the Tajik culture. The government stated that the national military facilities could be more open to the West and less to Russia. In the summer of 2008, Tajikistan suddenly imposed fees for the

---

<sup>1</sup> Sergei Blagov, "Russia Seeks To Revive Its Energy Projects In Tajikistan," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, December 2, 2007, <[http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=33210](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=33210)> (October 19 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Konstantin Parshin, "Tajikistan: Language Row Riles Russians," *Eurasianet*, August 26, 2009, <<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eavo82609a.shtml#>> (October 19 2009).

takeoff and landing of Russian military airplanes in Tajikistan according to the market price. Due to the serious disagreements between the two countries, Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon flew to Moscow to meet Russian President Dmitry Medvedev on February 24, 2009. It should be noted that in the conflicts between the two countries over issues such as armaments, hydropower stations, humanitarian aid, etc., Tajikistan was inclined to join the Western, especially the U.S., side. Indeed, Tajikistan's alienation from Russia should be understood within the context of America's growing military operations in Afghanistan.

Relations between Russia and Kyrgyzstan are better. Russia announced a loan of US\$2 billion and free aid worth \$1.5 billion to Bishkek while it abolished the \$180 million debt owed by the Kyrgyz state. Russia also prepared to invest US\$1.7 billion in order to establish a hydropower station in Kambarata. Recently Kyrgyzstan extended the use of Kant Base by Russia to 49 years.<sup>3</sup> Russia-Uzbekistan relations, however, have not advanced smoothly since the 1990s. In October 2008, Uzbekistan proclaimed its withdrawal from the Eurasian Economic Community. And while on February 4, 2009, Russia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan agreed to build a rapid response force with 15,000 soldiers during the summit of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) held in Moscow, later, in August, Uzbekistan refused to partake in the military exercises of the CSTO.

### **Relations Between Central Asian Countries**

Due to the increasing conflicts among Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan over access to water resources, the pacts and agreements between and among countries have not been implemented or acted upon smoothly. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan even had a diplomatic confrontation. The recurring "Ketmen War"<sup>4</sup> demonstrates the harm caused by the struggle for water. In April 2009, the five countries in Central Asia held a summit in Almaty on protecting the Aral Sea. The summit was supposed to resolve conflicts among upstream states

---

<sup>3</sup> "Kyrgyzstan: Russians Kant Leave Military Airbase For 49 Years, 29 May 2009," *Eurasianet*, May 29, 2009, <<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/news/articles/eav052909.shtml>> (October 19 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Ketmen is a very popular agriculture tool in Central Asia, which is used for digging. In boundary areas of the Fergana Valley farmers used to use this tool to fight for water. This kind of scuffle is referred to as the Ketmen War.

(Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) and downstream states (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) over the distribution of water resources and the establishment of new hydropower stations. However, the summit did not reach any agreement.

In April 2008, Uzbekistan cut a third of its gas exports to Tajikistan, which posed a great challenge to the latter as it was still winter. Uzbekistan also had a severe conflict with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan over the Naryn River, which crosses their borders, and was in deadlock with Tajikistan over border negotiations. Without notification, Uzbekistan dug an entrenchment on the border with Kyrgyzstan in the Fergana Valley.<sup>5</sup> On another note, Uzbekistan did not attend the second education ministers' SCO meeting, which was held in Astana on October 22-24, 2009, and has yet to sign the mutual diploma recognition agreement.

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have been in dispute over territorial issues on a number of occasions. Kyrgyz officials, scholars, and media have criticized the territory expansion policy in the Batken Province by Tajikistan. The dispute and confrontation has been ongoing for years. The increase in conflicts in 2008, moreover, illustrated that their relationship has deteriorated rather than improved. There have also been similar territorial disputes between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, water and territorial disputes have proven to be the largest obstacles to the improvement of relations among the Central Asian countries. The issues have remained in deadlock due to the hard-line attitudes taken by the various Central Asian countries.

SCO Central Asian member countries have maintained good relationships with countries outside Central Asia, however, and have sought to develop a high level of cooperation. To reiterate, the Central Asian member states have experienced more difficulty in cooperating among themselves, and have thus far only managed to achieve a low level of cooperation.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev stated that there are two major factors that influence the relations between two countries – interests and

---

<sup>5</sup> “Na granitse Uzbekistana i Kyrgyzstana rojut protivotankovye rvy [Several anti-tank explosions on the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border],” *Ferghana.ru*, June 9, 2009, <<http://www.ferghana.ru/news.php?id=12162&mode=snews---2009.10.22>> (September 1 2009)

trust.<sup>6</sup> The Central Asian countries have worked to safeguard their own narrow self-interests, rather than towards achieving win-win outcomes. Their relationships lack trust and are often marred by conflicts with one another. The situation among Central Asian countries has influenced their cooperation within the SCO and affected the multilateral potential of the grouping. For example, as the SCO developmental fund has not yet been established, the Chinese government separately offered SCO member countries preferential loans to solve their financial difficulties by means of bilateral cooperation. The total amount is more than US\$2 billion. As a result, cooperation is often bilateral in nature. If the trend towards bilateral cooperation continues, the SCO will become an organization that has no “heart” since intra-regional cooperation among members in the Central Asia region would be insignificant.

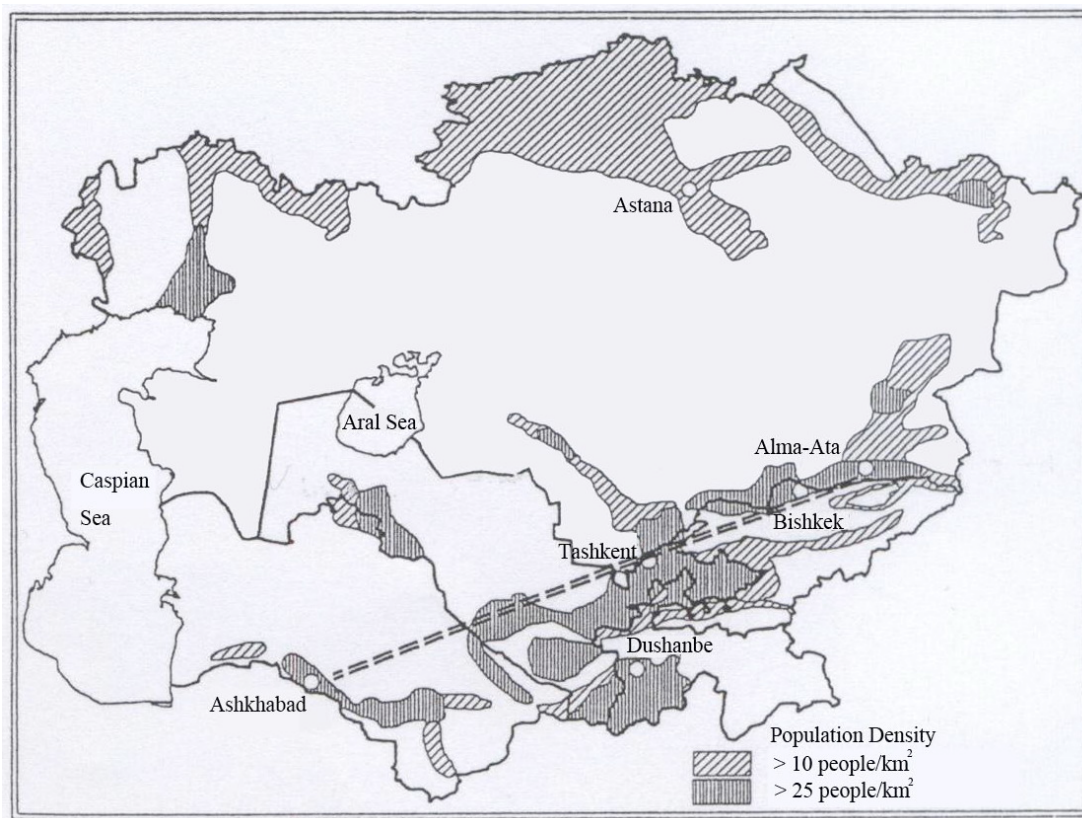
There are many additional reasons for the low level of cooperation among countries in Central Asia. One of the key reasons is the increasing disparity of development among them. An effective measure to reduce such disparity is to enhance the intra-regional links through investment in transport infrastructure. Currently Central Asia possesses few high quality highways that link the countries of the region. I propose here that a highway from Almaty to Ashkhabad (the sketch map is presented below) should be constructed. We can find an interesting point on the map: if we draw a line between Kazakhstan’s former capital Almaty and Turkmenistan’s capital Ashkhabad, the three other capitals are also located on the line except for a slight deflection in the case of Dushanbe. The areas around the line exhibit the densest populations in Central Asia, especially the Fergana Valley, where population density reaches 300-400 per square kilometer. Although the valley only covers only 15 per cent of Central Asia, it contains 67 per cent of its people. The highway will benefit most people in Central Asia and promote regional economic development and cooperation. There is no technical obstacle in constructing the highway. The main problem is investment. With the approval of Central Asian countries, the SCO will provide support for the construction and make it an open program that welcomes the participation from other countries and organizations. These countries and

---

<sup>6</sup> Yuri Mamchur, “Medvedev Wants ‘Fresh Start’ in U.S.-Russia Relations, But Doesn’t Start Fresh Himself,” November 5, 2008, <[http://www.russiablog.org/2008/11/medvedev\\_obama\\_fresh\\_start\\_us\\_russia\\_speech.php](http://www.russiablog.org/2008/11/medvedev_obama_fresh_start_us_russia_speech.php)> (September 1 2009).

organizations may include the U.S., EU, Japan, South Korea, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, and India.

**Map 1. Sketch Map of the Great Highway Corridor of Central Asia**



## Conclusion

In my opinion, Central Asia is the core area of the SCO, thus emphasizing the cooperation among Central Asian countries would surely only enhance the cooperation quality of the SCO. The cooperation level is determined by the following four actor linkages: relationships between Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, the Russo-Sino relationship, and the four countries' relationships with Russia and China. There presently exist problematic relationships between the four Central Asian countries, which are caused by several reasons. One of them is the lack of necessary transportation infrastructure. If this situation could be changed, the cooperation quality will be highly improved.



# Iran and India's Cooperation in Central Asia

Mahmoud Balooch\*

## Introduction

Iran, located by the Persian Gulf, Oman Sea, and Central Asia, is in the center of a perpetual “hot spot” in world affairs. It is situated at the eastern end of the oil-rich Persian Gulf and a possible export route for the natural resources of Central Asia. Iran's geostrategic position allows it to play an important role in connecting India to Central Asia militarily and strategically. India sees Central Asia and Iran, situated at the crossroads of overland trading routes, as potential consumer markets for Indian products. Meanwhile, Iran sees in India a cost-effective source of high-technology inputs.<sup>1</sup> However, this potential has yet to translate into major economic benefits. Among others, the region's distance from the sea is a major disadvantage. This article therefore describes cooperation between Iran and India to create a North-South corridor, and more specifically, a trade route between Central Asia and the Iranian port of Chabahar, located on the south-eastern part of the Oman Sea and Indian Ocean.

## The Geopolitical Framework

Relations between India and Iran have been deepening with respect to most issues, especially security, energy, and the North-South Transportation Corridor. Transportation relations were initiated in January 2003 when the Iranian president visited India, at which time the two nations signed a number of agreements, including a “Memorandum of Understanding on the Road Map to Strategic Cooperation.”<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the foregoing, Tehran and New Delhi have been discussing the construction of a natural gas pipeline from Iran via

---

\* Mahmoud Balooch, Research Scholar at the Defence and Strategic Studies Department, Pune University, India.

<sup>1</sup> Robert E. Ebels, Rajan Menon, *Energy and Conflict in Central Asia and the Caucasus* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), pp. 1-21.

<sup>2</sup> Donald L. Berlin, “India-Iran Relations: A Deepening Entente,” Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, (October 2004), pp. 23.

Pakistan (or via the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea) to India. The two countries want to establish a trade bloc consisting of India, Iran, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan to promote trade and commerce in Central Asia. Indo-Iranian trade has been growing steadily with bilateral trade reaching around US\$12.896 billion in the financial year 2007-2008, with non-petroleum products accounting for US\$2.3 million,<sup>3</sup> but which is not considered optimal given the good political relations between the two countries. With the development of Chabahar port and the 200 kilometer North-South Corridor linking Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and India, the future trade in this area is potentially destined to grow.<sup>4</sup>

The potential for India-Central Asian trade has been hamstrung by the India-Pakistan rivalry. The shortest route from India to the Central Asian republics is through Pakistan and Afghanistan, but New Delhi cannot use this route given its troubled relations with Islamabad. The relationship between India-Iran-Central Asia provides a new link which could transform the face of trade in the region. Linking the Indian commercial capital of Mumbai with the Iranian ports of Chabahar and Bandar Abbas by maritime transport, the North-South Corridor will then rely on road and rail networks to connect Chabahar port and Bandar Abbas with Central Asia and Afghanistan. In fact, Iran has land links to Central Asia, and its ports offer warm-water sea routes to India. The corridor could evolve towards boosting trade between Central Asia and the world. This new initiative is expected to reduce the cost of transit and transportation of goods. The North-South Corridor holds out new hope for India for it “will enable India to bypass Pakistan and yet reach out to Central Asia.”<sup>5</sup>

### The Transportation Issue

India needs Iran to achieve its varied objectives in Central Asia. Iran, for its part, sees a tremendous complementarity of interest with India. Both governments are optimistic about the commercial benefits of Central Asia markets and hope to share the benefits of the North-South Transit Corridor. Iran will require massive infrastructure investments to extract maximum benefits from it, and India is lined up to provide cost-effective

---

<sup>3</sup> Hossieny, “Two percent Indian trade with Iran,” *Sarmayeh* (Persian Newspaper), November 3, 2008. <http://www.sarmayeh.net/ShowNews.php?21518> (August 1 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Vijay G. Kalantri, “India, Iran trade relations growing,” *Ettela’at* (Persian Daily Newspaper), June 17, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Sudha Ramachandran, “India, Iran, Russia map out trade route,” *Asia Times Online*, June 29, 2002, <<http://www.atimes.com/ind-pak/DF29Dfo2.html>> (August 1 2009).

intellectual and material assistance in the development of information technology networks, ports, roads, and rail projects.<sup>6</sup>

With the completion of the Mashhad-Sarakhs-Tajan railway in 1996, the landlocked Central Asian states became linked to Iran and saw a slow decrease of their dependency on the Russian railways and road system.<sup>7</sup> The Indian Government's Border Road Organization financed to the tune of US\$136 million the opening up of a road link between the deep ports at Chabahar in Iran and Afghanistan's main ring road highway system. The 215-kilometer road from Zaranj to Delaran was completed on January 22, 2009. This is part of a garland road network in Afghanistan that forms a circular route connecting Herat and Kabul via Mazar-e-Sharif in the north and also Kandahar in the south, thereby potentially connecting Afghanistan to Uzbekistan.<sup>8</sup> This fits in with Iran's focus on Central Asia, which lies to its north-east, a region that has seen increasing development as compared to its south and east, with Mashhad emerging as the second largest city of Iran.<sup>9</sup>

India and Iran have been making progress on their commitment to build a North-South Corridor with the participation of Russia. Iran and India signed an agreement, called the Inter-Governmental agreement on International North-South Transport Corridor, in September 2000 in St. Petersburg. India and Iran also entered into an agreement to open up a transportation route with Turkmenistan in February 1997. This agreement provides a legal framework for the multi-modal movement of goods from India to Iran and Turkmenistan, and other Central Asian countries may also join the arrangement in the future. This North-South Corridor permits the transit of goods from Indian ports to Iran's port of Bandar Abbas, and hopefully to Chabahar in the future. Currently, goods transit through Iran via rail to Iran's Caspian Sea ports of Bandar Anzale and Bandar Amirabad. They are then transferred to ports in Russia's sector of the Caspian Sea, Central Asia, and finally Europe.<sup>10</sup>

As a part of the North-South agreement, India agreed to help expand the Iranian port of Chabahar. Meeting in Tehran in January 2003, Iran, India, and Afghanistan signed a memo on the Development and Construction of the Transit and Transport Infrastructure with the intent of improving the route from Chabahar port to the Afghan cities of Zaranj

<sup>6</sup> C. Christine Fair, "Indo-Iranian Ties: Thicker than oil," *The Middle East Review of International Affairs* 11, 1, (March 2007), p. 45.

<sup>7</sup> Majid Abulverdi, "Investigating Iran-Turkmenistan Relations," *Journal of Central Asia and Caucasus Studies* 56 (2006), p. 25.

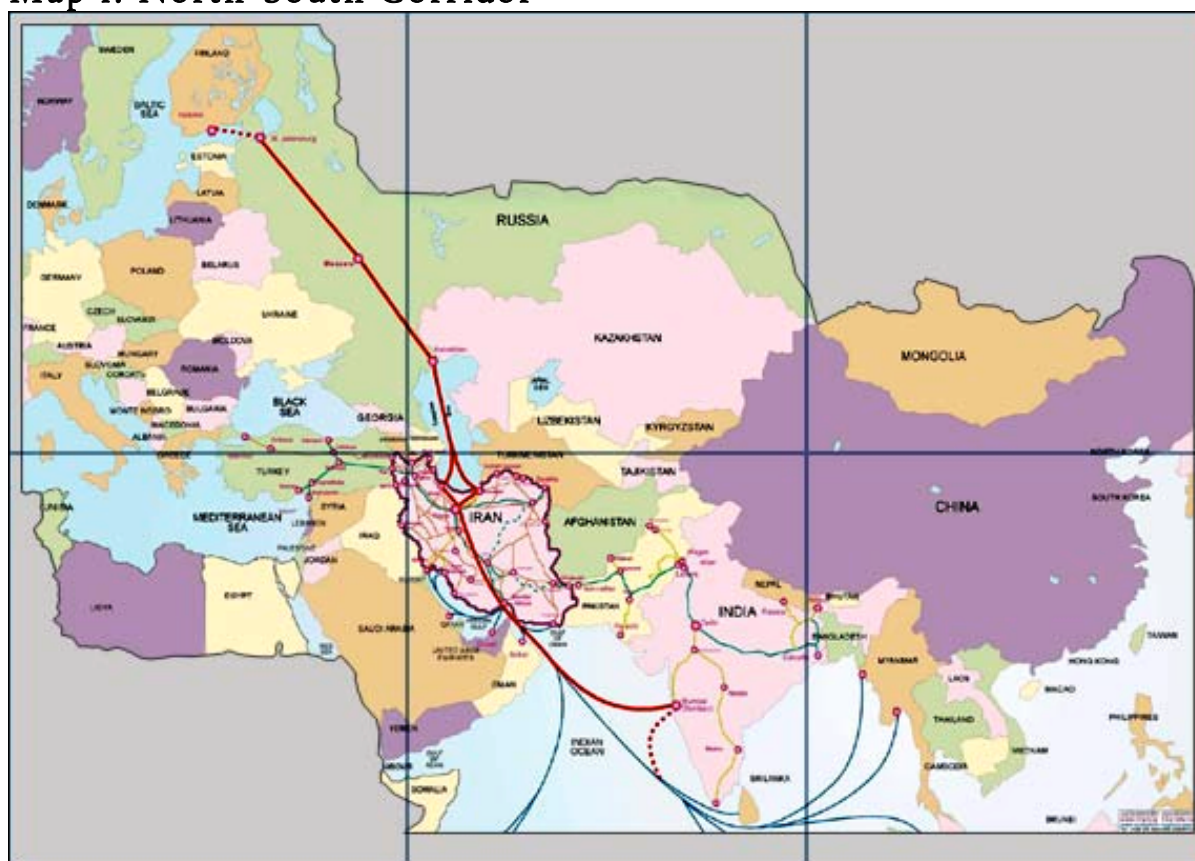
<sup>8</sup> Shubha Singh, "Bound by history," *The Pioneer*, January 27, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Ertan Efegil and Leonard A. Stone, "Iran's Interests in Central Asia: A Contemporary Assessment," *Central Asian Survey* 20, 3 (2001), p. 353.

<sup>10</sup> Aaron J. Sushil, "Straddling Faultlines: India's foreign policy toward the Greater Middle East," *CSH Occasional Paper* 7 (2003), pp. 41-43; Ramachandran, "India, Iran, Russia Map out Trade Routes."

and Delarm. In addition, an Indian consortium has been engaged by the Iranian ports and shipping companies to undertake development work at the Chabahar port and on the Chabahar–Fahraj–Bam Railway link. Iran hopes that expanding Chabahar will relieve some of the congestion in Bandar Abbas. Part of the concern that emanates from this activity is the ambiguity about what kind of facility or facilities will materialize at Chabahar port. India claims that this will be a commercial port. However, others in the region – such as Pakistan and China – fear that once it is complete, Indian naval vessels will have a presence there. These apprehensions are important and may affect the Chinese and Pakistani planning at Pakistan’s Gwadar port. The Gwadar port lies along Pakistan’s Makoran Coast, only 200 kilometers from Chabahar port. Gwadar is being modernized and expanded with Chinese capital and it is hoped that this port will diminish Pakistan’s vulnerability to a naval blockade of its port in Karachi. It has added importance in the light of purported Indian and Iranian activities at Chabahar.<sup>11</sup>

**Map 1: North-South Corridor**



Source: [www.instc.org](http://www.instc.org).

<sup>11</sup> Rizvan Zeb, “Gwadar and Chabahar: Competition or Complimentarily,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, October 22, 2003.

## **Conclusion**

The location of Iran is ideal for the northern neighboring countries of Central Asia, and they have been interested in connection, security, and low cost of transiting their goods from Iran. None of these countries have access to warm waters. The creation of the North-South Corridor is the best opportunity for Iran to expand its transit corridor to India. The idea of the North-South Corridor has multiple purposes and is, therefore, seen as an opportunity to bypass the East-West Silk Road project.

Iran gains political and economic benefits from trade with Russia, Central Asia, and India, perhaps at the expense of Pakistan. India gets access to Russian, Central Asian, and Eastern European markets for its goods and links to a variety of energy import sources. Although India is closest to the Central Asian supply chain and could potentially be the biggest consumer of Central Asian exports, it currently has no toe-hold in the region.

The United States would prefer a route via Afghanistan, but it is likely to be a long time before peace returns there and any trade route would be considered safe. Lacking direct access to Central Asia, India sees Iran as a useful gateway to the markets and natural resources of that region. India hopes that it can diversify its energy sources from Central Asia, which has long figured imminently in these plans. India believes the Iranian route, therefore, may be the easiest and possibly the cheapest gateway for Central Asian goods. The route would travel some 1,300 kilometers (over 800 miles) through Iran to its warm water ports of Chabahar in the Arabian Sea. The port of Chabahar is a cargo terminal with connections to Central Asia and Afghanistan and the Indian commercial capital of Mumbai. Hence these are ideal trans-shipping points.



# Revisiting Female Suicide in Muslim Tajikistan: Religious, Cultural, and Public Health Perspectives

*Alisher Latypov*<sup>\*</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This article explores religious, cultural, and public health dimensions of female suicide in post-Soviet Muslim Tajikistan by contextualizing the findings from interviews with Tajik women and staff of the Dushanbe-based Burn Center, Toxicology Center, Emergency Department and Surgery Center within broader historical material, archival sources, religious texts, cultural studies, and scholarly research of suicide and self-immolation in Soviet and post-Soviet Central Asia. The results of this multidisciplinary analysis suggest that pre-Islamic beliefs may play an important role in determining regional differences in methods of suicide employed in contemporary Tajikistan. Actual completed suicide rates in Tajikistan may be higher for females than for males. This article will propose avenues for further research including the relationship between female suicide and male labor migration.

*Keywords* • Tajikistan • Central Asia • Female Suicide • Self-Immolation • Culture • Religion • History

## Introduction

Suicide among Tajik women has become a matter of increasing concern in recent years. As one of the most dramatic ways of taking one's own life, female self-immolation has invariably been in the spotlight of local mass media and gender activists. "Tajikistan in denial over spiraling suicide rate," "Death in fire," "A wave of self-immolations ran through

---

<sup>\*</sup> Alisher Latypov is a Research Student at the Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine at University College London, UK. He is currently working on his doctoral thesis, *The Administration of Addiction: The Politics of Medicine and Opiate Use in Soviet Tajikistan, 1924-1958*. I am very grateful to Hayot Aliev for his assistance in contacting and accessing health care facilities in Dushanbe and to Irene Jillson for her valuable contribution and encouragement. I am thankful to Vivienne Lo, Michael Stanley-Baker, Guy Attewell, and Sarah Marks for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I am indebted to the Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine at UCL for its support.

Tajikistan,” “Only Islam can stop increasing number of suicides among women,” – these are just a few of the many catchy titles that one could find in Tajik newspapers and on-line publications issued over the last six years and devoted to female suicide in that country. Although the authors of these articles have been helpful in sensitizing the public and raising political awareness of the problem, they have not provided in-depth analysis of social, cultural, religious, and epidemiological contexts. In Tajikistan, a more thorough investigation of female self-immolation was conducted by Mamadalieva et al. and Mukhamadiev.<sup>1</sup> Certain attempts at describing and considering self-immolation among Tajik women have also been made by local researchers writing in the English language.<sup>2</sup>

Most of the published studies of suicide in Soviet and post-Soviet Central Asian countries have been based on the quantitative analysis of reported suicide rates and were commonly an initial work.<sup>3</sup> They raised a number of important questions to be addressed by means of qualitative studies and highlighted areas for further research, such as exploring precipitants of and psychological motives for suicide<sup>4</sup> and investigating the degree of underestimation of suicide rates through interviews with relatives and professionals.<sup>5</sup> Studies of suicide in Muslim and Islamic nations also suggested a strong possibility that “completed and attempted suicidal behavior is covered up” and stressed the need for substantial theorizing and research in order to better understand the occurrence and characteristics of suicidal behavior in those nations.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, a recent study of Muslim culture and female self-immolation proposed nine questions for future investigation in Central Asia including motivations for self-immolation, experiences and perceptions of survivors and family members, availability of health and

---

<sup>1</sup> M. Mamadalieva, S. Muminova and S. Davliyorova, *Self-Immolations of Women: Causes and Factors* (Dushanbe: NGO Zan va Zamin, 2006); Davron Mukhamadiev, “Self-Immolation of Women under the Conditions of Extreme Psychotraumatic Situations” (Dushanbe: Department of Psychiatry of the Tajik State Medical University named after Abu Ali Ibn Sino), <<http://www.medlinks.ru/article.php?sid=106>> (April 2 2008).

<sup>2</sup> N. Avakova, *Self-Immolation of Tajik Women: An Attempt at Describing and Considering* (MA thesis, Central European University, Budapest College, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Cynthia Buckley, “Suicide in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan: Role Stress, Age and Gender,” *Central Asian Survey* 16, 1 (1997), pp. 45–52.

<sup>4</sup> David Lester, “Suicide and Homicide after the Fall of Communist Regimes,” *European Psychiatry* 13, 2 (1998), pp. 98–100; David Lester, “Suicide in Post-Soviet Central Asia,” *Central Asian Survey* 18, 1 (1999), pp. 121–124.

<sup>5</sup> Danuta Wasserman and Airi Värnik, “Reliability of Statistics on Violent Death and Suicide in the Former USSR, 1970–1990,” *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* 98, Suppl. 394 (1998), pp. 34–41.

<sup>6</sup> David Lester, “Suicide and Islam,” *Archives of Suicide Research* 10, 1 (2006), pp. 77–97.

social services for the prevention and treatment of self-immolation, and response of the Islamic communities to female self-immolation.<sup>7</sup>

This paper aims to address some of the above-mentioned gaps in our knowledge of female suicide in Tajikistan, which requires crossing both disciplinary and national boundaries and, at some points, interrogating female suicide vis-à-vis male suicide. As a background for this project we first present a summary of qualitative interviews with health care professionals and young Tajik women, which were conducted between May and September 2004 in Dushanbe, the capital city of Tajikistan.

## **Findings from the Dushanbe-based Study of Suicide in 2004**

### *Interviews with the Burn Center Staff at Dushanbe City Hospital*

At the end of May 2004, we paid a one-day visit to the Republican Burn Center where we arranged semi-structured interviews with seven doctors and nurses who were willing to share their knowledge on female suicide. Major themes that emerged in the course of these interviews were primarily related to various aspects of self-immolation among women in post-independence Tajikistan and, to a lesser extent, in Soviet times.

The staff's reflections on the dynamics of suicide in Tajikistan prior to the breakdown of the USSR suggested that self-immolation was common during the years of Soviet rule and the Center normally had between 4 to 6 women admitted at any given time following attempted suicides. In those years medications were provided to patients at no cost by the state and, in this sense, no economic barriers existed for applying to the Center's services.

On the other hand, the potential disguising of self-immolation as an accident by the patient's relatives was made difficult due to stronger controls by the Communist Party, local communities, municipalities, and the police. Statistical data on cases of self-immolation seen by the Center in the most recent years were as follows: 45 cases in 2001, 60 cases in 2002, and 48 cases in 2003. With the exception of several self-inflicted burns among men, these were overwhelmingly young women aged between 16 and 30. In relation to these cases, respondents suggested that reasons for suicide were often related to domestic violence, polygamy, arranged marriages, and poor relationships with mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law. They believed that there was also a "copycat phenomenon" in place whereby self-immolation was increasing, as were the numbers of people

---

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Campbell and Isabelita Guiao, "Muslim Culture and Female Self-Immolation: Implications for Global Women's Health Research and Practice," *Health Care for Women International* 25, 9 (2004), pp. 782-793.

hearing about it and potentially choosing the same method of taking one's life.

The lack of actual intention to die was repeatedly stressed as well. In many of the cases described by respondents women seemed to have had chronic arguments in their families and wanted to make a husband feel sorry about the abuse of his wife by intimidating him with self-immolation. Some did not realize the risk they were running when striking a match with hands covered in kerosene. Many female survivors told the staff that they had set themselves on fire in the presence of their husbands or other people, and that they had believed that these people would stop the fire immediately. As stated by one of these respondents, "their intention was not to die, it was just to threaten the perpetrators of domestic violence and to make them treat their wife, and daughter in-law, better." Virtually all women admitted to the Burn Center with self-inflicted burns regretted their act of self-immolation.

Interviews with the Center staff revealed that self-immolations were particularly "popular" in rural areas, making some 80-90 per cent of all attempted and completed suicides. In contrast to that, the majority of women in Dushanbe were resorting, in the words of one doctor, to "more intelligent" (*intelligentnyi*), "western" methods such as overdosing on medications and household gas poisoning. One doctor and one nurse interviewed at the Burn Center were from the Pamirs, Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) located in the eastern part of Tajikistan, and they mentioned that self-immolation was literally non-existent there. Instead, the largest proportion of female suicides was committed by means of drowning in a river. Both respondents stated that sometimes it was originally parasuicide by drowning, when a woman would enter a river at the presence of her husband and, by means of a suicide threat, demand that he respect her needs as well as her personality. But the risk posed by the Panj river's fast current would not be fully realized, thus leading to unintentional death.

According to respondents, in most cases both women with self-inflicted burns and their relatives claimed it was an accident rather than a suicide attempt at the time of admission. For example: on her way to the Burn Center a woman who had just set herself on fire was being continuously persuaded by her husband and in-laws not to report self-immolation because otherwise the whole family would have to go through police investigation, and if the police were to arrest the husband on charges of forcing his wife to commit suicide, their children would lose a breadwinner. They also promised to buy all necessary medications and to cover associated treatment costs, since women are most often financially dependent on men.

A reference to Islam is made too, because admitting suicidal intent might imply a denial of the religious burial of the body in case of a lethal

outcome and humiliation for the whole family. Despite an accident being initially claimed as the cause of burns, many women later confess that they actually attempted suicide. This usually happens when a woman feels that she is dying or when her husband and his relatives do not provide promised financial and moral support. This also happens when a husband, not willing to live together with his disfigured wife any longer, wants to divorce her. However, the Burn Center staff believed that the use of kerosene or gasoline as fire accelerants was often associated with self-immolation.

While respondents were confident in their ability to identify and report self-immolations, they entirely agreed that very often women with self-inflicted burns were not delivered from their rural communities to the Burn Center in Dushanbe for financial and other reasons. They believed that such cases have most likely resulted in deaths disguised under different causes and have led to major under-reporting of female suicide in the country. Finally, speaking about the very limited number of cases of self-immolation among men it was suggested by the respondents that, contrary to cases involving women, these men had clear manifestations of a mental illness.

#### *Interviews with Service Providers at other Medical Establishments*

In order to get a better insight into various aspects related to other modes of committing suicide, between July and September 2004 we met with medical professionals from other health settings including the Republican Toxicology Center (one respondent), the Dushanbe Emergency Department (one respondent), and the Republican Surgery Center (four respondents) that had its own Intensive Therapy Department, the Department of Reconstructive and Restorative Surgery and the Department of Microsurgery. In the course of interviews it was confirmed that these health clinics admitted people who had attempted suicide.

A key informant from the Toxicology Center reported that a total of 183 women and 75 men were treated by this institution for attempted suicide in 2003, which involved poisoning with medications and vinegar essence. Of the 183 women, the majority were between 16 and 25 years old, although in cases with vinegar poisoning the age of patients was usually higher. Poor relationships with mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law, as well as mental health problems, were listed as the main reasons for attempting suicide. Men were usually between 16 and 20 years old and, as this informant believed, unshared love was often the primary reason for their suicides. The interview also revealed that whereas in cases involving vinegar essence an intention to die was more obvious, some cases of poisoning with medications were rather related to a woman's intention to make her partner feel guilty and to change his

abusive and unjust behavior. In such a situation, only a few medications are taken orally while containers and remaining tablets would be scattered around the room to create an impression of severe overdosing. Most commonly, deliberate poisoning with medications involves *dimedrol*, an over-the-counter antihistamine and sedative.

A key informant at the Dushanbe City Emergency Department reported that most cases of attempted and committed suicide that he could recall involved swallowing needles or pins, cutting veins on the wrists, and some cases of poisoning with medications, which were usually referred to the Toxicology Center. This respondent could not cite any cases of suicide among males, and stated that all cases that he was aware of were female suicides. These women were usually aged between 20 and 30. On average, each year the Emergency Department admitted some 20 women who attempted suicide by swallowing needles or pins. Even in such obvious cases women and their families often had a tendency to “cover-up” attempted suicide as “accidental swallowing of needles while sewing.” It was also suggested that there was a clear distinction between rural areas and Dushanbe in terms of the mode of suicide. In rural areas suicide was overwhelmingly committed by self-immolation, whereas in Dushanbe suicides were more often attempted and committed through poisoning with medications.

Such a sharp distinction between rural and urban settings was explained by the limited availability of medications in rural households on the one hand, and kerosene being widely available and commonly used due to electricity shortages in rural Tajikistan on the other hand. According to this informant, another factor that could play an important role here was related to education, since “better educated residents of the capital city usually choose less painful ways of taking their lives.” Finally, in contrast to urban areas, in many rural communities all people know each other personally, and when a woman commits suicide she wants everybody to know about her sufferings and her protest against domestic violence or polygamy. “She pours down kerosene on herself and runs outside of the house so that people in the neighbourhood could see her protest. That is why self-immolations are widespread in rural areas, and not ‘quiet’ ways of dying.”

Each of the four respondents from the Republican Surgery Center were able to recall between 2 and 6 cases of attempted suicide that were dealt with in the Center. Only one of them mentioned cases involving poisoning with vinegar and swallowing needles and pins, while the rest stated that they were exclusively taking care of patients who had cut veins on their wrists. Female patients were young and only a few cases involved women older than 30. Again, it was mentioned that often it is rather deliberate self-harm that is taking place with the hope of bringing about a change in relationships between a female patient and her husband

and in-laws. Such patients usually display several light cuts in different sections of their arms and not one or two deep cuts, which usually occur with people who have a clear intention to die.

Speaking about suicide among males as compared to females, 3 of the 4 respondents knew about one case of male suicide (self-immolation, gun shot, and thrusting scissors into the chest). One respondent mentioned three cases of men cutting their veins in a state of acute alcohol intoxication. Last but not least, the four surgeons suggested that, although by discouraging suicide Islam played a protective role among the predominantly Muslim population of Tajikistan, many people believed that, according to Islam, it was acceptable for a man to beat his wife: "A husband is viewed as a master and his wife should tolerate and obey him. However, one day, after many months and years it goes too far and this obedience transforms into a suicide."

#### *Interviews with Tajik Women Visiting a Health Clinic in Dushanbe*

In August and September 2004, we interviewed 15 Tajik women visiting a Skin and Sexually Transmitted Diseases and Reproductive Health Clinic in Dushanbe. A semi-structured questionnaire that we used also had several questions related to suicide including having attempted suicide/having ever thought about suicide, and knowing someone who attempted and/or committed suicide. Nearly half of respondents (n=7) reported having suicidal thoughts at some point in their lives, and one of them had attempted suicide several times in the past. Seven women also reported knowing someone who had committed or attempted suicide. Below are some of the stories shared by these women:

One woman in our neighborhood stabbed herself with a knife because her husband married a second wife. Also, a friend of mine attempted suicide by overdosing on medications after having an argument with her mother-in-law.

My former classmate took her life by self-immolation. She was epileptic. When she was 15 her parents arranged her marriage with a relative.

Last year a woman hanged herself because there was no money to buy food, her husband has left for Russia to find a job, but then he has married another woman there. He stopped sending money back home to Tajikistan.

About 6 months ago my close friend committed suicide. She always complained that her brothers did not let her go out with her classmates. One day her class was having a party but her brothers did not let her join it. So she came to see me, and told me that she was going to commit suicide. I

did all my best to convince her against doing this. Soon after she left I went to her house to see if she was all right. I found her dead. She hanged herself. In her socks there was a note saying that she did so because her family was too strict with her.

Two years ago I consumed agrochemicals because my father and my brothers were isolating me from society, they did not let me go out of the house to see my friends and to chat with neighbors on the street. They were very strict with me. I attempted suicide several times.

My younger sister committed suicide by self-immolation when she was 22 because her husband was a drug addict.

## Religion and Suicide

Although the above testimonies and expert accounts only briefly refer to Islam, it seems vital to consider religious beliefs as a starting point in a historical investigation of suicide in Tajikistan. This is in line with the argument made by Wasserman et al., who emphasized that:

former generations' religious beliefs appear to serve as the foundation of attitudes towards life, death and suicide. They also influence family patterns, gender roles, lifestyles etc. In other words, the culture of present generations – even if it is not considered to be religious – is influenced by the religiosity of previous generations.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, it may also be tempting to suggest the possible influence of religion on the modes of suicide, as self-immolation is known to be particularly widespread in the Muslim countries of Central Asia and Middle East.<sup>9</sup>

Islam, however, is believed to condemn suicide and Muslim countries have lower suicide rates.<sup>10</sup> An important study of suicide in Islam was carried out by Franz Rosenthal, who analyzed actual legendary cases of committed and attempted suicide as reported in Arabic literature as well as the theoretical discussions of suicide, both those reflecting the official attitude of Islam and those which originated outside the sphere of

---

<sup>8</sup> Danuta Wasserman, Airi Värnik and M. Dankowicz, "Regional Differences in the Distribution of Suicide in the Former Soviet Union During Perestroika, 1984-1990," *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* 98, Suppl. 394 (1998), pp. 5-12.

<sup>9</sup> Campbell et al., "Muslim Culture and Female Self-Immolation: Implications for Global Women's Health Research and Practice," p. 783.

<sup>10</sup> R. F. Diekstra and W. Gulbinat, "The Epidemiology of Suicidal Behaviour: A Review of Three Continents," *World Health Statistics Quarterly* 46, 1 (1993), pp. 52-68.

Muslim theology.<sup>11</sup> As far as the *Qur'an* was concerned, he discussed four passages [2.54 (51); 4.29 (33); 4.66 (69); and 18.6 (5)] which might have an indication of either a condoning or prohibitive attitude toward suicide. Here, the most important one is the *Qur'an* 4.29 (33), which reads as follows:

O ye who have believed, do not consume your property among you in vanity, except there be trading by mutual consent on your part, and do not kill each other [*wa-lâ taqtulû anfusakum* literally to be translated as “and do not kill yourselves”]; verily Allah hath become with you compassionate. 30 (34) Whoever does that in enmity and wrong we shall one day roast in fire; for Allah that is easy.<sup>12</sup>

Many *Qur'an* commentators including at-Tabari have argued that this passage refers to the killing of one Muslim by the other.<sup>13</sup> However, Rosenthal believed that although there was no absolutely certain evidence to indicate that suicide is discussed in the *Qur'an* at all, an argument could be made that “from the early days of Islam on, this and some other passages of the *Qur'an* were considered by many Muslims as relevant to the subject.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, Al-Bukhari tells a story about the great general Amr bin al-‘As, who had a nightly pollution while on the *Dhat As-Salasil* campaign in 8 AH/629 AD. Because of cold weather he did not perform the prescribed ablutions and excused himself with a quotation from the *Qur'an* 4.29 (33): “And don’t kill yourselves; verily Allah has become with you compassionate.”<sup>15</sup> Although there is some uncertainty concerning the *Qur'anic* attitude towards suicide, the *Hadiths*, traditions related to the words and deeds of the Prophet, make it abundantly clear that suicide is condemned as a grave sin.

Rosenthal identified altogether seven traditions that deal with suicide and came to the conclusion that the theological position of Islam with regard to suicide can be summarized as follows: “Suicide is an unlawful act. The person who commits suicide will be doomed and must continually repeat in Hell the action by which he killed himself. If a

<sup>11</sup> Franz Rosenthal, “On Suicide in Islam,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 66, 3 (1946), pp. 239–259.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241; Richard Bell, *The Qur'ân: Translated, with a Critical Re-Arrangement of the Surahs* (Vols. 1–2) (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1939).

<sup>13</sup> The entry on suicide in Hughes’ *Dictionary of Islam* (1885) concurs with these commentaries and states that “suicide is not once referred to in the *Qur'an*.” See Thomas Patrick Hughes, *A Dictionary of Islam, Being a Cyclopaedia of the Doctrines, Rites, Ceremonies, and Customs, Together with the Technical and Theological Terms, of the Muhammadan Religion* (London: H. Allen, 1885), p. 622.

<sup>14</sup> Rosenthal, “On Suicide in Islam,” p. 243.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.

person kills himself accidentally, it is not considered suicide.”<sup>16</sup> Although one of the traditions attests to the Prophet’s refusal to say prayers over the body of a man who had killed himself, it is widely debated whether prayers are said for suicide or not.

There is no doubt, therefore, that Islam strictly discourages suicide including self-immolation. Furthermore, in Muslim traditions, fire is generally portrayed as the most violent punishment and the application of the *lex talionis* in the *Hadiths* also has unequivocal implications in terms of setting oneself ablaze: Whoever strangles himself will repeat his deed in the Fire, and whoever kills himself by stabbing his own body with some weapon will repeat his deed in the Fire.<sup>17</sup>

Russian Orthodox Christianity has not encouraged self-immolation either. However, Old Believers valued a voluntary death over a natural one and held a dogmatic belief that “the true disciples of the “old piety,” in sacrificing themselves to fire, would be redeemed from the flames of hell.”<sup>18</sup> An analysis of 53 recorded cases of individual and mass self-immolation by Old Believers in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries yielded a total of 10,567 deaths. Such an incredibly high figure seemed to be particularly related to the Decree of the Empress Sofia in 1684, whereby the schism adherents were given two options: self-immolation or burning at the stake.<sup>19</sup> Severe and brutal persecutions of Old Believers by the official Russian Church and Tsarist administration continued until the middle of the nineteenth century. Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century, when Central Asia was colonized by the Russian Empire, self-immolation was rather uncommon in Russia as were the remaining communities of Old Believers with a few of them having settled down in Russian Turkestan as well.<sup>20</sup>

In Turkestan, some records available for the year 1894 suggest that suicide was limited to male *Sarts* only, who either hanged themselves (3 people, including one in Khodjent, present-day northern Tajikistan) or stabbed themselves with sharp objects (2 people, one of whom did not die).<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, self-immolation among women might have been

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 245.

<sup>17</sup> Abu Dawud. *Kitab al-Jana’iz* (Lucknow, 1312/1895), Sunan 2.83; see also Alireza Ahmadi, “Suicide by Self-Immolation: Comprehensive Overview, Experiences and Suggestions,” *Journal of Burn Care and Research* 28, 1 (2007), pp. 30–41.

<sup>18</sup> N. N. Veletskaia, “Forms of Transformation of Pagan Symbolism in the Old Believer Tradition,” in Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer (Ed.), *Russian Traditional Culture: Religion, Gender, and Customary Law* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1992), pp. 48–70.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51; Daniel Rancour-Laferriere, *The Slave Soul of Russia: Moral Masochism and the Cult of Suffering* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), p. 25.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Cherniavsky, “The Old Believers and The New Religion,” *Slavic Review* 25, 1 (1966), p. 4; Daniel Brower, *Turkestan and the Fate of the Russian Empire* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 113.

<sup>21</sup> Nikolai Ostroumov, *Sarty: Etnograficheskie Materialy* [Sarts: Ethnographic Materials] (Tashkent: Izdanie Knizhnogo Magazina Bukinist, 1896), p. 97.

present in the region, and as a starting point we first need to look at available records related to the meaning of fire as perceived by local populations. As early as in 1845 Khanykov reported that in spring people of Bokhara celebrated a day, “which bears the singular appellation of *Cheharshembe-Sunni*, in the following manner: they everywhere set fire to wood-piles, and having leaped over them, both men and women break some earthen vessel, thinking by such means to cleanse themselves from their sins, and even from illnesses.”<sup>22</sup> It is interesting to notice that Olufsen, who nearly seventy years later described the custom of leaping over the *Cheharshembe-Sunni* fires in order to drive away the evil spirits and to be purified from sin and illness, reports that “when a Bokhara man is asked whether he knows of it, he smilingly says: Oh! No! in such a way that the custom seems to be maintained secretly.”<sup>23</sup> Secretly or not, this custom has indeed been maintained, and in 1926, *Yangi Yo'l* (*New Path*), a magazine by and for Uzbek women published by the Women's Division of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan, launched an attack on this local “irrational” belief with an illustrated story on the victim of “superstition” who died in the flames. Importantly, it linked together fire and the purification rite and emphasized the concern over the death of a young girl. Two illustrations, have been reproduced in this article as Illustration 1a and Illustration 1b in the appendix.

In her analysis of this story, Kamp suggested that this practice was related to the annual spring festival *Navruz*, when women would gather in each other's places staying up all night cooking, singing, dancing, and jumping over the fire. Although in this instance the emphasis was made on the eradication of practices of the uneducated Muslim population, communists adopted different strategies at a later stage and often used Islam as their weapon in the fight against suicide in Soviet Central Asia. Through the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults, they encouraged the Spiritual Directorate of the Muslims of Central Asia to issue various *fatwas* condemning suicide among women, as will be discussed below.

Neither Islam as a religion followed by about 99 per cent of Tajikistan's population nor Christianity can explain the origins of female self-immolation in Tajikistan. On the contrary, Islam has been struggling with suicide for ages, never being fully able to overcome “deeply engrained” pre-Islamic beliefs and traditions. In our quest for a religious explanation of female self-immolation in Tajikistan as related to the symbolic significance of fire we, therefore, need to look at the pre-Islamic era and consider Buddhism and Zoroastrianism in the first place because both were once practiced in the area presently occupied by that country.

<sup>22</sup> Nikolai Khanykov, *Bokhara: Its Amir and Its People*. Translated from the Russian of Khanikoff by the Baron Clement A. de Bode (London: J. Madden, 1845), p. 271.

<sup>23</sup> Ole Olufsen, *The Emir of Bokhara and His Country: Journeys and Studies in Bokhara* (London: William Heinemann, 1911), p. 367.

Buddhism spread out from India to the territories of modern Tajikistan through Pakistan and Afghanistan under the Kushan Empire. In the 2nd century BC during the rule of the king Kanishka, whose date has been recently placed in either the period AD 100-126 or in AD 120-146,<sup>24</sup> the human representation of the Buddha was introduced and was followed by further diffusion of Buddhism throughout Bactria and Sogdiana. In India, the home country of Buddhism, self-immolation is very common. Until recently it was particularly connected with the act of *sati*, in which women used to throw themselves onto the funeral pyre of their deceased husbands.<sup>25</sup>

This practice has been widespread in the Hindu communities, although not among Buddhists. Muslim literature also contains historical reports of self-immolation among Indian sages who, having realized that their lives were polluted, “threw themselves into a fire in order to purify their souls, to clean their bodies, and to free their spirits.”<sup>26</sup> Such cleansing acts among the Indians did not seem to be connected to Buddhism and were rather associated with the Vedic fire worship and Agni, the fire deity who sees that an oblation is purified and reaches the gods.<sup>27</sup>

However, self-immolation in a Buddhist context was well known and documented in China from the early part of the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. Burning the body developed in China as an apocryphal practice in a sense of being inspired and justified by texts beyond the *Lotus Sutra*, the most common legitimating text of Indian origin for self-immolation among the Buddhist monks and nuns.<sup>28</sup> These textual references included passages from the *Fanwang jing* (*The Book of Brahma's Net*) that appeared in China around 440-480 AD and the *Shouleng'yan jing* (*The Book of The Heroic-march Absorption*).

According to these texts, it appears that devotion and self-sacrifice should be considered among the primary motives for self-immolation in Buddhism. However, the actions of the Buddha's followers were motivated by multiple factors including politico-religious protest. Self-

<sup>24</sup> J. Cribb, “The Early Kushan Kings: New Evidence for Chronology. Evidence from the Rabatak Inscription of Kanishka I,” in M. Alram and D. Klimburg-Salter (Eds.), *Coins, Art, and Chronology: Essays on Pre-Islamic History of the Indo-Iranian Borderlands* (Vol. 280) (Wein: Denkschriften/Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse, 1999), pp. 177-205.

<sup>25</sup> Virendra Kumar, “Burnt Wives – A Study of Suicides,” *Burns* 29, 1 (2003), pp. 31-35.

<sup>26</sup> Rosenthal, “On Suicide in Islam,” pp. 247-248.

<sup>27</sup> E. Hopkins, “The Mediatorial Office of the Vedic Fire-God,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 1, 4 (1908), pp. 507-512; N. K. Singh, *Encyclopaedia of Hinduism* (New Delhi: Anmol Publications, 1997), p. 106.

<sup>28</sup> James Benn, “Where Text Meets Flesh: Burning the Body as an Apocryphal Practice in Chinese Buddhism,” *History of Religions* 37, 4 (1998), pp. 295-322; James Benn, *Burning for the Buddha: Self-Immolation in Chinese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), p. 59.

inflicted death as a manifestation of protest among the Buddhist monks dates back, according to one Chinese source on biographies of eminent monks, to 574 AD, when Emperor Wu of the northern Chou dynasty (557–581 AD) undertook anti-Buddhist measures.<sup>29</sup> Other authors also believed that the more recent instances of the use of fire as a form of protest in the twentieth century stemmed from the Buddhist model.<sup>30</sup>

As it was suggested by our interlocutor at the Dushanbe Emergency Department in 2004, and as it has been reported by other sources on post-Soviet Islamic society, some women may set themselves alight as a protest against domestic violence, political and social discrimination, or suicide taboo.<sup>31</sup> Yet, at this stage no firm conclusion can be drawn on the possible relationship between Buddhism and self-immolation as a form of protest in Tajikistan, and further research is needed before we can accept or decline any explanations.

Coming back to the issue of fire portrayed in the *Yangi Yo'l* magazine as a purification agent, it seems worthwhile to consider an argument of some authors who proposed that the “popularity” of self-immolation has emanated from the Zoroastrian beliefs, such as that “fire cleanses the soul and removes torment.”<sup>32</sup> However, the story of association between self-immolation and Zoroastrianism is more complicated than it might first appear. While the concept of purity is central to this religion, fire itself is regarded as a symbol of divine purity and must be protected from contamination. Although Herodotus records a case of Boges, the Persian governor of Eion who, being besieged by the Athenians, cast his family and himself into the fire in 476 BC, in later times self-immolation was considered as a great sin by Zoroastrians, “since it compounded that of suicide with pollution of the sacred fire with *nasa*, dead matter.”<sup>33</sup> Also absent in Zoroastrianism was the burning of dead bodies which, in fear of the contamination of fire, were rather taken to the so-called Tower of Silence and exposed to vultures.<sup>34</sup> Even accidental burning of any part of one’s body would be considered sinful.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Jan Yün-hua, “Buddhist Self-Immolation in Medieval China,” *History of Religions* 4, 2 (1965), pp. 243–268.

<sup>30</sup> D. O. Topp, “Fire as a Symbol and as a Weapon of Death,” *Medicine, Science, and the Law* 13, 2 (1973), pp. 79–86.

<sup>31</sup> Timur Kadyr, “Woman of the East – The Age of Freedom is Nowhere To Be Seen,” *The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* 44, 40 (1992), pp. 30–31; Nargis Zokirova, “Tajikistan in Denial over Spiraling Suicide Rate,” Institute for War and Peace Reporting, RCA # 218, July 18, 2003, <[http://iwpr.net/?p=rca&s=f&o=175601&apc\\_state=henirca2003](http://iwpr.net/?p=rca&s=f&o=175601&apc_state=henirca2003)> (March 30 2008).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*; S. Ramachandran, “Uzbekistan’s Femmes Fatales,” *Asia Times Online*, April 28, 2004, <[http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central\\_Asia/FD28Ago1.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/FD28Ago1.html)> (April 30 2008).

<sup>33</sup> Mary Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism* (Leiden: BRILL, 1982), p. 170; William Smith, *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities* (Boston: C. Little & J. Brown, 1870), p. 498.

<sup>34</sup> Kedar Nath Tiwari, *Comparative Religion* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1997), p. 102.

<sup>35</sup> Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, p. 317, footnote 129.

In this regard, one may suggest that Zoroastrianism in fact would play a protective role against self-inflicted burns in parts of Tajikistan where its fire-related beliefs and traditions would have been best preserved within an Islamic environment. Available evidence suggests such an area might be in the Pamirs, the geographically isolated Gorno-Badakhshan province of Tajikistan, populated by Ismaili Shia Muslims.

Many scholars involved in ethnographic research in the Pamirs throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries underlined similarities between contemporary customs of the Pamiris and Zoroastrianism. For some they were significant enough to regard the Oxus valley as the cradle of the religion of Zoroaster and to pose a question as to “whether Zoroaster might not actually have come from the Pamirs.”<sup>36</sup> As Zoroastrian priests wore masks while tending the fire in order not to contaminate the sacred fire with their breath, so it was considered bad luck to blow out a light by breath, and a *Wakhani* man would rather “wave his hand for several minutes under the flame of his pine-slip, than resort to the sure, but to him disagreeable alternative.”<sup>37</sup> In the Pamirs, at the end of the nineteenth century, sick adults and mothers holding ill children in their arms were seen jumping over the fire or walking around it.<sup>38</sup> Finally, very recent research has documented an old wedding ritual that goes as follows: “when the groom is about to set off to bring his bride home, he first goes to the *zingak* or hearth fire...and there he pays his respect by kissing the hearth and then touching his lips and chest with his finger.”<sup>39</sup>

On the other hand, we already know from the Pamiri doctors of the Republican Burn Center in Dushanbe that people of that land do not burn themselves in their intention to die. In fact, these doctors are not the only ones to report so and some accounts exist which support their statement. The Russian ethnographer Andreev, who conducted his research in Khouf Valley from the beginning of the twentieth century, reports an astonishing lack of male suicide in this area (common to Central Asia in general, as he believed) located around 50 kilometers away from Khorog and describes certain practices related to female suicide. Both in Khouf and in other mountainous areas of that region

---

<sup>36</sup> Shahin Bekhradnia, “The Tajik Case for a Zoroastrian Identity,” *Religion, State and Society* 22, 1 (1994), pp. 109–121; Frank Bliss, *Social and Economic Change in the Pamirs (Gorno-Badakhshan, Tajikistan)* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 238.

<sup>37</sup> Tiwari, *Comparative Religion*, p. 102; John Wood, *A Personal Narrative of a Journey to the Source of the River Oxus by the Route of the Indus, Kabul, and Badakhshan* (London: John Murray, 1841), p. 333.

<sup>38</sup> Élisée Reclus, *Nouvelle Géographie Universelle* (Paris: L’Asie Russe, 1881) and Franz Xaver von Schwarz, *Turkestan, die Wiege der Indogermanischen Völker* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1900) in Bliss, *Social and Economic Change in the Pamirs (Gorno-Badakhshan, Tajikistan)*, p. 238.

<sup>39</sup> Bekhradnia, “The Tajik Case for a Zoroastrian Identity,” p. 118.

suicidal women would usually run to the river and cover up their faces with a dress before drowning themselves.

Other less common modes of suicide reported by the local inhabitants included poisoning with opium or bitter apricot kernels.<sup>40</sup> Olufsen (1904) also describes a case when a woman, who was raped when her husband was on a journey, threw herself into the torrent.<sup>41</sup> As for the second half of the twentieth century, the most significant evidence showing nearly a complete lack of self-immolations in Gorno-Badakhshan comes from the Tajik archival records, which were dealt with top secrecy during the Soviet era.

Although the absolute numbers of completed and attempted self-immolations have often been on the rise and were almost exclusively limited to native, non-Russian women, when distributed by regions and districts data available for GBAO contain only two cases of self-immolations, at least one of whom was male. These two cases were reported in 1987 and 1988, whereas the total number of attempted and completed self-immolations in those two years was 39 and 51, respectively.<sup>42</sup> In all other years for which it was possible to locate annual records, no self-immolations seem to have become known to the authorities in Gorno-Badakhshan. In sharp contrast to Gorno-Badakhshan, women were burning themselves in nearly every other region of Tajikistan, with the highest incidence documented in the southern and northern parts of the country as well as in districts surrounding the capital city.

Overall, 4 women died due to self-inflicted burns in Tajikistan in 1956, 7 in 1957, 9 in 1960, and 15 during eleven months of 1961. Twenty-three native women completed, and another 9 attempted, suicide by self-immolation in 1973, followed by 18 completed and 13 attempted self-immolations in 1974. Between January 1984 and July 1985, Tajik authorities registered a total of 49 attempted and completed self-immolations.<sup>43</sup>

As if this were not enough, even the cult of fire in Zoroastrianism is not the end of the story. The cleanliness of water, the creation of *Haurvatat*, is equally important for the Zoroastrian. To use water to wash away dirt is an impiety and an accidental scalding by hot water is a sin.

<sup>40</sup> Mikhail Andreev, *Tadzhiki Doliny Khovf (Verkhov'ya Amu-Dar'i)* [Tajiks of the Khovf Valley (Upper Reaches of Amu-Dar'ya)] (Stalinabad: The Academy of Sciences of the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic, 1953), p. 182, footnote 1.

<sup>41</sup> Ole Olufsen, *Through the Unknown Pamirs: The Second Danish Pamir Expedition, 1898-1899* (London: William Heinemann, 1904), p. 134.

<sup>42</sup> Partiinyi Arkhiv Instituta Politicheskikh Issledovaniy pri Tsentral'nom Komitete Kommunisticheskoi Partii Respubliki Tadzhikistan (PAIPI TsK KP RT), f.3 op. 376 d. 139, l. 5.

<sup>43</sup> PAIPI TsK KP RT: f.3 op. 134 d. 61, l. 29; f.3 op. 158 d. 5, ll. 104-105; f.3 op. 280 d. 278, ll. 5, 31; f. 3 op. 363 d. 149, ll. 6-14.

As is the case with self-immolation, suicide by drowning is a doubly heavy sin and, in case of this, a prolonged ritual of purification, “the bathing of the nine nights,” would be imposed on a relative. However, because of such deep pollution water would not be then used at all in this cleansing ritual and cow’s urine would be applied throughout.<sup>44</sup>

Thus, from the religious perspective it remains unclear how in the course of centuries the cult of fire might have overtaken the cult of water, and how, speaking about suicide, drowning has developed into a more preferable option than self-immolation among the local residents of the Pamirs at the source of the river Oxus. One may only speculate that to a certain extent it could have resulted from the Hellenistic influence following the conquest of Badakhshan by Alexander the Great in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, whose descendants allegedly ruled the region for many centuries after his death and cited Alexander in matters of ideology up to the nineteenth century.<sup>45</sup> There can be little doubt, however, about the importance of the *availability* of high and fast water in shaping local patterns of suicide in the Pamirs.<sup>46</sup>

## Cultural and Social Contexts

While Islam does not encourage suicide, some authors believe that it significantly contributes to the oppression of women in Muslim countries. In support of the argument of the inferiority of women with regard to men they refer to the *Qur’an* and the *Hadith* and suggest that there it is stated that men have a “degree” over women, that women are genetically and legally inferior to men because of the deficiency of their mind, and that the husband is to train his wife and he can punish her as

---

<sup>44</sup> Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, pp. 296, 313-317.

<sup>45</sup> On the kings of Badakhshan who claimed their descent from Alexander the Great, see Bliss, *Social and Economic Change in the Pamirs (Gorno-Badakhshan, Tajikistan)*, pp. 54-55; and William Erskine, *A History of India under the Two First Sovereigns of the House of Taimur, Baber and Humayun* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1854), p. 286. On the reports of Herodotus concerning drowning as well as the ritual of animal sacrifice by drowning among Greeks see Stephen Benko, *The Virgin Goddess: Studies in the Pagan and Christian Roots of Mariology* (Leiden: BRILL, 2003), p. 124 and footnote 136; David Dodd and Christopher Faraone (Eds.), *Initiation in Ancient Greek Rituals and Narratives: New Critical Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 220-221; K. Dowden, *European Paganism: The Realities of Cult from Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 57; and E. Washburn Hopkins, *Origin and Evolution of Religion. Part I* (1869) (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2003), p. 174.

<sup>46</sup> On self-immolation and availability of kerosene, see Elizabeth Campbell, *Perspectives on Self-Immolation Experiences among Uzbek Women* (PhD dissertation, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 2005), who based on her nine interviews with female survivors of suicide by self-immolation concludes that “the use of fire appeared to have no symbolic significance when used in suicide attempts” and was rather a convenient method (pp. 58-59).

needed.<sup>47</sup> However, research on gender relations in Tajikistan by Harris convincingly demonstrates that both in Tajik and the majority of other Muslim societies the approach to everyday Islam is largely mediated through the honor-and-shame system bound up with local customary laws. Such mediation eventually leads to a considerable gap between the scriptures and the everyday beliefs of the average Muslim, which is responsible for reducing a woman's function to "carrying out domestic tasks, bearing, breastfeeding and rearing her children, showing obedience to her husband, and fulfilling all his needs, including sexual ones."<sup>48</sup> It is in this context that we need to consider many of the reasons for why women take their own lives as stated by survivors, professionals, and significant others.

There is a dearth of knowledge concerning female suicide in pre-Soviet Central Asia. While the number of suicides in Russian Turkestan was indeed "astonishingly low" due to the influence of Islam,<sup>49</sup> the few reported cases, however, may not accurately reflect the actual situation because of the hidden nature of this phenomenon that along with many other aspects of local everyday life, could have remained inaccessible to outsiders. Existing records indicate that in the Badakhshan area, suicide was mainly committed by women who were abused and "maltreated" in their families. Some women also committed suicide when they were not able to obtain a divorce because they could not afford to pay the "compensation" (usually a couple of cows and a horse) to their husbands and had to stay with them.<sup>50</sup> A woman who had been dishonored by rape would be "ashamed to look into the eyes of her husband" and might prefer to commit suicide.<sup>51</sup>

However, relationships between the sexes were "less problematic" in the Pamirs at the close of the nineteenth century, where women seem to have enjoyed greater personal freedom when compared to other regions. They were not veiled, there was no obsession with virginity to the same extent as in other Islamic societies, and men allegedly did not know jealousy despite common reports of sexual freedoms occasionally engaged in by married and unmarried women.<sup>52</sup> Most of the marriages in that area

<sup>47</sup> Campbell et al., "Muslim Culture and Female Self-Immolation: Implications For Global Women's Health Research and Practice," pp. 785-786.

<sup>48</sup> Colette Harris, *Control and Subversion: Gender Relations in Tajikistan* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), pp. 32-35.

<sup>49</sup> Konstantin Palen, *Otchet po Revizii Turkestanskago Kraia, Proizvedennoi po VYSOCHAISHEMY Poveleniyu Senatorom Gofmeisterom Grafom K.K. Palenom. Zemskoe Khoziaistvo* [Report on the Revision of Turkestan Administration] (St. Petersburg: Senate House Printing Office, 1910), p. 414.

<sup>50</sup> Andreev, *Tadzhiki Doliny Khovf (Verkhov'ya Amu-Dar'i)* [Tajiks of the Khovf Valley (Upper Reaches of Amu-Dar'ya)], p. 182.

<sup>51</sup> Olufsen, *Through the Unknown Pamirs: The Second Danish Pamir Expedition, 1898-1899*, p. 134.

<sup>52</sup> Bliss, *Social and Economic Change in the Pamirs (Gorno-Badakhshan, Tajikistan)*, pp. 153-155.

were monogamous. As for the Sogd region, one oral history collected by Harris on the pre-revolutionary period Zarkhok village of Isfara refers to a teenager, who drowned herself in the river to avoid an unwanted marriage arranged by her parents.<sup>53</sup>

In Russian Turkestan, cases of suicide among females might have been disguised and under-reported. Ostroumov, who put together five cases of suicide described by *Turkestarskie Vedomsti* newspaper between February and September 1894, noticed that all of them were males, though he underlined that this figure was “miserable” compared to the number of reported rapes.<sup>54</sup> We don’t have any published data as to what the consequences of rape were for the ten women and girls who were mentioned in *Turkestarskie Vedomsti* and *Okraina* in that same year, but it might be possible that, in line with the honor-and-shame system, some of them might have been forced into suicide by their husbands or male relatives. Published accounts of Russian and western travelers to Russian Central Asia at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were limited in terms of discussing the life of women and generally depicted their oppressed status:

From their earliest childhood the little girls are taught complete submissiveness to men and no girl would ever dare to lift a hand against a boy, even in play...Daughters are married off young, usually between the ages of 9 and 15...The wife is obliged to obey her husband in all things, and to avoid everything that is unpleasant to him, and cannot make any contracts without his consent. Polygamy is legal in Muslim law. In practice, however, only fairly well-to-do men can afford it...Men can change their wives as often as they want... When women go outside they wear long, full cloak over a thick, black horsehair veil and sidle along the walls, turning their head aside if a man appears...<sup>55</sup>

While such pre-Soviet descriptions contained only isolated references to people taking their lives, which to some extent may also be explained by the fact that they were primarily constructed based on the authors’ exposure to the local elite alone, this information is nevertheless instrumental in understanding the context which framed a large portion of female suicides in Central Asia during early Soviet times. When, in 1926, the Bolsheviks decided to launch the *Hujum*, a direct confrontational attack against female seclusion, unveiling became the major symbol of

---

<sup>53</sup> Harris, *Control and Subversion: Gender Relations in Tajikistan*, pp. 43-44.

<sup>54</sup> Ostroumov, *Sarty: Entograficheskie Materialy* [Sarts: Ethnographic Materials], pp. 97-99.

<sup>55</sup> Colette Harris, “Women of the Sedentary Population of Russian Turkestan through the Eyes of Western Travellers,” *Central Asian Survey* 15, 1 (1996), pp. 75-95.

this campaign for the emancipation of women and bringing modernity to Central Asia.

Unveiling, however, started long before the *Hujum* and these were mainly “prostitutes” who did not cover their faces, thus preventing “respectable” women from daring to go unveiled and even causing the non-native female population of Jews and Tatars to wear veils “to preserve themselves from disagreeable remarks as they pass through the streets.”<sup>56</sup> “Liberating” thousands of women, the *Hujum* also “suffered heavy losses” due to the self-immolation of girls and women who were bullied and called prostitutes not only in the community and at school, but also at home.<sup>57</sup> Some records indicate that in the initial two years of the *Hujum*, 203 women were officially known as having immolated themselves due to “maltreatment.”<sup>58</sup> It is difficult to say whether this figure involved all actual cases or not, but some archival work has produced more specific evidence of what has been among the most sensitive consequences of this struggle.

The prostitution label was indeed a very powerful factor and at the Tashkent Medical Technical School a student took her life “because her classmates insulted her, calling her a prostitute.”<sup>59</sup> Unexpected by the Communist Party but understandable within the above context, strong opposition to the unveiling campaign also came from women and girls themselves. As one Communist Party protocol examined by Northrop revealed, two young Turkmen schoolgirls doused themselves with kerosene and set themselves ablaze on March 7, 1930, the eve of International Women’s Day, at the town square of Ak-Sofi village immediately after a women’s liberation meeting. Investigation of this dramatic case of “setting women afire rather than their veils” concluded that “the girls had not wanted to participate in Women’s Day festivities, but had been forced to do so by the local Komsomol secretary.”<sup>60</sup> Such stories were probably some of the first documented cases of the use of fire as a form of protest in Soviet Central Asia.

Here, it is important to note that public unveiling ceremonies would often conclude with the demonstrative burning of veils, which may

<sup>56</sup> Eugene Schuyler, *Turkistan* (Vol. 1) (New York: Charles Scribner’s, 1876), p. 124.

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, the story of Tajikhan Shadiyeva, who had to wear *paranja* until she attempted suicide and then determined to leave her husband once and for all, in Fannina Halle, *Women in the Soviet East* (London: Martin Secker and Warburg, 1938), p. 312.

<sup>58</sup> Kh. Khushkadamova, *Reflections of Women’s Social Position in the Tajik Press* (Kandidat Nauk dissertation, Russian Academy of Sciences, Sociological and Socio-Psychological Center, 1993) in Suad Joseph and Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures: Family, Body, Sexuality and Health* (Vol. 3) (Leiden: BRILL, 2003), p. 451.

<sup>59</sup> Kamp, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling under Communism*, p. 195.

<sup>60</sup> Douglas Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 282.

actually be part of the explanation as to why similar tactics of self-immolation might then have been used by some women in their counterattack on the *Hujum*, especially as kerosene became more widely available following the construction of railways in Russian Turkestan in the last decades of the nineteenth through to the first decade of the twentieth century.<sup>61</sup> It is also worth mentioning that consumption of kerosene and matches by the local population of pre-Soviet Turkestan was the highest of all commodities subject to excise duty and exported by Russians into the region.<sup>62</sup>

Whereas female self-immolation obviously did not disappear after the *Hujum*, Islam was later co-opted by the communists in their attempts to eradicate this “most flagrant of all violations of Soviet law and order.” Instigated by the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults, the Spiritual Directorate of the Muslims of Central Asia repeatedly issued *fatwas*, which along with prohibition of taking one’s life stressed that “any person who took this step would be deprived of a religious burial and the regular memorial prayers.”<sup>63</sup> Internal materials of these institutions dated between 1951 and 1965 also highlighted some of the major reasons responsible for female self-immolation, as they were constructed by the authorities, including: (i) to avoid compromising her clan or family, a woman or girl who had been dishonored had no alternative to taking her own life; (ii) grievances on the background of family scandals; (iii) the insulting attitude of husbands, parents, and others to girls and young women, whom they did not let participate in public life or study; and (iv) religious traditions sanctioned and perpetuated by Muslim law.<sup>64</sup>

These reports also revealed that female self-immolation was far from rare in Central Asian republics, accounting for some 200 deaths in 1960 in Uzbekistan alone, which was about twenty-two times more than the number of completed female self-immolations in Tajikistan in the same year. While at the end of the 1950s the Tajik clergy were eager to re-issue the *fatwa* on self-immolation,<sup>65</sup> the Communist Party leadership

---

<sup>61</sup> Northrop suggests that self-immolation as an idiom of female protest (in Uzbekistan) has “deep historical roots.” See *Ibid.*, p. 282.

<sup>62</sup> Konstantin Palen, *Prilozhenie k Otchetu po Revizii Turkestanskogo Kraia, Proizvedennoi po Vysochaishemu Povelению Senatorom Gofmeisterom Grafom K.K. Palenom. Materialy k Kharakteristike Narodnogo Khoziaistva v Turkestane (Chast' 1, Otdel 2)* [Supplementary Materials to the Report on the Revision of Turkestan Administration (Part 1, Section 2)] (St. Petersburg: Senate House Printing Office, 1911).

<sup>63</sup> Yaacov Ro'i, *Islam in the Soviet Union: From the Second World War to Gorbachev* (London: Hurst, 2000), pp. 546-548.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* These reasons were summarized by Ro'i based on the following materials: (i) P.A. Solov'ev, Report, Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC) Session No.1, January 13 1951; (ii) Kh. Iskandarov to Kh. Gulyamov, July 20 1954; (iii) M. Il'baev, Report, All-Union Conference of CARC, February 17 1965; (iv) M. Il'baev, Address, All-Union Conference of CARC, April 18-20 1960.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

demanding that law enforcement agencies investigate all reported cases of committed and attempted suicide. Although in some years between 10 and 20 per cent of all suicides involved people with mental illnesses, the majority of women and girls who attempted and completed self-immolation between 1950s and 1980s did so because they were physically and psychologically abused by their husbands and relatives.

Many of these victims were poorly educated and lived in rural villages, but self-immolations by the Komsomol members were not unknown either, and in one case involved a husband who had been torturing his wife for not following his written "guidelines," which he entitled as "Who may be eligible to be my wife?"<sup>66</sup> The response of authorities to female self-immolation was not limited to criminal investigation alone, commonly requiring that each case be considered at the local Communist Party Bureau sitting as well as at staff meetings of various institutions, that "brigades" of female activists conduct individual and group discussions in the community, that lecturers deliver speeches on scientific-atheistic subjects, and that the measures were developed on further improvement of political and educational activities among women.<sup>67</sup>

While it is difficult to establish whether all these activities have had any positive or negative impact on the incidence of female suicide, Poliakov, in his research on everyday Islam in Central Asia, argues that: "public opinion usually blamed the victim herself and not the perpetrators of violence, condemning 'thoughtlessness' and 'immorality' of the woman who has killed herself. At the community level every effort was made to defend tradition and to portray it as blameless."<sup>68</sup>

Now, as we look back at the data that we collected in 2004 in Dushanbe and other recent studies on suicide in Central Asia, the issue of continuity in factors shaping female suicide across the centuries becomes evident. Certain aspects of arranged marriages, which already emerged with regard to suicide in some histories, underwent very little transformation as can be further seen from the following cases:

When a man wants a wife he employs some elderly female relative to find out where there is a suitable lady...He is not supposed to see his future wife before the betrothal...If she happens to be a cousin or some other near relative, he has probably known her well as a child (1903).<sup>69</sup>

<sup>66</sup> PAIPI TsK KP RT, f.3 op. 158 d. 5, ll. 106-107.

<sup>67</sup> PAIPI TsK KP RT: f.3 op. 292 d. 19, l. 7; f. 3 op. 280 d. 278, ll. 10, 19.

<sup>68</sup> Sergei Poliakov, *Everyday Islam: Religion and Tradition in Rural Central Asia* (Armonk; London: M.E. Sharpe, 1992), p. 85.

<sup>69</sup> Annette Meakin, *In Russian Turkestan: A Garden of Asia and Its People* (London: George Allen, 1903), pp. 140-141.

Very often she knows nothing about her bridegroom, not even if he is young or old, or whether he already has other wives or not...<sup>70</sup>

Young people entering into marriage often do not see one another prior to registration in the marriage registry office...There are cases of a girl having been shown the photograph of one man, who she agrees to marry, and then a completely different person comes to the marriage registry office, often one with physical defects. As a rule, in such instances the girl marries anyway, since refusal to marry is forbidden by public opinion. It is one of the most fearsome tragedies of Central Asia that the sole form of protest possible in these circumstances is self-immolation by the bride (1960s-1980s).<sup>71</sup>

It is only three months since I've got married, but I am already back to my father's house because I don't want to stay with my husband. He is very short, just like a dwarf. He has some physical disability. I was forced to marry him, they did not know that he has got some defects... The parents of my husband are quite rich, they've got lots of money. It seems that it was the only reason why I was given to them. Despite all his shortcomings he has been beating me every day. He used to say that nobody wanted to marry me and that I knew what kind of man he was because otherwise I would not marry him. I don't know what to do now. My father tells me that I should go and stay with my husband. I don't want to do that. I said that if they were to take me to his place I would commit a suicide. I have no other choice (Safarmoh, 23 years old).<sup>72</sup>

However, other issues that were repeatedly stressed as driving forces behind contemporary female suicide dynamics in Tajikistan, such as polygamy, male labor migration, domestic violence, and poor relationships with mothers-in-law might be intertwined with the past and with each other in a more complex fashion. None of these were by any means new to the region. Although in pre-Soviet Turkestan some wives pleaded with their husbands to get a second wife in order to relieve them from doing all the housework, many others would prefer to live in misery than to have their husbands become rich and bring a new wife,

---

<sup>70</sup> Elizabeth Bacon, *Central Asians under Russian rule: A Study in Cultural Change* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), p. 69.

<sup>71</sup> Poliakov, *Everyday Islam: Religion and Tradition in Rural Central Asia*, p. 54.

<sup>72</sup> Mamadalieva et al., *Self-Immolations of Women: Causes and Factors*, p. 55.

who would destroy all the happiness. Some men also had to travel to other cities to make more money and, unless accompanied by his wife, a man would “find another wife to replace her in the other town.”<sup>73</sup> The role of mothers-in-law in an extended family structure was hardly ever mentioned in Russian Turkestan,<sup>74</sup> but this was due to limitations in authors’ views rather than to the absence of mothers-in-law on the familial foreground. For our discussion of how relationships with in-laws, polygamy and migration could all be relevant to female suicide in contemporary Tajikistan the following accounts may be illustrative:

Married life for Latofat was a catalogue of abuses from the outset; she was forced to share a house with the in-laws who insulted her. When her husband left home to find temporary work in Russia, they started beating her as well. The final straw came when villagers started gossiping that her husband had found himself a new wife in Russia. Not long afterwards, Latofat poured kerosene over her clothes and set herself alight. She died of her burns a few days later...Another recent suicide involved a 25-year-old mother-of-three from the Kurgan-Tyube region of southern Tajikistan. Mohira killed herself after her husband brought home a 17-year-old wife. The two women did not get along, and Mohira tried to move back to her parents’ house. But they turned her away, insisting that she rejoin her husband.<sup>75</sup>

Our respondents also cited some cases, when a young woman would be married off and then immediately, literally in a couple of days, her new husband would leave the country in search for employment opportunities and would not come back. As for the young bride’s fate, she would stay with her in-laws and all other family members... Such a milieu would be a perfect breeding ground for conflicts and domestic violence, which may eventually lead to suicide.<sup>76</sup>

While Soviet authorities clearly failed “to root out feudal relics” in Central Asia, the system was strong enough to significantly reduce polygamous marriage in rural and, in particular, urban areas. In this regard many first wives would perceive the issue of a second wife more dramatically and would have been less “accustomed” to this practice at

---

<sup>73</sup> Meakin, *In Russian Turkestan: A Garden of Asia and Its People*, p. 139.

<sup>74</sup> Harris, “Women of the Sedentary Population of Russian Turkestan through the Eyes of Western Travellers,” pp. 75–95.

<sup>75</sup> Zokirova, “Tajikistan in Denial over Spiraling Suicide Rate.”

<sup>76</sup> Mamadalieva et al., *Self-Immolations of Women: Causes and Factors*, p. 44.

the end of the twentieth century. Such a “maladaptation” to polygamy, which regained popularity among the better-off Tajik men in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, civil war, and economic crisis in Tajikistan, may partially explain its frequent association with female suicide in recent years. Secondly, labor migration then and now are totally different issues in terms of scale. With an estimated 1,000,000 Tajik labor migrants who make up nearly half of the 2,203,720 total male population aged between 15 and 64, it is common in contemporary Tajikistan to come across villages populated almost exclusively by women, children, and the elderly. The number of migrants is so vast that it prompted some authors to suggest that “labor migration was the key to solving Tajik suicide mystery: absence of males in the lives of Tajik women engenders psychological discomfort, lack of confidence, poor self-esteem and the feeling of social non-normalisation, and increases physical burden on women.”<sup>77</sup> In this case, adopting a psychoanalytical model to female suicide and male labor migration may also support the theory of Jung, who saw fire as “a symbolic and primitive outlet for sexual frustration.”<sup>78</sup> However, it is important to note virtually an opposite milieu in pre-Soviet Russian Turkestan that has been described by several commentators as “the existence of large numbers of unmarried men in a community where women, other than those related in the forbidden degree, were almost totally unavailable even to look at or to talk to.”<sup>79</sup> Finally, speaking about Soviet legacy in post-independence Tajikistan, one cannot overlook the alcohol issue. Although the fondness for alcohol by Central Asian men and the growing interest of Russian settlers in local intoxicants such as opium, hashish, and *boozah* were often mentioned in various publications since the late nineteenth century, decades of vodka dominance during the Soviet period following the prohibition of other drugs raised the level of alcohol abuse among natives much higher. We have already learned from interviews with the Dushanbe-based surgeons how alcohol can be a powerful explanatory factor of male suicides, a fact which is underlined by data from the Tajik Ministry of Interior on the dynamics of suicide in Tajikistan in the late Soviet period.<sup>80</sup> The testimony below, in its turn, helps us to fully appreciate the connection between alcohol and that of wife and child abuse and suicide in contemporary Tajikistan:

One and a half years have already passed since I divorced my husband. He has always been drinking and beating me.

---

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>78</sup> Topp, “Fire as a Symbol and as a Weapon of Death,” p. 81.

<sup>79</sup> Harris, “Women of the Sedentary Population of Russian Turkestan through the Eyes of Western Travellers,” p. 82.

<sup>80</sup> PAIPI TsK KP RT, f.3 op. 363 d. 149, ll. 6-8.

He beat me almost every day. My body was covered with bruises and my head was injured as well...I came back to my parents' house and never returned to him. My father forced me into marrying this man. My father was an alcoholic too, he has always beaten my mother, he used to torture her and tell her that he will kill her. It is now nearly 3 years since he left us. My mother trades in all sorts of things on the street. Our life is really difficult. In my life there were moments when I wanted to commit suicide. This would usually happen after my father had beaten my mother and me, and then I would ask myself, why do I need such a life at all? It's better to leave this world and not to see all the sufferings of my mother...but after I married my ex-husband my own sufferings doubled (Nazira, 25 years old).<sup>81</sup>

### Public Health Implications

The analysis of suicide in Tajikistan would be incomplete without attempting to highlight some implications of the above data from the public health perspective. The fact that suicide in its different manifestations was present in Tajik society long before the current epidemic is hardly worth mentioning. However, what needs to be emphasized now is female predominance both among people attempting suicide and, possibly, among those who complete suicide. As the interviews with professionals from the Republican Burn Center, the Toxicology Center, the Emergency Department and the Surgery Center revealed, these Dushanbe-based institutions have been "overwhelmingly" dealing with female rather than male patients. This trend is consistent with the global patterns which show that 3 times more women than men commit parasuicide.<sup>82</sup> On the other hand, a very high percentage of women in rural Tajikistan attempt suicide by self-burning, which usually leads to death in some 68 per cent of total cases.<sup>83</sup> In Tajikistan, where public spending on health is among the lowest in the world, having declined to about 1 per cent of GDP in 2002,<sup>84</sup> and where the majority of the population has been living on less than US\$2.15 per day (81 per cent in

---

<sup>81</sup> Mamadalieva et al., *Self-Immolations of Women: Causes and Factors*, p. 55.

<sup>82</sup> Diekstra et al., "The Epidemiology of Suicidal Behaviour: A Review of Three Continents," p. 52.

<sup>83</sup> V. Laloë, "Patterns of Deliberate Self-Burning in Various Parts of the World: A Review," *Burns* 30, 3 (2004), pp. 207–215.

<sup>84</sup> The International Monetary Fund and The International Development Association, "Republic of Tajikistan: Joint Staff Assessment of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, Annual Progress Report, 2004," <[http://poverty2.forumone.com/files/Tajikistan\\_PRSP\\_APR\\_JSA.pdf](http://poverty2.forumone.com/files/Tajikistan_PRSP_APR_JSA.pdf)> (March 28 2008).

1999 and 64 per cent in 2003),<sup>85</sup> the percentage of fatal cases might be even higher. In Gorno-Badakhshan, where women may usually prefer drowning to other means when trying to kill themselves, fatality would be high too.

Secondly, all our respondents suggested that under-reporting of female suicide might be highly significant in Tajikistan for religious, social, and criminal justice reasons. Finally, given that because of labor migration almost half of Tajikistan's male population aged between 15 and 64 are "at home" only for a few months a year, thus keeping male suicide rates low, it may well turn out that the actual completed suicide rates are higher for females than for males in this country. If this assumption were valid, then Tajikistan would join China as the only country in the world where a higher risk for suicide has been observed among women.<sup>86</sup>

However, to test this assumption with actual figures on a national level is not an easy task due to potential problems with the reliability of statistics in Tajikistan. Some historical roots of this issue go back to the "date of birth" of Tajikistan, the year 1929, when suicide statistics were made secret and when "suicidology as a field of science effectively died out in the USSR."<sup>87</sup> As data on suicide in the Soviet Union became accessible to international researchers in 1988 as a result of Gorbachev's reforms, the first study of suicides and deaths from undetermined causes was conducted for each of the 15 former Soviet republics for the years 1984-1990. This study *inter alia* found out that: (i) no open or "between-the-lines" instructions to falsify data were ever given; the only requirement imposed by verbal and written instructions was that these data should be kept secret; (ii) the ratio of violent deaths to suicide varied markedly between republics, with Tajikistan showing the widest variation among Central Asian republics (standard deviation 1.6).<sup>88</sup> Importantly, another study also revealed that the 1.9 male to female suicide ratio in Tajikistan calculated from crude suicide rates was the smallest of all former Soviet Republics.<sup>89</sup> In other words, Tajikistan's suicide data were possibly both the least reliable and indicative of the

---

<sup>85</sup> Office of the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Tajikistan, *Moving Mountains: The UN Appeal for Tajikistan* (Dushanbe: UNDP, 2006).

<sup>86</sup> C. Pritchard, "Suicide in the People's Republic of China Categorized by Age and Gender: Evidence of the Influence of Culture on Suicide," *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* 93, 5 (1996), pp. 362-367.

<sup>87</sup> Denny Vågerö (Ed.), Andrew Stickley, Ilkka Henrik Mäkinen and Pitirim Sorokin, *The Unknown Sorokin: His Life in Russia and the Essay on Suicide* (Stockholm: Södertnös Högskola, 2002), pp. 55-56.

<sup>88</sup> Wasserman et al., "Reliability of Statistics on Violent Death and Suicide in the Former USSR, 1970-1990," p. 38.

<sup>89</sup> Wasserman et al., "Regional Differences in the Distribution of Suicide in the Former Soviet Union During Perestroika, 1984-1990," pp. 8-9.

narrowest gap between male and female suicide rates. While these studies were the only ones to look at the Tajik suicide rates on the national level, developments that occurred following the breakdown of the Soviet Union, including the Civil War in Tajikistan in 1992-1997, could further influence the reliability of diagnostic procedures.

This said, we now need to look at contemporary regional and national suicide statistics in Tajikistan, which, on the basis of *reported* cases, show either a very narrow gap between male and female suicides or even a higher number of female suicides:

- 132 people committed suicide in Sogd Province within six months of 2004, including 67 women.<sup>90</sup>
- According to the Regional Department of the Ministry of Interior for Khatlon Province, there were a total of 111 suicides in 2005, including 57 men and 54 women.<sup>91</sup>
- According to the Ministry of Interior, there were 158 suicides registered in the first six months of 2007 in Tajikistan, out of which 85 were committed by women.<sup>92</sup>
- 540 cases of suicide were registered in Tajikistan in 2008, 56 percent of whom were committed by women.<sup>93</sup>

Other important findings from qualitative interviews with medical professionals and women in Dushanbe include a complete lack of the mental health component at the visited institutions, the young age of women attempting and completing suicide in Tajikistan, the association between reproductive health and skin diseases with female suicidality, the unusually high occurrence of attempted suicide by swallowing needles among women in Dushanbe, the marked differences between rural and urban areas by method of attempted and completed suicide as

<sup>90</sup> *Vechernii Dushanbe* (February 28, 2008).

<sup>91</sup> *Charkhi Gardun* (February 3, 2006).

<sup>92</sup> M. Odinaeva and N. Pisaredzheva, "Tajik Women's Groups Press for Domestic Violence Law," Institute for War and Peace Reporting, RCA # 522, December 19, 2007, <[http://iwpr.net/?apc\\_state=henfrc341537&l=ru&s=f&o=341537](http://iwpr.net/?apc_state=henfrc341537&l=ru&s=f&o=341537)> (April 10 2008).

<sup>93</sup> Davron Mukhamadiev, "Suicide Mortality is on the Rise," *Hovar Tajik National Information Agency*, August 11, 2009, <[http://www.khovar.tj/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=12888](http://www.khovar.tj/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=12888)> (September 18 2009). Here, however, one needs to be aware that figures reported by the mass media vary significantly and may be confusing and contradictory (Compare, for example, *Asia Plus* (October 16, 2003); Zokirova, "Tajikistan in Denial over Spiraling Suicide Rate;" and *Asia Plus Blitz* (October 19, 2003)). On the other hand, annual national suicide data with distributions by region, sex, and age are not reported by the Tajik Government on a regular basis, whereas some senior Tajik officials publicly express their concerns that high suicide rates among women may "undermine the image of Tajikistan on the international arena" (Statement made by the Prosecutor General of the Republic of Tajikistan in his refutation of suicide data reported in a local newspaper).

well as importance of access to and availability of various means (such as fire accelerants, rivers, gas, medications) employed in the suicidal act in shaping such differences. All these issues would have significant policy implications and deserve further research. Last but not least, this study has also emphasized that a certain degree of preoccupation with self-immolation should in no case prevent us from realizing that so many more women actually suffer from violence and abuse in Tajikistan, but because they resort to less lethal and dramatic methods of suicide, they may not come into the focus of our attention and their “silent” cry for help may not be heard.

## Conclusion

In conclusion we need to consider some of our findings in relation to questions and arguments raised by earlier studies of suicide in Central Asia and the Muslim world. First, while the argument of Wasserman et al., about religious beliefs, the religiosity of previous generations, and attitudes towards suicide<sup>94</sup> is valid, the issue of *previous* generations may be vital and it would be important to look beyond the dominant religion of Islam and investigate pre-Islamic beliefs in order to develop further theories about the role of religion in determining regional differences in suicide rates and methods of suicide in contemporary Tajikistan. Similarly, when looking at potential differences in the suicide rates of Sunni and Shia Muslims in future studies,<sup>95</sup> the pre-Islamic beliefs of these populations may need to be taken into account as one of the possible factors responsible for such differences.

Second, Lester suggested that changes in the provision of mental health care services in Central Asian countries might have had an impact on the rates of death from suicide<sup>96</sup> and this seems to be particularly relevant to Tajikistan, where psychiatry experienced a major crisis as a result of migration of qualified staff, dilapidation of buildings, severe shortages in psychotropic drugs, and the disintegration of key services following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent civil war which took place between 1992 and 1997.<sup>97</sup>

Third, the connections between female suicide, male migration, and the domination of mothers-in-law in Tajik families that emerged on many occasions in this qualitative study support the arguments that in Central Asia, on the one hand, low suicide rates could be explained by the high degree of integration of individual members within large well-

---

<sup>94</sup> Wasserman et al., “Regional Differences in the Distribution of Suicide in the Former Soviet Union During Perestroika, 1984–1990,” p. 9.

<sup>95</sup> Lester, “Suicide and Islam,” p. 92.

<sup>96</sup> Lester, “Suicide in Post-Soviet Central Asia,” p. 123.

<sup>97</sup> Alisher Latypov, Vladimir Magkoev, Mutabara Vohidova and Zulfia Nisanbaeva, “Mental Health Services in Tajikistan,” *International Psychiatry* 4, 3 (2007), pp. 66–69.

consolidated families,<sup>98</sup> and that, on the other hand, changes to such family structure and residence patterns provide barriers to the realization of roles central to individual identity and can result in increased suicide rates.<sup>99</sup> However, domestic violence and reproductive health problems constituting some of the main motives for contemplating, attempting, and committing suicide by young women in Tajikistan may to some extent challenge the tentative interpretation of a marked increase in age-specific suicide rates among Kazakh women aged 25 to 30 as *financially* driven, that is reflective of “the difficulties related to the establishment of a marital union and initiation of childbearing in the present economic climate.”<sup>100</sup>

Finally, the relationship between the labor migration of Tajik men to Russia and suicide has a strong potential for becoming more prominent in the coming years because of the growing HIV/AIDS epidemic in Russia, unprotected sex patterns that Tajik migrant workers exhibit in that country,<sup>101</sup> and the association between HIV/AIDS, mental disorders, and suicide. Developing further theories on labor migration and suicide and addressing this relationship would be a particularly important area for future scholarly research.

---

<sup>98</sup> Wasserman et al., “Regional Differences in the Distribution of Suicide in the Former Soviet Union During Perestroika, 1984–1990,” p. 11.

<sup>99</sup> Buckley, “Suicide in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan: Role Stress, Age and Gender,” p. 46.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>101</sup> Stevan Weine, Mahbat Bahromov and Azamjon Mirzoev, “Unprotected Tajik Male Migrant Workers in Moscow at Risk for HIV/AIDS,” *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* 10, 5 (2008), pp. 461–468.

## Appendix -

Illustration 1a and Illustration 1b “Uzbek women and girls consider the month of Safar<sup>102</sup> dangerous and bad; they try not to have weddings or new beginnings in this month”<sup>103</sup>

### Illustration 1a.



“Uzbek women and girls consider the month of Safar dangerous and bad; they try not to have weddings or new beginnings in this month.”

*Top right:* “Did you all leap over the puppy? Yes, we leapt over. May all the evil spirits that roam in the month of Safar be buried with it.”

*Top left:* “May all our woes and blessings be poured out with this libation.”

*Bottom right:* “Children, you jump over [the fire] too, and all your sins will fall away.”

*Bottom left:* “Oh no! Now what will I do? I tripped and fell because I was hurrying!” *Yangi Yo'l*, no. 10 (1926).

<sup>102</sup> Safar is the second month of the Islamic calendar; based on the moon, the months shift about 11 days every year.

<sup>103</sup> *Yangi Yo'l* 10 (1926), as reproduced and translated in Marianne Kamp, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling under Communism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), pp. 95-96.

## Illustration 1b



Top right: "Oh, no! My child is all aflame! Quick, bring water and pour it on her!"

Top left: "Oh, that your mother would die, my child! By trying to deter future tragedies, I brought on Safar's fate!"

Bottom: "The victim of superstition is carried to the tomb." *Yangi Yo'l*, no. 10 (1926).



# Perspectives on the SCO: Images and Discourses

*Selbi Hanova*<sup>\*</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This article looks at the image construction of the SCO in the West and its own self-image as well as the history of discourse construction on the organization. The study utilizes constructivist lenses in order to investigate the reasons for certain image creation and trends/patterns in the activities of the SCO that contribute to the appearance of varying discourse. Such analysis is aimed at presenting relevant insights for policy formulations towards the organization where India, Pakistan, and Iran are observer states and where the membership includes countries key to EU energy politics

*Keywords* • SCO • Image Construction • Discourse • Geopolitics

## Introduction

Current trends in world politics require states to cooperate beyond their borders and often regional cooperation is seen to be of value in itself. Certainly, the majority of states in the current system still fall under the traditional Westphalian definition of statehood, while others have already entered the stage of postmodern development. Nevertheless, with the pace of globalization and the proliferation of international actors, it appears that states are encouraged and at times forced to ally in order to guarantee their security. Current forms of regional cooperation are indeed diverse, however it appears that there is once again a certain type that is perceived to be more suitable than other forms. In today's world where democracy and the principles of good governance and the respect for human rights are seen to be ultimate goods, the functions of regional cooperation entities evolve as well. What constitutes a fully functioning and legitimate regional organization is the fact that it is able to propagate those values despite the classical functions prescribed to it. If such

---

<sup>\*</sup> Selbi Hanova is a Junior Professional Officer at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). She is a graduate of the OSCE Academy and the International Training Course of Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP). The author thanks Dr. Pal Dunay for his guidance and assistance in completing this article.

principles are not promulgated, often the entity is seen as less legitimate and more alarming. Further, certain actions of such an organization attempting to exercise its influence over a territory might be considered illegitimate and pose even more security concerns to outside actors and thus contribute to creating certain images.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) that grew out of the Russian-Chinese rapprochement in the 1990s into a new institutionalized entity appeared as one such organization that did not quite fit into the modern definition of a regional security organization. The nature of the regimes of the SCO members, and some of its observer states, appeared to concern many analysts. The SCO on its own seemed reluctant in propagating the values of democracy, rule of law, and respect for human rights, stressing instead non-interference in internal affairs (the phrase much favored by Beijing and Moscow). The timeframe of the SCO's evolution into a fully fledged organization witnessed a corresponding cooling of bilateral U.S.-China and U.S.-Russia relations. Moreover, the tone of the founding documents of the organization repeatedly censured U.S. hegemony and favored instead the establishment of a multi-polar world order. Different interpretations of the purpose and functions of the SCO have been analyzed in the scholarly literature, portraying the organization in a variety of ways.

As much of the literature on the subject illustrates, there are three main tracks in regard to SCO images constructed. First, the SCO is often seen by those in the West (this term is used for the lack of a better concept of countries who identify themselves as Western) as an "Anti-Western" alliance created for the purposes of containing the influence of the U.S. in the region. Second, the SCO is often viewed through the prism of security architecture, and consequently one analyzes values that such a body ought to produce. In this regard, the organization is often portrayed as a "league of dictators,"<sup>1</sup> which does not appear to be projecting democratic values. There is also a third track that is less featured in the literature which relates to the prospect of the SCO as a new regional project that could, in the future, play an important role in Eurasia. Certainly, the list is not exhaustive and there are other discourses on the SCO depending on the location and worldview of the narrative constructors.

Analysis of the various images of the SCO and the processes of the construction of such images is a much needed feature in the body of literature on the organization. Such qualitative approaches to studying the organization contribute to the already existing literature on the SCO, by putting forward tracks of constructivist analysis and thereby

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Kagan, "League of Dictators?" *Washington Post*, April 30, 2006, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/04/28/AR2006042801987.html>> (February 3 2009).

providing experts with additional analytical tools for understanding the current nature of the SCO. A glance from a critical theoretical stand might also reveal how the official discourse of the SCO is formulated and how, in turn, the narrative of the SCO is told. Clearly, such discourse/image analysis is not aimed at a purely academic audience; it is also required for decision-makers, for it is they who define their policy choices towards the organization, looking for additional instruments to supplement their grand strategic thinking.

Major research questions of the study, which was based on the analysis of data derived from SCO official documents as well as academic and newspaper articles, from the period from 2001 to 2008 included the following:

- How is the SCO's image being constructed?
- How does SCO image construction contribute to the perception of the organization in the West?
- How is the SCO perceived by its member states (and observers)?

Ultimately, organizations like the SCO could be examined by means of various theoretical perspectives, giving way to either realist, liberalist, or pluralist analyses. Regional groupings in general present extensive material for analysts to probe various hypotheses and the SCO is no exception in this regard. However, the academic realm, in general, demonstrates that no theory alone is able to comprehensively explain the functions of the given organization, just as the real world of international politics and relations is far more complex than being able to fit into the worldview of one single school of thought. Therefore, the present work is an attempt to present the SCO through a different paradigm of a critical theory, looking at the reasons and factors that contribute to various images of the organization and different discourses that it is able to augment around itself.

### **SCO as seen in the West: "An Anti-Western Entity"**

The SCO has been viewed as a growing anti-Western alliance, especially since 2005 and the removal of the U.S. airbase in Karshi-Khanabad, Uzbekistan. Earlier, with the waging of the Global War on Terror and the beginning of Operation "Enduring Freedom" in Afghanistan, the region of Central Asia came into the spotlight of strategic thinkers in Washington D.C. Initially, the military presence of the U.S. in Central Asia was seen in terms of two different dimensions. First, the foreign policy analysts within the region assumed that the U.S. had only short-term military interests in Central Asia associated merely with the military operations in Afghanistan. The other group believed in the

revival of the Great Game of the nineteenth century, creating the model of the “New Great Game,” according to which the U.S. aspired to control the region.<sup>2</sup> In reality, the “US military presence in the region initially was seen by the SCO states (with the exception of China) as a strong means to tackle the Taliban threat.”<sup>3</sup> However, in the ensuing years which saw a greater engagement from the U.S. in the region in terms of support for the construction of alternative transport and energy routes, the presence of the Cold War adversary in what was seen as the “backyard” of Russia was interpreted rather differently in Moscow. In fact, President Putin indicated repeatedly that the SCO could potentially be used to “oppose Washington’s foreign policy efforts, especially on issues that are considered to be in Russia’s interest,”<sup>4</sup> and consequently as a lever against the U.S. military presence in Central Asia. Such a stance was further elaborated in the Astana Declaration of the SCO, where it stated:

taking into consideration the conclusion of the active military phase of the antiterrorist operation in Afghanistan, the member states of the SCO find it necessary that the respective participants of the antiterrorist coalition are to define the final deadlines of the temporary use of indicated infrastructure objects and the presence of military contingents on the territories of the SCO member states.<sup>5</sup>

The removal of the U.S. military base from Karshi-Khanabad, Uzbekistan, further contributed to the fact that Western discourse on the SCO perceived the organization to be anti-American.

Interestingly, another Western view portrayed the stand taken by Presidents Putin and Ahmadinejad regarding the military presence of the U.S. in Central Asia as stemming from “the organization’s future intentions to expand and consolidate with new member states, as well as its interests to construct a common energy market.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, as another view from the outside suggests, the possibility of the SCO turning into

---

<sup>2</sup> S. F. Starr, “The United States, Afghanistan, and Central Asia,” *NIASnytt*, Vol. 3, 2002, pp. 9–11.

<sup>3</sup> Natalia Touzovskaia, *Shanghai Cooperation Organization: a New Security Provider for Central Asia?* International Forum on Strategic Thinking, 9<sup>th</sup> New Faces Conference “Security in a Globalized World: Towards Regional Cooperation and Strategic Partnerships,” October 20–22, 2006, Oslo, Norway.

<sup>4</sup> Roger McDermott, *The Rising Dragon: SCO Peace Mission 2007*, The Jamestown Foundation Occasional Paper, October 2007, p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> SCO, *Declaration of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Member States*, Astana, July 5 2005, <<http://www.sectSCO.org/RU/show.asp?id=98>> (August 1 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Artyom Matusov, “Energy Cooperation in the SCO: Club or Gathering?” *China and Eurasia Quarterly* 5, 3, 2007, p. 80.

“gas OPEC” with Russia and Iran on the board was often cautiously predicted. In fact, enhancement of the economic dimension of cooperation within the organization was frequently mentioned in many official documents of the organization, such as the 2002 SCO Charter and the Astana Declaration of 2005. However, closer examination of the comprehensive energy policies in the region might suggest that “multilateral agreement that integrates energy policy throughout the entire region is a difficult proposition, and that the agreements which have emerged are not products of the SCO, even if they are influenced by the SCO process.”<sup>7</sup> Rather, bilateral agreements between the member countries seem to be dominating, while the SCO serves as a context or framework for such agreements. For Russia it appears that EurAsEc (Eurasian Economic Community) and the CIS fulfill the role of concluding agreements.

However, unlike Moscow and Tehran (an observer to the SCO), Beijing appeared to downplay the anti-American card, at least in its official statements. Perhaps, as it is often argued, it was “simply not Beijing’s diplomatic tradition to make harsh unexpected statements at international events.”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, there are other explanations as to the reasons for the creation of “anti-Western” and “oriental NATO” images as well. Zhao Huasheng provides another interpretation on the creation of the image of an “anti-Western ally.” It is argued that the formation and consolidation of the SCO took place at a time when bilateral China-U.S. and Russia-U.S. relations were deteriorating – and that could serve as one of the primary reasons behind such image construction. The cooling of China-U.S. relations after the events of 1989 took place simultaneously as the “strategic partnership” of the U.S. and Russia was transforming into a “cold peace.”<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the 2001 statement of the heads of the SCO member states, in which support for a multilateral approach, the role of the UN, and non-interference in the internal affairs of member states was expressed, could be interpreted as a possible challenge to “US unipolar and hegemonic politics.”<sup>10</sup> Zhao Huasheng argues that the creation of the SCO brought the so-called “Shanghai spirit” into existence, which could be seen as a uniting identity component. However, the “concept bears unclear meaning and every member can interpret it differently.”<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>8</sup> Erica Marat and Asel Murzakulova, “The SCO Seeks Energy Cooperation, but Problems Remain,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, August 21, 2007, <<http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4676>> (August 1 2009).

<sup>9</sup> X. Huashen, *Kitai, Tsentral’naya Aziya i Shankhaiskaya Organizatsiya Sotrudnichestva* [China, Central Asia and the Shanghai Cooperation organization], Carnegie Moscow Centre, Working Papers, No. 5, 2005, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Marat and Murzakulova, “The SCO Seeks Energy Cooperation, but Problems Remain.”

The presence of observer states, and their possible membership, could also contribute to understanding the organization in different ways. For instance, it is argued that, “should Iran and Pakistan ever become members, the SCO’s internal cohesion would continue to deteriorate. However, the SCO might also seek expansion vis-à-vis NATO’s potential enlargement in Eastern Europe and former Soviet states.”<sup>12</sup> It is often argued that the membership of India could bring a “democratic aspect” and help foster reform in the direction of liberal transformation.

When discussing images of the SCO as a possibly “anti-Western entity” it is important to touch upon the interests of the U.S. in Central Asia, which according to some analysts are seen as a “center” of the activities of the SCO. This is essential as it sets the contextual framework for the analysis of the “Anti-Western” type of classification track. The literature on this particular subject has grown dramatically and the path of U.S. policies in Central Asia has been carefully looked at and analyzed in various dimensions, yet this study requires briefly examining how the region of Central Asia is viewed. The image of the region in U.S. foreign policy was not always clear from the outset of U.S. engagement in all five ex-Soviet republics, which gave way to various misperceptions and inaccuracies in defining and categorizing the region as the following paragraph illustrates. However, what is important to note is that Central Asia appeared to be important to U.S. strategic interests with relation to the Global War on Terror, while before 2001 programs had focused on “democratization, economic liberalization, and human rights dominated US engagement, with scant attention to security cooperation.”<sup>13</sup>

The significance of Central Asia in geopolitical and geostrategic terms for U.S. foreign policy was initially mentioned in Silk Road Acts I and II and later re-evaluated in the *Strategic Assessment of Central Eurasia* published by the Atlantic Council of the United States and the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute in 2001. This document has clearly defined Afghanistan as a primary security concern for the entire region. By presenting three foreign policy guiding types of U.S. interests, i.e. vital, strategic, and important, this report indicated which interests were particularly applicable to Central Asia. While no vital interests were deemed present, strategic interests included four areas: peace and stability, containment of intra-regional disputes, prevention of inter-regional conflicts, and prevention of the production of weapons of mass destruction.<sup>14</sup> Important interests of the U.S. in the region included

---

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Roger D. Kangas, “Battling Misperceptions: Challenges to US Security Cooperation in Central Asia,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 50, 3, 2008, p. 99.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Fairbanks, et al, *Strategic Assessment of Central Eurasia* (Washington D.C., Atlantic Council of the United States and Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 2001), p. 98.

energy resources, human rights issues, environmental concerns, democratic reforms, religious freedom, fighting corruption, and drug trafficking. It was widely expected that as a consequence of active U.S. presence in the region and successful implementation of policies connected to important interests of the U.S., this would serve to speed up the long anticipated transformation of Central Asian states into stable democracies. U.S. Ambassador Pascoe wrote in this regard that America's "enhanced engagement is helping to break the habit of repression and stagnation in the region,"<sup>15</sup> while Martin Spechler argued that when the war in Afghanistan is over "Central Asia will revert to relative obscurity from a geopolitical point of view, the outskirts of the world economy."<sup>16</sup>

Central Asia has also been referred to as an unstable region, vulnerable to Islamization. Further, the term "failed states" has quite often been applied to the countries of the region. A predominant albeit somewhat simplified view of the region is illustrated in a quote from an *International Herald Tribune* article from 2005, stating that while the Bush administration was trying to foster reforms by showcasing Kazakhstan, "Central Asia largely remains a corridor of criminality, oppression and corruption."<sup>17</sup> The lack of a clear strategy of the U.S. toward Central Asia in the early independence period has also contributed to a somewhat distorted image of the region whereby several governmental agencies of the United States' government responsible for foreign policy formulation, such as the State Department and the Department of Defense, have had different sets of priorities toward the region. Later developments of U.S. foreign policy in the region have supported the opinion that "Central Asia is very likely to become a strategically important area, not overlaid by the Heartland or the Rimland as a subordinate entity, but represented in them as an independent entity."<sup>18</sup>

The adoption of the comprehensive EU strategy in its relations to Central Asia in 2007 under the German EU Council Presidency demonstrated three strategically important areas of interest for Europe (perhaps not for all member states, but rather a select few who have interests in the region). Those were Central Asia's proximity to Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan; the successful containment of Islamic fundamentalism by Central Asian states; and the region's hydrocarbon resources. Views from Europe, where the SCO is little known, differ to

---

<sup>15</sup> B. Lynn Pascoe, "U.S. Policy in Central Asia and the War on Terrorism," *IRPI Fact File*, 7, 6, 2005, p. 34.

<sup>16</sup> Martin C. Spechler, "Economy and Security in Central Asia since 9/11: A Skeptical Look," *Central Asia and the Caucasus* 1, 19 (2003): 44.

<sup>17</sup> Stanley A. Weiz, "Don't Play this Great Game," *International Herald Tribune*, December 10-11, 2005, p. 25.

<sup>18</sup> Farkhod Tolipov, "Are the Heartland and Rimland Changing in the Wake of the Operation in Afghanistan?" *Central Asia and the Caucasus* 5, 23 (2004), p. 107.

the extent that, on the one hand, the SCO is considered as “a dynamic, influential and ambitious regional organization, stretching across a large part of the Asian continent.”<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, skeptical views are expressed relating to the potential of the SCO to turn into a genuine security alliance and that “the time has gone that Western security experts could depict the SCO as simply one of many insignificant organizations in the Asia-Pacific.”<sup>20</sup> Finally, another view was propounded that the “practical impact of the SCO, as distinct from its normative characteristics, has some useful sides and could even be seen as positive for Europeans on balance.”<sup>21</sup>

Japan, another member of the West, has been proactive in Central Asia as well. For instance, Japan introduced the “Central Asia plus Japan” initiative, with the amount of Japanese Official Development Aid (ODA) having amounted to more than US\$2.5 billion by 2006; EU development assistance to Central Asia by comparison amounted to around US\$1.5 billion.<sup>22</sup> In this regard, analysts argue that such moves could be seen as not simply mechanisms for the promotion of regional integration, but “to some extent, also an attempt to counterbalance the growing influence of China in the region through the creation of an alternative to the SCO regional cooperation arrangement.”<sup>23</sup> Such an argument is valid if one looks at the situation in the context of the competing nature of Chinese-Japanese relations. Finally, Japan also views Central Asia as a part of a bigger Asia associated with ancient Silk Routes, and in thus doing, is willing to lend its assistance within the framework of its newly announced foreign policy pillar to create an “Arc of Freedom and Prosperity on the outer rim of Eurasia, including the region of Central Asia.”<sup>24</sup>

Another external view of the cooperation between Russia and China presents the argument that both countries “clearly have ‘normative advantage’ over the USA, because the Central Asian regimes have been developing according to political and economic models closer to those of Russia and China.”<sup>25</sup> This argument lies within the framework of another

---

<sup>19</sup> Oksana Antonenko, “The EU Should Not Ignore the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” *Centre for European Reform*, May 2007, < [www.cer.org.uk](http://www.cer.org.uk) >.

<sup>20</sup> Marcel de Haas, “SCO Summit Demonstrates its Growing Cohesion,” *Power and Interest News Report*, August 14, 2007, < <http://www.pinr.com> > (August 20 2007).

<sup>21</sup> Alyson J.K. Bailes, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Europe,” *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 5, 3, 2007, p. 18.

<sup>22</sup> Nargis Kassenova, “Japan’s Hesitant Embrace of Central Asia: Will There Be a Strategy?” *Great Powers and Regional Integration in Central Asia: A Local Perspective*, Mario Esteban and Nicolas de Pedro (eds.) (Madrid: Exlibris Ediciones S.L., 2009), p. 96.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>25</sup> Geir Flikke and Julie Wilhelmsen, *Central Asia: A Testing Ground for New Great Power Relations*, NUPI Report, 2008, p. 3.

track of categorizing the region as an area where democratic governance is not particularly welcomed. In fact, the membership of the SCO does not require certain conditionalities as is the case with other “Western blocs” such as NATO or the EU. However, looking at this organization simply through a one-sided lens in terms of a NATO or EU-type organization is rather simplistic. Ultimately, the SCO originates and is cultivated in an area where different cultural traditions are predominant. And simplifying everything to the nature of the political regimes might not, on the whole, be relevant for the policy implications of actors willing to engage in dialogue.

The predominant view of the SCO in the West is obviously a product of the interpretations of events, and at times even simplifications, as is illustrated in the articles of leading newspapers and academic magazines. Evidently, the SCO was not created for the sole purposes of blocking any Western moves in the area; the mere fact that, as Alyson Bailes and Pal Dunay state, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan hosted U.S. military bases on their territories *after* the institutionalization of the SCO took place shows that the organization did not initially take an anti-Western stand. Although, as Lena Jonson argues, it could also have been a move by Putin to allow the U.S. military presence in Central Asia in the context of the War on Terror in order to bargain Russia’s re-entry in the great power elite.<sup>26</sup> The author writes that such rapprochement was meant to “bring about a breakthrough in Russia’s relations with the West and, at least in the long run, to bring dividends for Russia.”<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, on the other side, views on Russian policies in the CIS area are often interpreted in different manners often revoking the idea of Russia’s supremacy in the region. For instance, the view of Putin’s desire to re-build Greater Russia is evident in the writings of analysts, and, furthermore, the contention that such expansionist moves are not “in the traditional geo-political sense of acquiring new territory, but rather of denying others influence”<sup>28</sup> adds to a rather negative perception of the SCO. Nevertheless, the states in Central Asia “continue to receive substantial Western aid and advice for military reform and technical interoperability and for the development of defensive, intelligence-gathering and enforcement capabilities against various ‘new threats’.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore, views differ and the reality of the SCO – the one created in the West – is once again constructed by various agents and often leads to the production of images

<sup>26</sup> See Lena Jonson, *Vladimir Putin and Central Asia: the Shaping of the Russian Foreign Policy* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>28</sup> Bertil Nygren, *The Rebuilding of Greater Russia: Putin’s Foreign Policy Towards the CIS Countries* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 249.

<sup>29</sup> Alyson J.K. Bailes and Pal Dunay, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a Regional Security Institution,” *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, Alyson J.K. Bailes, et al., SIPRI, SIPRI Policy Paper No. 17. May 2007, p. 15.

that seemingly once again puts emphasis on an “us versus them” type of discourse.

### SCO Self-Image

The SCO often transmits its own image, which becomes especially evident in the official documents and the rhetoric used by the member states’ political authorities. Certainly one might argue that such rhetoric could be quite declaratory and less implementation might take place in reality, yet nevertheless the discourse often carries certain important messages. Such messages are directed to a wider audience that goes beyond the populations of the member countries; but at the same time, in a more narrow sense, such messages are often used as a tool for the socialization of certain groups within the SCO in order to achieve specific aims. Clearly, without being an insider to SCO decision-making one could only presume which socialization aims are sought after in this case. The following section looks at how both Russia and China, but also other member states of the SCO, propagate the founding ideas of this organization and the purposes for which it was created. Just as the previous chapter, the present one looks at the events and their interpretative meaning for the states involved, which later transform those interpretations into policies.

The Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China are clearly leading members of the SCO. The very alliance of these rather autocratic (as seen in the West) actors with superpower potential could be taken to represent a disturbing signal of a possible strategic imbalance if the SCO develops its full political, military, and economic capacities. Presumably, the views from within the organization differ. Much of the literature on the subject matter illustrates the multiplicity of contradictions and conflicting interests within the organization in terms of bilateral relations between the member states. Indeed, opinions on the SCO’s pessimistic future could be heard especially after the 2008 Dushanbe Declaration with no clear common stand adopted with regard to the Russia-Georgia conflict of August 2008. In fact, when looking at the foreign policy priorities of Russia and China it becomes evident that the SCO does not feature in the top priorities of either country. Rather, the SCO member states’ experts’ evaluations of the organization “are characterized by definite variations and nuances slightly differing from the definitions made by the SCO itself on the basis of consensus.”<sup>30</sup> Certainly, it is necessary to differentiate between the two categories of images and views of the SCO. First, there are declarations made by the organization itself on its nature and functions and, second, there are

---

<sup>30</sup> Vladimir Portyakov, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Achievements, Problems, Prospects,” *Far Eastern Affairs*, 35, 4 (2007), p. 5.

views expressed within member states (including practically all members without exception) about the SCO and its role in the wider region.

According to official statements of the SCO, the organization is defined as “a stable multilateral body enjoying generally recognized prestige in the world” and “an important mechanism to broaden and deepen the good-neighborly, friendly and partnership relations between its member-states.”<sup>31</sup> The organization propagates the “Shanghai spirit” or a “common home” of ideas and in general, as Portyakov writes, the SCO “has proclaimed its role as an example and catalyst in the sphere of intercivizational relations and solutions of the problems obstructing the establishment of harmonious relations in the world.”<sup>32</sup> Often the SCO is characterized as an organization that fights the “three evils of terrorism, separatism and extremism,” which in many ways has become its hallmark. Consequently, the official declarations of the SCO do not form any particular anti-Western stand,<sup>33</sup> but rather declare the “universal” values of cooperation and multilateralism. Illustratively, the founding SCO Charter of 2002 proclaims that the basic purposes and aims of the organization are as follows: the strengthening of mutual trust, friendship, and good-neighborliness; the development of multidimensional cooperation; the mutual fight against terrorism, separatism, and extremism; encouragement of effective regional cooperation; support for multilateral and balanced economic, social, and cultural development; coordination of approaches to integration into the world economy; support for the provision of rights and fundamental freedoms of individuals; support and development of relations with other states and international organizations; cooperation in preventing international conflicts and in their peaceful settlements; and, finally, the mutual search for issues arising in the twenty-first century.<sup>34</sup> As the list illustrates the directions are quite exhaustive including a wide range of activities of a purely cooperative nature aimed at fostering dialogue and regional cooperation.

Interestingly, another Declaration of the SCO adopted in Bishkek in 2007 lists among other criteria for the creation of a security architecture the necessity to guarantee each state “an independent choice of the way of development in accordance to its historical experience and national specificities for the protection of state unity and national dignity and for

---

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> At the same time, the Astana Declaration of 2005 is often the most cited official document of the SCO, which in fact does make an “anti-American” stand by requesting U.S. military bases to leave the territory of SCO member states. Yet such language was not heavily present in the founding documents of the organization.

<sup>34</sup> SCO, *Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, June 7 2002, <<http://infoshos.ru/?id=33>> (June 7 2002).

the equal participation in the international affairs.”<sup>35</sup> Such a message is quite usual of the general tone in which both Russia and China make their official statements. At the same time, another interesting item on the list is worth mentioning. It states that such security architecture ought to “maintain the variety of cultures and civilizations, encourage the realization of initiatives aimed at the deepening of the dialogue between the civilizations and religions.”<sup>36</sup>

Such rhetoric of cultural variety and the importance of inter-civilizational dialogue serves as a message to inform the larger public of the multiplicity of cultures and religions inside the larger region, which could be potentially vulnerable to inter-ethnic and border conflicts. As one of the views illustrates, the purpose of the rapprochement of the five non-Western civilizations, namely Russian, Chinese, Islamic, Hindu, and Buddhist, “where the priority of collective forces predominates over the individualistic consumerist ones could bring about the disagreement of the former ones over the ideology of monetarism.”<sup>37</sup> Certainly such statements full of pathos are not rare in writings about the SCO. However, they are useful in order to give a complete picture.

At the same time, the other strand of literature looks at the SCO as a somewhat challenged entity. For instance, it is mentioned that one of the weaknesses of the organization is the “absence of inter-civilizational integration, concepts and algorithms of the structurization of the gigantic space.”<sup>38</sup> Indeed, perhaps the absence of such a catalyst could be considered an impediment in the overall integration of the entity in the years after 2001. Luzyanin adds that parities in economic development “objectively create inner imbalance.”<sup>39</sup> Once again the multilevel structure of the organization surfaces in the analysis. There are varying interpretations of those levels where Russia and China occupy the leading positions, while Kazakhstan is in the middle – sometimes with Uzbekistan, but less so recently – with the lower level consisting of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In fact, both economic disparities and the lack of a long-term vision on the parts of the member states of the organization appear to be one of the contributing factors to the somewhat lengthy process of the consolidation of the SCO.

---

<sup>35</sup> SCO, *Declaration of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, Bishkek, August 16, 2007, <<http://infoshos.ru/?id=25>> (September 17 2007).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> L. Ivashev, “O Rasshirenii Hartlenda ili SHOS [The enlargement of the heartland or SCO],” *Fond Strategicheskoi Kultury*, January 1, 2008, <<http://infoshos.ru/?idn=3509>> (January 10 2008).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> S. Luzyanin, “Garmonizatsiya SHOS-Dolgovremennaya i Produmannaya Politika [The harmonization of the SCO - a long term and well-thought-out policy],” *Informatsionnyi Portal SHOS* [Information portal of the SCO], February 9, 2009, <<http://infoshos.ru/?idn=3687>> (February 10 2009).

On the other hand, there are experts who predict a somewhat brighter future for the organization. Knyazev writes that in the conditions of the global economic, energy, and financial crisis the SCO could become a unique instrument, which could become a self-sustaining energy system.<sup>40</sup> Such a system would include both the producers of energy (Russia, Iran, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan) and the consumers (China, India, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan). The author further suggests that the SCO should play a proactive role in Afghanistan by creating international cartels with the purpose of the development of Afghanistan.<sup>41</sup> The view on the SCO developing as a potential military bloc – that appears to be of concern in the West – and its possible involvement in Afghanistan is not a novel one either. Rather, the military exercises carried out between members of the organization, such as the “Peace Mission” in 2007, in addition to the idea of potentially merging with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) create certain security-related implications for analysts in the West. Indeed, in 2007, during the summit in Dushanbe at which representatives from the CIS, EurAsEC, and CSTO were present a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the SCO and the CSTO. Yet, as Luzyanin argues, this document does not in reality mean any formation of a bloc or “Anti-NATO” type of union, but rather speaks of the willingness of both sides to enhance cooperation in the sphere of regional security.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps, such interpretation does not sufficiently address the matter, since both organizations have Russia as a member (and while CSTO is de facto Russian-led the SCO’s leadership is still shared by Russia and China). According to local views, such a merger could help stabilize the situation in Afghanistan, by creating a “regime of security” along the borders of the CSTO member states and Afghanistan together with Iran and Pakistan, which as observer states in the SCO are also key players in Afghanistani affairs.<sup>43</sup>

Nevertheless, the images between the “big two” differ. In Russian foreign policy terms the SCO is seen as an instrument of “coordinating the interests of the organization’s member-states, including Russia and

---

<sup>40</sup> A. Knyazev, “Nuzhen li Shankhaiskoi Organizatsii Sotrudnichestva Afganistan [Does the Shanghai Cooperation Organization have to cooperate with Afghanistan?],” 23 January 2009, < <http://infoshos.ru/?idn=3577> > (February 10 2009).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> S. Lyuzyanin, “Garmonizatsiya SHOS-Dolgovremennaya i Produmannaya Politika [The harmonization of the SCO - a long term and well-thought-out policy].”

<sup>43</sup> V. Sitenko, “Rol’ Regional’nykh Organizatsii v Uregulirovanii Situatsii Vokrug Afganistana v Kontekste Interesov RK [The role of regional organizations in regulating the situation around Afghanistan in the context of Kazakhstan interests],” *Analytic*, 3, 43, 2008, pp. 15-16.

China.”<sup>44</sup> Moscow has often referred to SCO’s potential success in creating an “arc of stability” in Eurasia “as opposed to an ‘arc of instability’ on its southern rim, reflecting, in Moscow’s view, Washington’s failed policies in Afghanistan and Iraq.”<sup>45</sup> Russia appeared, moreover, to support the membership of Iran and Pakistan.<sup>46</sup> Consequently, concerns about the possible gas cartel initiated by Russia, Qatar, and Iran together with the formation of the energy club within the framework of the SCO were rather prominent. Iran’s motives emerged as the most obvious since Tehran “feels that it can count on Moscow’s and maybe Beijing’s support, as they are clearly reluctant to vote for sanctions against it.”<sup>47</sup>

The Chinese view, guided by its security concerns in Xinjiang, regards Central Asia as a priority region and “the SCO makes for the most natural multilateral mechanism through which to pursue this strategy.”<sup>48</sup> As Lam argues, while the former president Jiang Zemin was seen as pro-U.S., Hu Jintao is pro-Russian relying on Russia “for political support as well as military hardware to repel the “anti-China containment policy’.”<sup>49</sup> Invitations extended to Pakistan, Iran, and India were seen accordingly to Beijing as a demonstration “that it has ways and means to not only maintain its foothold in Central Asia but also promote Central Asia’s link with Asia.”<sup>50</sup> China’s interests go beyond the economic sphere, trade investment, and energy – “membership in the SCO has served China well, giving it a major voice in Central Asian affairs without antagonizing Russia and alarming regional leaders, while keeping the United States at bay.”<sup>51</sup> Pan Guang argues that the SCO has also contributed to Chinese diplomacy by having a strong “demonstration effect” which has helped it develop newer approaches in thinking in its foreign policy.<sup>52</sup> The author argues that the SCO facilitated thinking in Beijing about its neighborhood security through its positive experience with the ex-Soviet republics in border demarcation; it also shaped a new model of state-to-state relationships in contrast to

---

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> McDermott, *The Rising Dragon: SCO Peace Mission* 2007, p. 23.

<sup>46</sup> Stephen Blank, “Iran and the SCO: A Match Made in Dushanbe or in Moscow?” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, April 30, 2008, <<http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4847>> (June 1 2008).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> McDermott, *The Rising Dragon: SCO Peace Mission* 2007, p. 22.

<sup>49</sup> Willy Lam, “Hu’s Central Asian Gamble to Counter the US ‘Containment Strategy’,” *China Brief*, Jamestown Foundation, July 5, 2005.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Eugene B. Rumer, “China, Russia and the Balance of Power in Central Asia,” *Strategic Forum*, No 223, November 2006, p. 5.

<sup>52</sup> Pan Guang, “Chinese Perspective on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, Alyson J.K. Bailes, et al, SIPRI, SIPRI Policy Paper No. 17. May 2007, p. 46.

previous Cold War thinking; a new model of regional cooperation was endorsed; and finally “the transformation of Chinese diplomacy from its traditional focus on bilateral relations towards the growing embrace of multilateral interactions” was witnessed.<sup>53</sup> However, at the same time, it is noted that the future of the SCO is likely to depend on U.S.-China relations. Orazaliev argues that in the short term Beijing and Moscow are likely to resist a consolidation of the U.S. presence in Central Asia, while maintaining a certain vagueness in U.S.-China relations is likely to contribute to the stable development of the SCO.<sup>54</sup>

Let us briefly touch upon the interests of the Russian Federation in Central Asia, in order to examine the motives behind the Russian version of the SCO image construction. According to Paramonov and Stolpovski, “Central Asia has always been of particular importance to Russia by virtue of its strategic geographical location and its wealth of natural resources.”<sup>55</sup> In fact, the authors argue that only when the Russian Federation had stable positions in Central Asia was it “able to exert much influence in the development of favourable balance of forces and interest in Eurasia.”<sup>56</sup> Central Asia has been historically closely linked to initially the Russian empire and then to the RSFSR. Thus, one might argue that it is in Russia’s interest to develop military and political dimensions to the SCO, yet as Paramonov puts it: “in reality, Moscow sees multilateral military cooperation merely as a cheap and reasonably effective way of increasing its own geopolitical influence.”<sup>57</sup> At the same time, the SCO is seen through Moscow’s eyes as an opportunity to form a new effective security system “along with Beijing but excluding Washington.”<sup>58</sup>

Interestingly, in the view of Central Asian scholars, the organization does not exist for mere military and security reasons and its “members are also interested in seeing the SCO develop its trade and economy component.”<sup>59</sup> The self-image of the region within the organization of

---

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 46-48.

<sup>54</sup> E. Orazaliev, “Perspektivy SHOS V Kontekste Sotrudnichestva v Oblasti Regional’noi Bezopasnosti [The perspectives of the SCO in the context of cooperation in regional security],” *Analytic*, No. 4, 2006, p. 26.

<sup>55</sup> Vladimir Paramonov and Oleg Stolpovski, *Russia and Central Asia: Multilateral Security Cooperation*, Advanced Research and Assessment Group, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, March 2008, p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> A. Khasimov, *SCO: Measurement of the Regional Security and Stability*, Dialogue on Globalization, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Briefing Papers, Proceedings of the Second Shanghai Workshop on Global Governance, June 21-23, 2004, Shanghai, p. 95. For a more detailed overview of Central Asian perspectives on China, see Marlene Laruelle and Sebastien Peyrouse, *China as a Neighbour: Central Asian Perspectives and Strategies* (Washington D.C.: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program,

being “central” and serving as an “historical center of the Great Silk Road” and having linked “East to the West and the North to the South during many centuries”<sup>60</sup> exemplifies the extent to which the countries in the region view their historical connection to both Russia and China. In the current setting “both China and the Russian Federation share the Central Asian leaders’ sense of what is and what is not good statecraft, and do not accuse them of advancing policies that create the very security risks that all agree must be alleviated.”<sup>61</sup> At the same time, when it comes to the SCO, it is even more difficult to argue that there is a commonly shared view of the role and functions of the organization among its four Central Asian members. Clearly, the balancing and “multi-vector” policies of the states in the region leave the SCO as one of the possible options for cooperation among many other regional projects in which these states are also members.

Consequently, one might argue that the views of the member states on the SCO differ from capital to capital. For Moscow the SCO among other objectives is a mechanism, alongside the CSTO and other Russia-led initiatives (i.e. CIS), by which it carries out its foreign policy in Central Asia. Its two-level approach of multilateral and bilateral relations with the countries in post-Soviet Central Asia illustrates the fact, however, that the SCO is not seen as the only instrument for the implementation of its foreign policy objectives. Rather, the SCO may also be used for balancing out its relations with China or gaining leverage in its talks with the West. Troitsky argues that “in terms of its overall role in the world stage, Russian policymakers want the SCO to continue to act as an important symbol of rebuke to Russia’s might-have-been strategic partners in the West and as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the USA.”<sup>62</sup>

For China, the SCO is also one of the mechanisms of its foreign policy that increasingly looks at its western dimension, in which Central Asia represents an attractive market for Chinese goods but also as an energy source. China is proactive in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, concluding deals on energy pipelines that could bypass the Russian Federation. At the same time, with sensitive ethnic issues involved in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, China wishes to secure its relations with Central Asia and therefore adopts a rather pragmatic approach within the SCO, taking advantage of quick bilateral deals under

---

2009), <<http://www.isdp.eu/files/publications/books/09/ml09chinaneighbor.pdf>> (August 1 2009).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>61</sup> Martha Brill Olcott, “Strategic Concerns in Central Asia,” *Central Asia at the Crossroads*, Disarmament Forum, 2007, p.11.

<sup>62</sup> Mikhail Troitskiy, “A Russian Perspective on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, Alyson J.K. Bailes, et al, SIPRI, SIPRI Policy Paper No. 17. May 2007, p. 44.

the wider umbrella of the organization. Despite the fact that a certain anti-Americanism as discussed earlier is present in both the foreign policies of Russia and China and in the founding documents of the SCO (specifically pre-Astana Declaration 2005), such sentiment is not the only driving factor behind the SCO and its future development.

In the Central Asian context, the views on the organization differ as well. The much favored “multivectorism” in the foreign policies of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan appears to contribute to the consideration of the SCO as a forum where bilateral issues with Russia and China can be solved quickly. Uzbekistan with its re-joining of the SCO after the Andijan event in May 2005 and Tajikistan, whose economic indicators appear to have declined in recent years, also view the organization as a forum for discussing various bilateral issues. As a matter of fact, as has been previously mentioned, there is no commonly shared view of the organization among the Central Asian members and the strategic vision for the future of the organization is seemingly a plan yet to be discussed and developed. For now the SCO “remains terra incognita with unclear interests and positions of the members on various issues.”<sup>63</sup>

To date the self-image of the organization is evident in the official rhetoric with multiple declaratory statements, common military exercises (in which not all member states participate), as well as elaborate plans for closer cooperation in areas such as the fight against terrorism, economics and trade, cultural and educational fields. The SCO is also seen variously by the Central Asian member states as either a Russian or Chinese-led organization. Its observer states also appear to lack a consistent vision of the organization. Practically very little could be found in the Foreign Affairs Ministries’ resources on the SCO, and the academic papers written by authors originating from the observer states appear to put a lot of emphasis on the economic dimensions of the cooperation. However, one should not conclude on these bases that the SCO is a merely bureaucratic organization. There are characteristics of the SCO that could qualify it as an entity that goes beyond simply being that of an alliance or an instrument of the foreign policies of the powerful states, but rather as a body that could potentially develop into a regional cooperation project.

## Conclusion

It is clear that trends in the discourse formulations towards the organization, especially in the West, indicate the fact that the SCO is still looked upon either with concern or suspicion. Cooperation with Western entities, such as NATO or EU, is largely absent. At the same

---

<sup>63</sup> GCSP-OSCE Academy Seminars, *Central Asia 2008*, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 22-23 September 2008, Rapporteur: Selbi Hanova, p. 30.

time, the self-image appears to be less unified in so far as the two leading member states Russia and China have used the organization for their own purposes rather than developing it to meet common objectives (the only common objective is likely to be anti-Americanism, which is once again different in both cases).

The SCO area exhibits a complex nature with a history of numerous integration initiatives and attempts. The states in the organization have not yet been clearly defined in terms of belonging to security structures, and in such an instance, this is where theory might provide some useful insights. For instance, Buzan's earlier definition of a Regional Security Complex (RSC) as groups of states whose security concerns are interlinked to an extent that they cannot be considered apart has evolved with the end of the Cold War, yet "the central idea remains that substantial parts of the securitization and desecuritization processes in the international system will manifest themselves in regional clusters."<sup>64</sup> The author argues that the post-Soviet space could be defined as a centered RSC built on conflict relations initially with Russia as a dominating power. At the same time, Central Asia presents a challenge, since it is not clear whether it is "an RSC and/or a huge insulator zone, or a subcomplex in the Russia-centered RSC."<sup>65</sup> In the author's view, the region has the potential of becoming an RSC in its own right in the case that Russia would engage less and the U.S. would increase its presence.

Looking at the geopolitical landscape of the SCO area one would conclude that Russia-China-Central Asia joining together might appear as a natural umbrella of various cooperative, but also conflicting, alliances within this group. Alyson Bailes and Pal Dunay note "SCO activities thus far have only reached the level of goal setting and primary provision of resources, with little evidence of how far and how effectively these are being used and whether there is more to come."<sup>66</sup> We are yet to witness the full potential and capabilities of the SCO, certainly if the member states would in future decide to consolidate the organization. The SCO is also yet to emerge from the current financial crisis, where its member states with likely different degrees of consequences and varying policy responses would contribute to the evolution of the organization. As constructivists point out, "structure affects through shared beliefs the very definition of identity, hence interests, and eventually behavior."<sup>67</sup> We are left to observe the development of SCO identity be it the

---

<sup>64</sup> Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 44.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 428.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>67</sup> Stefano Guzzini, "Constructivism and the role of institutions in international relations," *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, 2003, <<http://www.ciaonet.org/wps/guso6/guso6.pdf>> (February 26 2009).

“Shanghai spirit” or any other new form to which member states would subscribe to. It is also not clear how member states are likely to wield SCO influence; strategic thinking appears to be lacking when it comes to decisions regarding the future of the organization. Yet its existence is providing analysts and policy makers with room to create varying discourses, and events involving the SCO lead to diverging interpretations of this new entity.



# The Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and Russia's Strategic Goals in Central Asia

*Alexander Frost\**

## ABSTRACT

The Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization have both proved to be key security-coordinating and training instruments in Central Asia. From Moscow's point of view her security goals are superbly met through both. However, from her strategic standpoint the dual existence of these two organizations, the former Russian backed the latter a Chinese initiative, presents both benefits and major strategic drawbacks. This article examines how their dual existence affects Russia's three key Central Asian strategic goals of promoting Moscow as a pole of power in the region, preserving the pro-Moscow regimes, and excluding or limiting American and Chinese influence. It draws conclusions about Sino-Russian relations and presents a course of action for Western governments to address their own security concerns in the region.

*Keywords* • Central Asia • China • Competition • CSTO • Russia • SCO

## Introduction

The Soviet collapse of 1991 which resulted in the independence of the five Central Asian states has forced subsequent Russian governments to find new ways to manage security policy in the region. Whereas the region used to be solely influenced by Soviet power, in the last 18 years it has been gradually penetrated by American and Chinese influence and has become a focal point for many new non-traditional security threats such as religious extremism and narcotics smuggling. Though for much of the 1990s Russian efforts to coordinate the security agenda in Central Asia were managed through bilateral agreements, since 2001 the responsibility for regional security has shifted to multilateral frameworks. The two

---

\* Alexander Frost is a recent Masters graduate of the Department of European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada. He has travelled extensively in Europe, Russia, and the Far East and now resides in Montreal. His major research interests include Sino-Russian security relations, Russian energy politics, and Russian-Georgian relations.

organizations responsible for addressing regional security are the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The former a Russian dominated grouping formed in 2002 that grew out of the old military alliance of the Collective Security Treaty (CST) between former Soviet states, and the latter a Chinese initiative began to resolve border disputes between Beijing and the Central Asian states in 1996.

On a security level the two organizations have an obvious benefit to Russia in that they are effective coordinating, training, and delivery systems to assist the Central Asian states in fighting terrorism, religious extremism, and narcotics production and smuggling. The CSTO since its formation in 2002 has served not only to train Central Asian officers in Russian military academies and the Central Asian militaries in anti-insurgent tactics at its “*Rubezh*” (frontier) military exercises but is also a framework for delivery of both Soviet-era and more modern military equipment to the Central Asian militaries at Russian internal prices. It also hosts the annual region wide “*Kanal*” (channel) drug interception operations that, in 2008, saw 107,000 troops and law enforcement officers in action.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, permanent CSTO establishments such as the Anti-Terror Center (ATC) in Tashkent, the airbase at Kant in Kyrgyzstan, and the Russian 201<sup>st</sup> Motor Rifle Division at Kulyab in Tajikistan<sup>2</sup> form a strong backbone to their security operations. Likewise the SCO, which in its founding document states that member states “realize [...] that terrorism, separatism and extremism represent a threat against international peace and security”<sup>3</sup> plays an important role in confronting regional security threats. The high profile SCO “Peace Mission” military exercises served to establish a basis for potential future joint anti-terror action between Russia and China in 2005, which were the first Sino-Russian war games in 40 years. They also brought in contingents of the Central Asian militaries to participate in Peace Mission 2007, forming the basis for a region-wide response to a potential security threat. The SCO also brings Chinese resources into Central Asia in the form of intelligence experience through the SCO’s Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) and supplies regional National Guards and law enforcement agencies with uniforms, mobile barracks,

---

<sup>1</sup> “Narkobizness perekhodit v nastuplenie [Narcobusiness Goes on the Offensive],” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, November 14, 2008, <[http://www.ng.ru/society/2008-10-14/8\\_narkobiznes.html](http://www.ng.ru/society/2008-10-14/8_narkobiznes.html)> (January 28 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Both bases are referred to by Russia as CSTO installations though both are formally registered as part of the Volga-Ural military district.

<sup>3</sup> *Shankhaiskaya Organizatsiya Sotrudnichestva*, “Shankhaiskaya Konventsia [Shanghai Convention],” under “2001 Dokumentii [2001 Documents],” <<http://www.sectsco.org/RU/show.asp?id=82>> (February 4, 2008) Author’s translation.

communications equipment, and vehicles in much the same way Russia uses the CSTO.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the use of both the CSTO and the SCO in meeting Russia's short-term security goals, there are larger, strategic issues that bring into question the using of two organizations. Primarily since the SCO is undoubtedly a tool for Chinese penetration of a region that Moscow considers its backyard and given the overlapping security mandates of the two organizations, the question arises: Why does Moscow operate in these two organizations rather than one or the other? The logical assumption is that using two organizations somehow is a greater benefit to Moscow than simply one. The case for this assertion can be found in Moscow's Central Asian strategic agenda. Russia's Central Asian security goals can be identified primarily as:

1. To position Moscow as a pole of power and influence in the region.
2. To maintain the pro-Moscow regimes of the region.
3. To exclude or limit American and Chinese influence from the region.

Examination of the mandates, functions, and structure of both the CSTO and the SCO is revealing of how this co-existence may help or hinder Moscow's pursuit of each of these goals.

### **Positioning Russia as a pole of power and influence in the CIS**

In terms of promoting Moscow's power and role in the region, the CSTO plays a much more active role than its predecessor the CST. Far from being a traditional military alliance meant to simply defend members from aggression, the CSTO is supposed to help build further connections between them on issues of military, economic, and political security as well as tackle region-wide problems. With this mandate CSTO Secretary General Nikolai Bordyuzha claims that the CSTO has adopted the political-military alliance and solidarity framework of what used to be the USSR.<sup>5</sup> With such an ambitious mandate the CSTO requires its own permanent institutions which promote integration from issues as major as military and political cooperation to those as minor as joint sports competitions but which can be divided primarily into military and political branches.

---

<sup>4</sup> Malia K. Du Mont and Matthew Oresman (ed.), "Selected New Summaries: July-October 2004," *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 4 (2004): 31, <<http://www.isdp.eu/files/publications/cefq/04/october04.pdf>> (March 5 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Nikolai Bordyuzha, "Collective Security Treaty Organization," *International Affairs* 51 (2005): 34.

### *Military Integration*

On a military level, Russia's Central Asian deployments are a powerful tool. Not only to disrupt and prevent terrorist activities, but also in terms of creating dependency in Central Asian governments. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in particular are beholden to Russia because of their heavy reliance on Russian military equipment and because of the large Russian troop deployments in their countries. With the Russian airbase at Kant in Kyrgyzstan now the most effective airbase in the region with over 80 aircraft, and with over 6,000 troops of the 201<sup>st</sup> motor rifle division at Kulyab in Tajikistan, neither state is likely to oppose Russia on key regional defense issues.

The CSTO has also given Russia the opportunity to increase its control over the Central Asian military establishments through its joint staff and command structure. On a planning level, all CSTO military exercises are proposed and planned by the ATC in Bishkek, which is officially supervised by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) director.<sup>6</sup> Given the role of former security officials in Russia (known as the *Siloviki* or "power men") and their personal sense of loyalty to Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, clear formal and informal links exist between the ATC and the highest members of the Russian government. On a command staff level, a 2002 Russian proposal at the CIS summit in Armenia wanted to integrate the dispersed CSTO staff to better coordinate them with the Russian General Staff.<sup>7</sup> Though this was only permanently realized after Rubezh 2004 with the establishment of the Collective Rapid Reaction Force (CRRF) joint staff, in reality CSTO troops had been placed under Russian command as early as 2002's South Anti-Terror exercise.<sup>8</sup> Soon after its creation in 2004, the CSTO joint staff was made up of 55 officers, half of which were Russian and half from the other member states.<sup>9</sup> Since the Central Asian states have limited institutions for training and as many of those that may one day become high-ranking Central Asian military officers train in Russian military academies, it is likely that the senior staff members of the CSTO will lean toward Russia in military vision. As such the CRRF may be considered to be under de facto Russian command. Not only does this

---

<sup>6</sup> Gregory Gleason & Marat Shaihutdinov, "Collective Security and Non-State Actors in Central Asia," *International Studies Perspectives* 6 (2005): 281, <<http://www.unm.edu/~gleason/mats/Nonstate.pdf>> (March 3 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Geir Flikke & Julie Wilhelmsen, "Evidence of a Russian Bush Doctrine in the CIS," *European Security* 14 no.3 (2005): 406, <<http://web.ebscohost.com.proxy.library.carleton.ca/ehost/pdf?vid=2&hid=109&sid=4f270018-ed3a-448b-91e0-273789ad25a1%40sessionmgr103>> (June 25 2008).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 406.

<sup>9</sup> Malia K. Du Mont, "That Other Central Asian Collective Security Organization – the CSTO," *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly: Special SCO Double Launch Issue* (2004), <<http://www.isdp.eu/files/publications/cefq/04/january04.pdf>> (accessed March 1 2009).

have consequences for military operations, but it also has an effect on the Central Asian states' abilities to exercise military policy independent of Moscow. The CRRF has become a key military instrument in Central Asia, made up of troops from member states but supplied with Russian-trained commanders, advanced Russian weaponry, and trained through Russian-funded exercises. Since the CRRF reports to CSTO institutions such as the Council on Collective Security or the Council of Defence Ministers, it appears that control over the CRRF is multilateral, although tellingly both of the largest CRRF bases – Kant and Kulyab – are registered as part of Russia's Volga-Ural military district.<sup>10</sup> However, since the CSTO councils only meet intermittently, in the meantime the CRRF reports to CSTO coordination bodies such as the ATC or the Secretariat which in turn have a connection to the top Russian leadership, which suggests orders could be given that would bypass the various Central Asian defence ministries.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, at the recent June 2009 CSTO summit in Moscow, discussions on a permanent CRRF treaty raised the question of deployment based on agreement between individual members, rather than on an organization-wide consensus. Uzbekistan, traditionally the most suspicious of Russia's Central Asian allies, is especially concerned by this possibility. However, the Uzbeks have never been considered a de facto full CSTO partner and bar Belarus, whose reasons seem economic rather than political, none of the other CSTO countries have objected to the CRRF's set-up.<sup>12</sup>

Further control of vital defense issues could be removed from Central Asian control if Russian efforts to place the old Soviet air-defense system under CSTO control are realized. This idea, originally proposed in 2004, has gathered speed in recent years. Russian ratification was agreed last year in 2008. These air defenses would bring the extensive system of anti-aircraft brigades, rocket positions, army radio engineers, and 23 fighter formations under central CSTO management and regulations.<sup>13</sup> Though details have not yet been announced, if these air defenses were also to report to CSTO coordinating bodies the air defense of the whole region could come under the supervision of Russian or pro-Russian officers, meaning that a response to any threat would be a Russian decision.

---

<sup>10</sup> Zdzislaw Lachowski, *Foreign Military Bases in Eurasia*, SIPRI Policy Paper No 18, SIPRI, p. 46, <<http://books.sipri.org/files/PP/SIPRIPP18.pdf>> (February 20 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Nurshat Ababakirov, "The CSTO Plans to Increase its Military Potential," *CACI Analyst Bi-Weekly Briefing* 10, 18, September 17, 2008, <<http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4942>> (February 18 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Erkin Akhmadov, "Uzbekistan and the CSTO: Why Not Collective First Response Forces?" *CACI Analyst*, July 15, 2009, <<http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5151>> (August 10 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Alexander Kuznetsov, "Nebesnyi Shchit Dlya Sodruzhestva Nezavisimyykh Gosudarstv [Sky Board for Commonwealth of Independent States]," *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, November 14, 2008, <[http://nvo.ng.ru/realty/2008-11-14/12\\_shield.html](http://nvo.ng.ru/realty/2008-11-14/12_shield.html)> (January 19 2009).

### *Political Influence*

The primary political organs of the CSTO are divided into 3 committees and 1 council:

1. The Council on Collective Security
2. The Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs
3. The Council of Ministers of Defence
4. Committee of Secretaries of the Security Council

The supreme body is the Council on Collective Security, which is made up of the heads of state of the members and which has the power to establish subsidiary bodies of the organization be they permanent or temporary. Since these bodies do not meet often throughout the year, between meetings of the councils decisions are taken by the Permanent Council made up of plenipotentiary representatives of member states. However, responsible for all organization, administration, budgetary, and advisory services is the Secretariat which is located in Moscow.<sup>14</sup> The highest ranking non-head of state in the CSTO is the Secretariat's Secretary General whose job it is to draw up the CSTO's annual budget, coordinate all draft proposals and documents, and is the official guardian of the organizational charter. No information regarding the organization can exist, nor can anything be done without his staff's knowledge. This provokes an interesting question: Who is more important inside the CSTO – the various heads of state or the Secretary General? This question is important to this analysis not only because Secretary General Bordyuzha is Russian, but because he is also a Russian General, former head of the Russian National Security Council, and a close associate to Russian President Dmitri Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. His connections to the Kremlin are obvious. Leaving aside the list of duties of the Secretary General, Nikolai Bordyuzha is the public face of the organization. He writes prominently in academic journals about the current role and future plans of the organization and has even proposed his own initiatives to the CSTO councils, like the CSTO sportive club. It is he who announces expansions of the CRRF, he who attends and observes CSTO military exercises, and he who liaises with the media about the CSTO's role in a global sense, offering his opinions on possible cooperation or confrontation with NATO or the SCO.<sup>15</sup> As head of the

---

<sup>14</sup> Collective Security Treaty Organization, "Ustav Organizatsii Dogovora o Kollektivnoi Bezopasnosti [Charter of the Collective Security Treaty Organization]," under 'Dokumentii [Documents],' <<http://www.dkb.gov.ru/start/index.htm>> (February 4 2008).

<sup>15</sup> "Our military exercises are a threat for terrorists, but not for the West - Interview with N. Bordyuzha," *Moscow Weekly News*, March 24, 2008, <<http://www.mnweekly.ru/politics/20080424/55325469.html>> (February 18 2009).

secretariat it is Bordyuzha and his staff who turn directives into reality. In short, Nikolai Bordyuzha exercises a huge degree of influence within the organization and is its leading member. While technically committed to the organization rather than a single member state he is no doubt firmly committed to carrying out the wishes of the Russian leadership within the organization.

Through Bordyuzha and the CSTO Secretariat Moscow has succeeded in promoting what Erica Marat calls the Kremlin's "ideological projects."<sup>16</sup> The CSTO states all possess a shared Soviet history and Russian remains the dominant language between them, but in recent years Moscow seems determined to play up other aspects of their shared past – such as trying to revive feelings of old Soviet glories as a means of further integration between members, resulting in the agreement at the 2008 CIS defense ministers' meeting to jointly celebrate the Soviet victory in the Second World War (known as the Great Patriotic War in the former Soviet Union). Remembering joint triumphs helps promote a sense of shared accomplishment and a joint future. At the same time, shrewdly being sensitive to Central Asian independence the CSTO claims to value each nation's ethno-cultural identity and its declarations are translated into all official languages just like in the Soviet days.<sup>17</sup> Further Russian efforts have been proposed to try and create joint events and friendly competitions such as holding regular CSTO sporting events between military and non-military personnel which were announced as annual events in 2008. Secretary General Bordyuzha even proposed the setting up of a CSTO youth development-military-sportive club at Lake Issyk-Kul in Kyrgyzstan that same year. While seemingly trivial, Marat points out that a joint sports program will prove to be an effective system of integration, as this will be a good way to work out competitive urges with allies as well as to demonstrate how Russian and Central Asian players can work on the same team. Over time this will help promote patriotism in youth as well as give the military in their respective countries a higher and more positive profile.<sup>18</sup>

The results of further political cooperation and integration with Russia have become evident in recent years. The CSTO expresses support for Russian positions on international issues, most prominently Russia's use of armed force in Georgia in August 2008 when member states condemned Georgian "aggression" at the September 2008 CSTO

---

<sup>16</sup> Erica Marat, "Moscow's Efforts to Strengthen Grip on CSTO and CIS Seek Greater Ideological Unity," *CACI Analyst*, July 23, 2008, <<http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4907>> (February 18 2009).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

summit in Moscow,<sup>19</sup> and delivered on Bordyuzha's and Moscow's desire that, "[e]ach member should deservedly count on the political, moral and psychological support of its partners and allies in difficult situations, particularly if these are detrimental to its sovereignty and international prestige."<sup>20</sup>

However, the CSTO's position on the 2008 conflict in Georgia was significant not so much for what was said, but what was left unsaid. The member states, though condemning Georgia, stopped short of recognizing the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This can be attributed primarily to the presence of China in the region through the forum of the SCO. Though the SCO is a valuable security structure from Moscow's point of view for reducing regional tensions and promoting regional trust it does provide the Central Asian states with a forum for discussion that is not controlled by Russia and where the potential penalties for opposing Russian policy can be deflected by China. The SCO as opposed to the CSTO possesses two great powers rather than one, and allows even the smaller Central Asian states to maneuver between China and Russia according to their interests.<sup>21</sup>

The best example of this, as noted above, was the crisis in Georgia in the summer of 2008. Since many of the Central Asian states and China suffer from the threat of separatist movements such as Hizb ut-Tahrir or the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a key objective of the Central Asian states has always been to prevent separatist aspirations. As such a special place was reserved for separatism, described as an "evil," in the Shanghai Declaration. The SCO firmly demonstrated this position in March 2008 during the uprisings in the Chinese region of Tibet. Official announcements on the SCO website targeted the violence there claiming that the SCO "Cannot ignore the disturbances in the region." It went on to state that the SCO regards Tibet as an inalienable part of the People's Republic of China and what goes on there is a purely internal Chinese affair. Furthermore, it expressed support for the Chinese government in taking all necessary measures to prevent "unlawful actions" and to "normalize" the situation.<sup>22</sup> With this in mind there is no possible way that the SCO could support the separatist regions of Georgia. Though

---

<sup>19</sup> "Security Treaty Leaders Condemn Georgia for Aggression," RFE/RL, September 5, 2008, <[http://www.rferl.org/content/Security\\_Treaty\\_Leaders\\_Condemn\\_Georgia\\_For\\_Aggression/1196765.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Security_Treaty_Leaders_Condemn_Georgia_For_Aggression/1196765.html)> (January 29 2009).

<sup>20</sup> Nikolai Bordyuzha, "CSTO: Counteraction Tool against New Threats," *A Russian Journal of World Politics, Diplomacy, and International Relations* 2 (2007): 58.

<sup>21</sup> Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), p. 107.

<sup>22</sup> Shanghai Cooperation Organization, "Statement by SCO Secretary General Bolat Nurgaliev," <[http://www.sectsco.org/news\\_detail.asp?id=2086&LanguageID=2](http://www.sectsco.org/news_detail.asp?id=2086&LanguageID=2)> (March 20 2008).

some of the Central Asian leaders may have been pleased at the blow to Georgia, as a developing pro-Western democracy inside the former Soviet Union (FSU), the invasion violated key SCO principles on both separatism and non-intervention.<sup>23</sup> Would the CSTO leaders have been able to hold back from full support of Russia had the SCO and China not been present? Though the SCO did voice support for Russia's "active role" in resolving the conflict, Niklas Swanström aptly describes the SCO response as being a "deafening silence" in which the only statement was from the 2008 Dushanbe summit, which called on all parties to resolve the situation through negotiation, effectively a disavowal of Russian actions.<sup>24</sup> A split was obvious between Russia, which favoured national self-interest over multilateral solidarity, and China and the Central Asians who were determined to uphold the SCO charter. In this case, the Central Asian states were able to only partly support Russian actions and get away with it because of the presence and support of China. Not only has this undermined support for Russia's objectives in the Caucasus, it has also harmed Russian efforts to promote itself as an integrator and a pole of power in Central Asia. The crisis in Georgia has strengthened China vis-à-vis the Central Asians by making Beijing seem a more stable partner, one that is more willing to uphold the SCO agreements than Moscow.<sup>25</sup>

The war in the Caucasus has also had the effect of spurring the Russians into proposing the idea of an "information security system" under CSTO auspices to deliver "official" information and coordinate CSTO political responses.<sup>26</sup> One lesson Russia seems to have learned from the conflict is that modern wars are as much fought in the media as they are on the battlefield, and due to often contradictory information coming out of Georgia, it was hard to coordinate an official position. A CSTO information security service would ensure all members speak with one voice, presumably to support Russia in any future crisis. However, this too could well be undermined by the SCO where the Central Asian states could again feel free to speak out against Russian actions of which they disapprove, such as intervention in an FSU state. Further situations like 2008 where China and the SCO allow CSTO leaders to defy Moscow would make for a confusing atmosphere and represent a very damaging blow to Russian interests of regional

---

<sup>23</sup> Niklas Swanström, "The SCO and the Aftermath of the Invasion of Georgia," *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 6, 3 (2008): 5,

<[http://www.isdp.eu/files/publications/cefq/o8/August\\_2008.pdf](http://www.isdp.eu/files/publications/cefq/o8/August_2008.pdf)> (January 12 2009).

<sup>24</sup> Niklas Swanström, "Georgia: The Split that Split the SCO," *CACI Analyst*, September 3, 2008, <<http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4930>> (December 23 2008).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Nurshat Ababakirov, "The CSTO Plans to Increase Its Military Potential," *CACI Analyst Bi-Weekly Briefing* 10, 18 (2008) <<http://www.cacianalyst.org/files/o80917Analyst.pdf>> (January 18 2009).

integration. This would not only make Russia seem unable to coordinate its smaller regional allies and its security organizations, but it would also give the Chinese a chance to appear as protector to the Central Asian states from a Russia which is breaking with SCO doctrine. In turn, an increase in the sense of reliability of China means an increase in Chinese influence in Central Asia at the expense of Russia.

Though not yet a real danger there is also the potential for the SCO to begin to undermine the CSTO's integrationist role by making similar Chinese security resources available to the Central Asian states. As already noted, the SCO allows the Chinese to train and supply the National Guards and police forces of the Central Asian states, and though it lacks a basis for delivery of military hardware inside the organization, it does not mean that China cannot deliver military assistance on a bilateral basis.

The co-existence of the CSTO and the SCO in Central Asia is a delicate situation for Moscow and one that does little to improve its goal of positioning itself as a pole of power in the region. While the CSTO is an effective tool for military and political integration and coordination between Moscow and the Central Asian states, if the SCO's security and political roles grow in importance it threatens to supersede the CSTO and damage Moscow's integrationist agenda. Potentially the CSTO could become a sort of West European Union,<sup>27</sup> which becomes secondary to NATO and then eventually pales into insignificance, leaving the CSTO as nothing more than a vehicle for training and cheap military hardware.<sup>28</sup> Similarly in a cascading effect, if the SCO security component grows then its importance as a forum for regional political coordination will also grow and the Central Asians will be able to distance themselves further from Moscow's political positions. The effect of the CSTO-SCO co-existence on this Russian goal is therefore negative. However, this must be balanced against the benefit it provides in terms of maintaining Central Asia's pro-Russian regimes and in preventing further American and Chinese penetration of the region.

## Maintaining Pro-Russian Regimes

Though Russia's military doctrine was amended in 2005 to address "anti-constitutional" actions inside the CIS, the CSTO sat idly by during the Kyrgyz Tulip Revolution of the same year and made no military attempt

---

<sup>27</sup> Marcin Kaczmarek, "Russia Attempts to Limit Chinese Influence by Promoting CSTO-SCO Cooperation," *CACI Analyst*, October 17, 2007, <<http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4716>> (February 27 2009).

<sup>28</sup> Ivan Safranchuk, "The Competition for Security Roles in Central Asia," *Russia in Global Affairs* 6, 1 (2008): 167, <<http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/numbers/22/1183.html>> (April 20 2008).

to rescue the regime of Askar Akayev. While the CSTO is sometimes used as a forum to speak out against “Western meddling” in Central Asia<sup>29</sup> and though Secretary General Bordyuzha has stressed that he personally is worried by the violence that accompanies anti-government uprisings like those in Kyrgyzstan<sup>30</sup> (meaning he opposes such uprisings), the CSTO is committed to a policy of non-interference in member states’ internal processes.<sup>31</sup> On this basis it seems that the CSTO will not interfere were there to be further political unrest in one of its member states. The truth, however, is that much depends on perspective and on the crucial issue of threat perception. Non-interference in internal affairs is CSTO doctrine, as long as no foreign forces are involved. According to Bordyuzha; once foreign forces are involved, the CSTO is duty bound to act in order to protect its member states against foreign aggression.<sup>32</sup> How then does one define foreign involvement or the even more vague *threat* of foreign involvement? The events surrounding Andijan in 2005 are the clearest example of how these definitions could be used to invoke CSTO action. Repeated Russian assurances were given in support of the Uzbek position that foreign agents had caused the uprising,<sup>33</sup> and it was on the heels of this crisis that Uzbekistan began its re-association with the CSTO at the 2006 Minsk summit, clearly demonstrating that Tashkent feels the CSTO has a role to play in ensuring internal regime security. In return for advanced weapons sales, Uzbekistan granted Russia the right of access to its airbase at Navoi in case of “emergencies,” which Stephen Blank describes as “[...]another example of Russia’s efforts to encompass all of Central Asia in a single defense organization that is, in essence, counterrevolutionary and/or anti-democratic.”<sup>34</sup> Blank then clearly sees a role for the CSTO in suppressing internal dissent

---

<sup>29</sup> Sergei Blagov, “CSTO Seen as Shield Against Outside Meddling,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, December 4, 2005, <[http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews\[swords\]=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx\\_ttnews\[any\\_of\\_the\\_words\]=CSTO&tx\\_ttnews\[pointer\]=6&tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=31170&tx\\_ttnews\[backPid\]=7&cHash=ff0de79b31](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[swords]=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx_ttnews[any_of_the_words]=CSTO&tx_ttnews[pointer]=6&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=31170&tx_ttnews[backPid]=7&cHash=ff0de79b31)> (January 25 2009).

<sup>30</sup> Roger McDermott, “Russia Seeks Closer Ties with Post-Revolutionary Kyrgyzstan,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 29, 2005, <[http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews\[swords\]=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx\\_ttnews\[any\\_of\\_the\\_words\]=CSTO&tx\\_ttnews\[pointer\]=8&tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=30167&tx\\_ttnews\[backPid\]=7&cHash=e1f28344df](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[swords]=8fd5893941d69d0be3f378576261ae3e&tx_ttnews[any_of_the_words]=CSTO&tx_ttnews[pointer]=8&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=30167&tx_ttnews[backPid]=7&cHash=e1f28344df)> (January 25 2009).

<sup>31</sup> “Our military exercises are a threat for terrorists, but not for the West - Interview with N. Bordyuzha.”

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Website of the President of Russia, “Nachalo vstrechi s Prezidentom Uzbekistana Islamom Karimovym, 2005 [Beginning of a meeting with Uzbek President Islam Karimov 2005],” *Kremlin.ru*, <[http://www.kremlin.ru/appears/2005/06/28/2340\\_type63377-90481.shtml](http://www.kremlin.ru/appears/2005/06/28/2340_type63377-90481.shtml)> (March 10 2008).

<sup>34</sup> Stephen Blank, “An Uzbek Airbase: Russia’s Newest Achievement in Central Asia,” *Eurasianet*, January 11, 2007, <<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav011107a.shtml>> (March 21 2008).

under the guise of defending its members from external aggression. The CSTO also has a present and future role to play in maintaining regime stability through its proposed peacekeeping operations and its military bases.

The idea of CSTO peacekeepers has been under discussion for several years and members agreed to their creation at the 2007 Dushanbe summit. Originally these forces were supposed to number up to 5,000 troops and would be able to deploy in states upon request.<sup>35</sup> Actual creation requires the ratification of the agreement by all member states but this has already been passed in Armenia, Belarus, and Russia. Though technically the UN would act as an umbrella organization for these peacekeepers, the CSTO position could be that these troops would be more like NATO forces to be used at the alliance's discretion to suppress, in the words of one Russian news service, "Saakashvili-like aggression."<sup>36</sup> Though complete ratification and deployment of these troops and clarification of their final role is probably several years away, their introduction would give the CSTO a key role in preserving internal regime stability if they were deployed to handle an act of "foreign aggression" or "internal violence" like in Andijan.

CSTO bases, apart from potentially being available to support the regimes of the region militarily, also have a role to play economically. They provide a large amount of money, jobs, and services to local regions, making both the Russians, and the governments with whom Russia is allied, more popular locally. Staying with the example of Kant airbase, in 2009 alone Russia plans to spend US\$60 million on the installation as opposed to US\$22.7 million in the period 2003 to 2008. The base's company has grown from 30 at its creation to now close to 700 Russians with a further 100 Kyrgyz personnel; it is surrounded by residential areas, schools, and even a hospital which have provided many local jobs.<sup>37</sup>

Likewise, the SCO also expressed its support for the Karimov regime during the events at Andijan, demonstrating its commitment to preserving Central Asia's authoritarian leaderships. The then SCO Secretary General Zhang Deguang linked the killings to "religious extremist forces" and sought to cast it as part of the wider SCO struggle

---

<sup>35</sup> "CSTO peacekeepers in Central Asia to number up to 5,000," *RIA Novosti*, November 16, 2007, <<http://en.rian.ru/russia/20071116/88417116.html>> (February 26 2009).

<sup>36</sup> "V SNG poyavilis' Mirotvortsy [In the CIS there will be Peacemakers]," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, December 1, 2008, <[http://www.ng.ru/politics/2008-12-01/3\\_kartblansh.html](http://www.ng.ru/politics/2008-12-01/3_kartblansh.html)> (January 19 2009).

<sup>37</sup> Erica Marat "Russia Drums up Support for its Airbase in Kyrgyzstan," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 5 no.236 (2008) [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=34253](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=34253) (February 26 2009).

against terrorism.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, in an interview given to Chinese television soon after the revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005, Zhang denounced the “negative excesses” of the protestors and used this as a reason for why the SCO must combat extremist forces.<sup>39</sup> Apparently any kind of protest, be it against economic hardship or rigged elections, is illegitimate as far as the SCO is concerned.

Thomas Ambrosio correctly notes that the language of the Shanghai charter is inherently conservative, and unlike in the charters of other international organizations such as the European Union or the Organization of American States, there is no commitment to democratic values.<sup>40</sup> Instead the SCO is committed to values such as “stability,” “diversity,” “sovereignty,” “non-interference,” and is opposed to the export of “models of social development.” All of these can be taken as synonyms for an absence of political change and supports Jan Arno Hessbruegge’s observation that the SCO is a kind of “Holy Alliance” for Central Asia like that of 1815 between Prussia, Austria, and Russia to prevent liberal revolution in Europe.<sup>41</sup> Political protest like in Kyrgyzstan or Andijan is always linked to the “three evils” of terrorism, religious extremism, and separatism as well as to new “communications technology” that could be used for internal criminal, terrorist, military, and political purposes. This is a clear swipe at the internet by the SCO leaders who adopted a common statement on information security at their 2006 summit.<sup>42</sup> An organization whose founding charter is so clear in stating its preference for political continuity and subsequently denounces new ways of fermenting political activity is perfectly in line with Moscow who, as former Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov made clear, opposes “[...] exports of revolution to the CIS states, no matter [where] and what colour – pink, blue, you name it!”<sup>43</sup> Unlike the CSTO, the SCO has few practical means, such as airbases or ground forces, with which to support this goal of regime stability but it has formed its own corps of observers to monitor elections inside the organization. The integrity of these observers as independent is obviously suspect, especially since they have declared every election in

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Ambrosio, “Catching the ‘Shanghai Spirit’: How the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Promotes Authoritarian Norms in Central Asia,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 60, 8, 2008: 1332.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1332.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1322, 1327.

<sup>41</sup> Jan Arno Hessbruegge, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Holy Alliance for Central Asia?” *Journal for Issues related to Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization* 2 (2004), <[http://fletcher.tufts.edu/al\\_nakhlah/archives/spring2004/hessbruegge.pdf](http://fletcher.tufts.edu/al_nakhlah/archives/spring2004/hessbruegge.pdf)> (November 30 2007).

<sup>42</sup> Ingmar Oldberg, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Powerhouse or Paper Tiger?” Swedish Defence Research Agency, FOI-R- 2301-SE, pp. 16-17 <<http://www2.foi.se/rapp/foir2301.pdf>> (February 12 2009).

<sup>43</sup> Ambrosio, “Catching the ‘Shanghai Spirit,’” p. 1333.

Central Asia since the February 2005 Kyrgyz election to have been fair and legitimate.<sup>44</sup> While its doctrine of official non-interference in member states' political affairs means it cannot directly involve itself, the SCO can give huge moral support to its members' ruling regimes. Since its members have the opportunity to coordinate against possible threats to their leadership, political movements will face opposition from international voices as well as domestic security forces.<sup>45</sup> This political and moral support coupled with the effect CSTO bases and the potential role of its peacekeepers may have ensures efforts either from outside or internally to mount another revolution like that in Kyrgyzstan or a protest like in Uzbekistan will face a united front from both the CSTO and the SCO. In this way the dual existence of the organizations presents a solid benefit to Russia's regional strategic goal of maintaining existing pro-Russian regimes.

### **Excluding or Limiting American and Chinese Influence from the Region**

Finally, how does the CSTO-SCO co-existence help Russia exclude or limit American and Chinese influence in Central Asia? First let us consider America's role in the region. Though the conflict in Afghanistan has been ongoing since 2001 and shows no sign of a quick conclusion, America's position in the former Soviet Central Asian states began to wind down in 2005. The Andijan massacre of that year and the subsequent breakdown in U.S.-Uzbek relations represented an opportunity for Russia to exploit. The tool it has used to exploit this has been the CSTO. Though not granted access as they had wished to the vacated American airbase at Karshi-Khanabad, Russia does now have access to an airbase at Navoi, which is the result of the 2005 bilateral treaty between Russia and Uzbekistan. Effectively the CSTO has stepped in where the Americans left off. In the same vein this year, as the Kyrgyz government debated whether to close the US airbase at Manas, Moscow announced plans to spend US\$60 million expanding its base at Kant. A clear pattern is evident that as American forces are withdrawn, the CSTO will step in to take their place to ensure that no such deployment will be made easily again. Members inside the organization who have Russian forces deployed inside their borders will find it harder to defect to the American side like Uzbekistan in 2000. In a further effort to break down connections between the Central Asian states and America, the Russian leadership has been pressing for several years now for official recognition of the role the CSTO plays in Central Asia by

---

<sup>44</sup> Oldberg, *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Powerhouse or Paper Tiger*, p. 16.

<sup>45</sup> Ambrosio, "Catching the 'Shanghai Spirit,'" p. 1326.

NATO. Both former Russian Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov<sup>46</sup> and CSTO Secretary General Bordyuzha<sup>47</sup> have stated that the CSTO is interested in cooperation with NATO on a variety of security issues. Though disguised as an effort to coordinate against transnational threats the primary reason behind these offers is strategic. As Stephen Blank says:

Insinuating the CSTO between NATO and individual Central Asian states would give Moscow considerably more say over the Atlantic alliance's activities in the region, effectively forestalling the ability of regional leaders to forge independent relationships with Brussels.<sup>48</sup>

For the moment NATO seems to have seen these offers for what they are and has resisted them. However, Russia's failure to maximize the CSTO's role in removing American influence from the region has been offset by its success in creating a multilateral opposition to America's presence in the region inside the SCO. The 2005 SCO Astana summit's main achievement was a call for members of the international antiterrorist coalition to set a final timeline for withdrawal of their militaries from Central Asia. This may have been contrary to the wishes of several of the Central Asian states that benefited monetarily from U.S. deployments in their countries, but with both Russia and China urging them onwards the statement was unanimous. The SCO clearly has an anti-U.S. slant based on its repeated statements opposing a single hegemonic world order and its silence regarding U.S. requests to be admitted to the organization as an observer.<sup>49</sup> SCO exercises such as Peace Mission 2005 were also clearly aimed at U.S. interests in Taiwan and South Korea as much as they were for practicing anti-terrorist maneuvers. This is evident not only by their size and location but also by the sophistication of the weaponry on display such as the new Russian "Moskit" carrier-buster missile which was no doubt an effort to get the attention of the U.S. navy.<sup>50</sup> The fact that U.S. military observers were

<sup>46</sup> "Ivanov for NATO-CSTO interaction in fighting terrorism," *RIA Novosti*, February 5, 2006 <<http://en.rian.ru/russia/20060205/43344211.html>> (February 27 2009).

<sup>47</sup> "Our military exercises are a threat for terrorists, but not for the West - Interview with N. Bordyuzha."

<sup>48</sup> Stephen Blank, "Russia Looks to Build a New Security System in Central Asia," *Eurasianet*, January 4, 2006, <<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav010406.shtml>> (February 28 2009).

<sup>49</sup> A.K. Mohanty, "A Russian Understanding of China's SCO Policy," *China Report* 43, 245 (2007): 247, <<http://chr.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/43/2/245>> (January 15 2009).

<sup>50</sup> Ariel Cohen, "After the G-8 Summit: China and the SCO," *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 4, 3 (2006): 56, <<http://www.isdp.eu/files/publications/cefq/06/aco6aftersummit.pdf>> (March 3 2009).

denied permission by then Russian President Vladimir Putin to attend Peace Mission 2007 but U.S. journalists were allowed at the event provided a further message to U.S. aspirations in the region.<sup>51</sup>

Though both the Russians and the Chinese share a desire to force America out of its Central Asian toeholds this can only be described, as Bobo Lo puts it, as an “Axis of Convenience.”<sup>52</sup> Russia and China have very different visions of their roles in the region. For Russia it is to return to being the leading regional hegemon, for China it is slow development of relations and gradual penetration. However much it may hurt Russia to admit, the Soviet collapse vastly increased the potential area for Beijing’s strategic role. The SCO, despite the role it can play in removing the United States, runs the danger of increasing Chinese power at the expense of Russia.

China, which after 1991 happily recognized Russia’s leading role in Central Asia as stabilizing its backyard while it dealt with bigger issues, changed its tune after the U.S. arrival in 2001. Moscow did not consult with China about the U.S. deployment and there was a feeling in Beijing that Russia only sided with China when Russian relations with the U.S. were suffering.<sup>53</sup> Thus China would have to rely on itself to build relations with the Central Asians and the SCO was the obvious vehicle. Though Russia is *de-jure* joint head of the SCO, China is clearly the main power behind it, and allowing China a forum with which to engage the Central Asians on an equal basis means accepting China’s interests in the region are equal to Moscow’s.<sup>54</sup> In addition, the SCO legitimizes Chinese bilateral and multilateral military exercises with the Central Asian states such as the 2002 exercises between China and Kyrgyzstan on which occasion Russia was excluded. An increase in the Chinese strategic presence is exactly what Moscow wants to avoid. This was demonstrated by Russia’s quick and firm disavowal of the idea of Chinese forces being stationed in Central Asia soon after the 2005 revolution in Kyrgyzstan<sup>55</sup> and by the way Russia continually stresses the SCO is not a military

---

<sup>51</sup> Marcel de Haas, *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Towards a full-grown security alliance?* Defense Academy of the United Kingdom, Central Asian Series 7/28, September 2007, p. 43. <[http://www.clingendael.nl/publications/2007/20070900\\_cscp\\_paper\\_haas.pdf](http://www.clingendael.nl/publications/2007/20070900_cscp_paper_haas.pdf)> (February 8 2009).

<sup>52</sup> Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics*.

<sup>53</sup> Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics*, pp. 95-96.

<sup>54</sup> Alexander White, “Guiding the “Near Abroad” Russia and the SCO,” *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* (July 2005): 30, <<http://www.isdp.eu/files/publications/cefq/05/july05.pdf>> (January 17 2009).

<sup>55</sup> “Interview Granted by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov,” *Vremya Novosti*, June 6, 2005, <[http://www.ln.mid.ru/brp\\_4.nsf/e78a4807of128a7b43256999005bcb3/fa8a01a9b7a51fc1c325701800548c7e?OpenDocument](http://www.ln.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/e78a4807of128a7b43256999005bcb3/fa8a01a9b7a51fc1c325701800548c7e?OpenDocument)> (December 20 2008).

bloc; notably, its documents do not contain any mention of mutual defense.<sup>56</sup>

The Peace Missions of 2005, 2007, and 2009 reveal much about Moscow's view of China's role inside the SCO. The 10,000 troops and heavy vehicles, ships, and aircraft present at Peace Mission 2005 made it obvious it was more a political statement to the West than an actual anti-terror exercise. By the time of Peace Mission 2007 Russia had realized that such large and sophisticated exercises had to be avoided. Large military exercises, in Moscow's opinion, were the CSTO's prerogative and allowing them to take place under the SCO was opening doors to Chinese involvement in Central Asia's strategic affairs on much too big a scale. Subsequently at Peace Mission 2007, hosted in Russia, Moscow moved to block Chinese aspirations. At first Russia insisted that the number of troops involved in this operation would have to be less than at Peace Mission 2005, but when China pressed for permission to bring a large contingent Moscow eventually agreed. However, the Chinese request for more tanks and other heavy equipment to be present was denied on the grounds that this would undermine the "antiterrorist" nature of the exercise.<sup>57</sup> Moscow also argued that the exercise site at Cherbakul was not big enough for heavy vehicles while China insisted it was the perfect size. It seems Moscow has decided that future SCO drills must be less sophisticated than CSTO drills in order to preserve the CSTO's role as Central Asia's military integrator and leader. This strategy seems to have met with some success as by the time of Peace Mission 2009 the number of troops involved from both Russia and China had dropped to 1,300 each.

In the same way that the SCO is the obvious Chinese vehicle to penetrate Central Asia, the CSTO is the obvious tool for Moscow to try and check this penetration. Moscow demonstrated how effective a tool it can be in the lead up to Peace Mission 2007 by its efforts to make the exercises a joint CSTO-SCO operation. It was almost humorous how before the exercise Chief of the Russian General Staff General Yuri Baluyevsky called for the exercises to be a joint CSTO-SCO operation<sup>58</sup> while Colonel Tsy Govej, the head of the foreign department of China's Central Military Council, declared there would be absolutely no sharing of military doctrines between the CSTO and the SCO, effectively

---

<sup>56</sup> Mikhail Troitskiy, "A Russian perspective on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization*, SIPRI, SIPRI Policy Paper No.17, May 2007, p. 37. <<http://books.sipri.org/files/PP/SIPRI17.pdf>> (February 11 2009).

<sup>57</sup> de Hass, *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Towards a full-grown security alliance*, p. 43.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

refusing any such joint operation.<sup>59</sup> The idea behind this cooperation was almost certainly to show up the Chinese military in front of Central Asia's military leaders who would all be present to observe the SCO drills. There was apparently no direct inter-operability between the Chinese and Russian forces at Peace Mission 2005 and The People's Liberation Army (PLA) reportedly performed very poorly by themselves, demonstrating to the Russians a simple way of embarrassing the Chinese.<sup>60</sup> The PLA, despite ongoing modernization, is still a very backward military force and Russian forces, despite their weakening since the Soviet collapse, are still far superior.<sup>61</sup> As such, Beijing feared that if Peace Mission 2007 were a joint operation the CSTO's much better forces would stand in stark contrast to the PLA and re-affirm the CSTO as Central Asia's primary security organization. Consequently, even though CSTO forces were not present, Chinese troops at Peace Mission 2007 were very secretive compared to the Russian and Central Asian troops. Journalists were not allowed access to Chinese troops or barracks, interviews were forbidden, and all equipment when not being used was covered up.<sup>62</sup> This fear of Chinese military inferiority compared to Russia proved to be at least partly well founded as Chinese armored personnel carriers' and 100 mm self propelled guns experienced difficulty in moving over rough terrain during the exercises due to design flaws in their suspension.<sup>63</sup>

Since Beijing wisely side-stepped the Russian effort to demonstrate their military superiority at Peace Mission 2007, Russia has changed its priority to agreeing some sort of formal recognition by the SCO of the CSTO's role in Central Asia. At first glance this idea seems perfectly reasonable since their similar roles do leave unanswered questions about who is primarily responsible for regional security. CSTO Secretary General Bordyuzha has said that the CSTO is extremely interested in developing links with the SCO but at the same time noted that every organization in Central Asia must have a niche and that security is reserved for the CSTO.<sup>64</sup> To obtain a written understanding between the CSTO and the SCO would recognize the CSTO's role as the primary military organization in the region and ensure that the SCO's security development is, if not permanently blocked off, at least seriously delayed.

---

<sup>59</sup> "SHOS ne budet provodit' sovместnye ucheniya s ODKB [The SCO will not build joint doctrines with the CSTO]," *Izvestia*, August 28, 2007, <<http://www.izvestia.ru/news/news146435>> (January 29 2009).

<sup>60</sup> Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics*, p. 49.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>62</sup> de Hass, *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Towards a full-grown security alliance*, p. 43.

<sup>63</sup> "Problems in Russian-Chinese military-technical cooperation," *RIA Novosti*, September 25, 2007, <<http://en.rian.ru/analysis/20070925/80780903.html>> (January 28 2009).

<sup>64</sup> Nikolai Bordyuzha, *Collective Security Treaty Organization*, p. 40.

CSTO-SCO cooperation would also strengthen Russia's hand in Central Asia by bringing in two more pro-Russian voices in the form of Armenia and Belarus. China appears to have been unable to resist repeated Russian pressure for this kind of agreement and eventually conceded, signing the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the CSTO and the SCO in October 2007. Beijing seems to have done its best to ensure the document was as short as possible (less than one page) and the language very halting with no details of what cooperation would be like. Still, the MoU is a significant victory for Moscow which is now able to present itself as the chief security coordinator in Central Asia and the representative of all the Central Asian states vis-à-vis Beijing on security.<sup>65</sup>

The dual existence of the CSTO and the SCO as regards Russia's goal of excluding American and Chinese influence from Central Asia is a double-edged sword. Though SCO military maneuvers serve to weaken America's military prestige and increase Russia's and though the SCO creates a united political voice calling for American withdrawal from Central Asia, the other side of the coin is increased Chinese influence. Russian membership in the SCO helps allow Moscow to scale back military maneuvers that would increase Chinese prestige while the CSTO can be used to lock members into a non-NATO alliance, and block Chinese efforts to develop military links with the Central Asian states. The moment the SCO begins to overtake the CSTO as a security coordinator Russia's strategic position in Central Asia will be threatened.

## Conclusion

Though Russia must surely want the CSTO to remain the key Central Asian security apparatus Moscow cannot, in a time of post-Soviet weakness, oppose China's new role in the region and so it might as well be a senior SCO member. After all, the SCO does perform the vital strategic function of maintaining the Moscow-friendly regimes of Central Asia and is valuable in terms of presenting a united front in opposing the American presence in the region as its military exercises serve to demonstrate Russia's military might and sustain her prestige. However, the mistake should not be made that the SCO marks the beginning of a strong Chinese-Russian friendship or alliance. It is a temporary arrangement and one Moscow will seek to keep rudimentary on a regional level. For the moment the co-existence of the two organizations is the best situation Moscow can hope for. Indeed, when comparing the CSTO's security development versus the SCO, Moscow

---

<sup>65</sup> Marcin Kaczmarek, "Russia Attempts to Limit Chinese Influence by Promoting CSTO-SCO Cooperation," *CACI Analyst*, October 17, 2007, <<http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4716>> (February 27 2009).

remains in a strong position. The CSTO has already constructed a joint command staff and coordinating center, holds annual exercises, and has established a permanent military force, while the SCO merely has RATS and is issuing statements calling for more security cooperation.<sup>66</sup> It is inconceivable that the SCO will quickly grow and overtake the CSTO in regional security importance anytime in the near future. Since we in the West share with the Russians the desire to combat terrorism and organized crime in both Afghanistan and the Central Asian republics, the logical course of action is recognition and cooperation with the CSTO as the primary effective regional security body. Though this would recognize Central Asia as firmly inside Russia's security sphere, Moscow is unlikely to be dislodged as the regional security coordinator anytime soon and recognition of the CSTO's regional role would allow cooperation between Russia and Western agencies and international bodies. It would also help prevent a deterioration of Sino-Russian relations in the region. For, paradoxically, as their cooperation inside the SCO grows and the more the two organizations compete for primacy, the more likely a worsening of relations becomes. Giving the CSTO the nod as the regional security coordinator would provide a partner in the fight against terrorism and organized crime and prevent either a potential Russian-Chinese front against America or, more worryingly, a potential Sino-Russian military or political clash in Central Asia.

---

<sup>66</sup> Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics*, p. 105.

# India's Approach to Central Asia: Strategic Intent and Geo-political Calculus

Jagannath P. Panda \*

## ABSTRACT

There is a widely held assumption that India's growing military and security contacts in Central Asia in the last few years have made it a promising player in the region's politics. But has India already emerged as a major player in Central Asia or is it in the process of becoming one? To what extent does the Great Game lens capture the real dynamics of India's influence in Central Asia? A steady growth in Indian influence in the military, diplomatic, and strategic spheres confirms that there is a new Great Game being played in Central Asia, which is becoming an intriguing geo-political event in the political order of Asia.

*Keywords* • New Great Game • India • Central Asia • China • Geo-strategic interests

## The Great Game Complexity

In any region where many global and local powers are present and a proper regional order is absent, with each state judging its grievances and ambitions by its own rationale and priorities, political conflict and competition is bound to arise. Morgenthau and Thompson maintain that "the aspirations for power of the individual nations can come into conflict with each other – and some, if not most of them, do at any particular moment in history – in two different ways ... *the pattern of direct opposition and the pattern of competition.*"<sup>1</sup> To make the best of this

---

\* Jagannath P. Panda, PhD, is Associate Fellow at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), New Delhi, India. This paper was presented at an international conference titled "Central Asia, and the New "Great Game": Between the emerging powers of India and China" at the India International Centre (IIC), New Delhi from October 14-15, 2009. This conference was organised by the Centre de Sciences Humaines, New Delhi, India).

<sup>1</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau and Kenneth W. Thompson, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, (New Delhi: Kalyani, 1985), p. 192.

competition–conflict phenomenon, a state has to rely on its diplomacy and power factors, the relative competence of which must be its invariable concern.

To start with, the region of Central Asia, being geographically placed in the “backyards” of both the Middle Kingdom and Muscovy, holds utmost importance in military terms for many powers. Currently, an acute struggle is taking place among the major powers for influencing the region for both economic and strategic reasons, what is popularly known as the “great game” politics. Local powers like Russia and China are together concerned mainly with resisting the global supremacy of the U.S. and its regional presence. India, on its part, given its stable political and economic progress, is in the process of redrafting its newfound influence to spread and defend its strategic interests in Central Asia, with a vision to play a “broader Asian role.” This renewed policy priority is evidenced in India’s strategic and diplomatic engagements with the region in the recent past. A set of institutional engagements along with military contacts in Central Asia corroborates this design.

India’s vision for itself in Central Asia is conditioned by economic interests, security interests, and geo-strategic interests. Central Asia forms part of India’s extended neighborhood. Interrelated factors like the strategic location of the region, the demand for energy resources, and the contest for pipeline routes are adequate reasons for India to take a special note of the region and carefully craft its policy.<sup>2</sup> India’s primary concerns in the region are: (i) to promote stability in the Central Asian–South Asian region; (ii) to extirpate Islamist terrorism; (iii) to checkmate Pakistan and contain China’s growing power and influence in the region; (iv) to ensure its own energy security; and (v) to open up new bilateral trading and economic opportunities through regional cooperation. In the “New Great Game” being played in the region, where the struggle for economic and strategic positioning is rising, India cannot afford to be left out. Unlike in the past, the importance of Central Asia to India today is not merely civilizational, but also geo-political and economic.

### India’s Geo-strategic Interests

The pre-eminence of geo-politics in Central Asia has had the consequence of limiting Central Asian regionalism. The basis of this geo-political command is twofold: *one*, the politics of Central Asia are strongly influenced by the conduct of external actors involved in the region; and *two*, the individual nations of the region pivot their foreign policy on the old balance of power politics. They not only allow the major and minor powers to get involved in their respective policies and

---

<sup>2</sup> Gulshan Sachdeva, “India’s Attitude towards China’s Growing Influence in Central Asia”, *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 4, 3 (2006): 23–24.

politics, but also see themselves as obligated to maintain a balance among themselves. Under these evolving conditions, India's sphere of geo-political and strategic interests in Central Asia has widened considerably.

Recently, India has activated its policy towards Central Asia at various levels. Be it at the diplomatic level through numerous government delegations' visits to the region, the plan of opening an Indian Cultural Centre in one of the Central Asian states, or the rising interest of the Indian investors in the Central Asian markets, a newly designed Indian Central Asia policy is visible. To its credit, India recently successfully handed over to the Afghan authorities an important highway of 215-km long from Delaram to Zarani. This was an Rs.600 crore (US\$129,645,638 project. On the ground, authorities in India are keen on bringing further infrastructure developmental programmes that would connect India and Central Asia via Afghanistan.

The strategic location and geographic proximity of Tajikistan to Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) compels many in India to look at the region from a fresh perspective. The most important strategic concern for India in Central Asia is Pakistan's growing attempts to acquire strategic depth. Pakistan has systematically pushed its agenda since the 1990s by supporting the cause of the Taliban and has facilitated the nurturing of a multitude of extremist and terrorist groups in the Kashmir and Central Asian region.<sup>3</sup> In the light of the numerous terrorist episodes that have beset India in recent years, policymakers in India have realized the need to formulate an inclusive policy not only to tackle the terrorism with the help of the Central Asian states, but to have a good control over the extremist complexity in the region. To counter the Pakistani moves and issues related to extremism and terrorism, India has taken seriously its military engagement with the region. This was noticeable particularly after the hijacking of the Indian Airlines flight IC-184 from Kathmandu in 1999 by Pakistan-backed terrorists to Kandahar in southern Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup> For example, India's Ayni air base in Tajikistan owes its existence more to India's contentions with Pakistan than anything else.

Formally, India always eschews detestable military projections to arbitrate unilaterally in other countries. But it required the Ayni air base in Tajikistan to defend its flights and to gain strength against Pakistan after the latter closed, in 2002, its air space to Indian commercial flights to Europe. Moreover, it is argued that such a military presence would enable India to monitor anti-India activities in the region. In addition, the Ayni base has not been limited to the region as India's sole resort. India has steadily gone on to expand its military and security contacts at individual levels with other Central Asian countries. Nevertheless, India's growing

---

<sup>3</sup> Kumar Amitav Chaliha, "India moves on Central Asia," *Asia Times Online*, October 17 2003, <[http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South\\_Asia/EJ17Dfo4.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/EJ17Dfo4.html)>, (September 29 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Rahul Bedi, "India and Central Asia," *Frontline* 19, (September 14-27 2002).

military profile in Central Asia might be due to the Pakistani influence in the region, but there is more to these engagements than simply restricting it to India-Pakistan dynamics. In this regard, India's security engagement with the region and individual countries stands as a testimony to its power projection capability which now goes beyond the normal South Asian frontier. India, for instance, has expanded its military contacts with Tajikistan. A fine example of this was the India-Tajik military exercises in 2003.<sup>5</sup> In short, the basis of India's military cooperation with the region was laid when India, Tajikistan, Russia, and Iran backed the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance in Afghanistan in its fight against the erstwhile Taliban regime. Moreover, India has had an eye to deepening its strategic involvement in Central Asian politics in various ways through individual contacts with Iran, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. For instance, though at a relatively low level, India and Iran have steadily established their military engagement over many years. As per the New Delhi declarations of January 2003, both India and Iran decided to "explore opportunities for cooperation in defence and agreed areas, including training and exchange of visits."<sup>6</sup> Though one should not read too much into these engagements, it nonetheless has undoubtedly increased India's power projection capabilities in the region to some extent.

### The China Factor

Intriguingly, among the important group of actors in the Central Asian region – Russia, the U.S., China, Iran, and the European Union (EU) – India's greatest commonality of interests is with China.<sup>7</sup> An effective and superior Chinese design in the quest of its national interests in Central Asia provides a fine example for India to imitate. India has gone a long way to learn how an interlocking approach has enabled China to leap over the huge chaos of antipathy and distrust regarding its intentions in the region, which was a hangover of the region's Soviet history. Unlike India, China accords the utmost priority in its foreign policy to relations with neighbors.<sup>8</sup> In Central Asia, China has created a huge profile for itself through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization

---

<sup>5</sup> This exercise involved air, airborne, and ground forces of both sides.

<sup>6</sup> K. Alan Kronstadt and Kenneth Katzman, "India-Iran Relations and US Interests," CRS Report for Congress, Congressional Research Service: The Library of Congress, August 2, 2006, p.5.

<sup>7</sup> M.K. Bhadrakumar, "India Plays Catch-up in the Great Game", *Asia Times Online*, July 18, 2009, <[http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South\\_Asia/KG18Dfo6.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/KG18Dfo6.html)> (September 29 2009).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

(SCO).<sup>9</sup> China has tried to replicate its thriving Pakistan and Myanmar policy in Central Asia, which seems to clash with India's security interests in the region. While a complex set of factors shape India's policy orientation towards Central Asia, it is the economic interest coupled with the need for energy that holds the first line of interest among Indian policymakers.

Central Asia has emerged as a new hub of oil and gas reservoirs in the last few years. It is reported that Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan have almost 300 trillion cubic feet of gas and 90 to 200 billion barrels of oil.<sup>10</sup> The crisis-driven economies in this region depend upon outside powers to transport their abundant energy resources to the outside world. Being geographically close to the region, India wants to capitalize on these energy reservoirs for its own energy needs.

India's oil need in the coming decade is forecast to rise to 7 to 8 million barrels. This estimation of oil needs in the next 10 years is expected to triple from the current 2.7 to 3 million barrels. Similarly, the need for gas would jump to 60 to 90 million cubic meters per day. In the backdrop of this demand for energy resources, India faces stiff competition from China. China managed to outmaneuver India by booking all the gas offers from Myanmar and by buying up the Canadian-owned oil company in Kazakhstan. Most recently, Pakistan has managed to attract the Chinese interests in the Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI)<sup>11</sup> pipeline. This pipeline project offers an immense strategic opportunity for Pakistan, as this could also lay the path for a possible oil and gas pipeline to China. It becomes significant particularly when China has expressed its willingness in the past to import gas and oil through Pakistan. Given its difficult relations with Pakistan – and the consequent uncertainty in developing an overland pipeline through Pakistani territory – India faces hard choices in transporting the Central Asian energy resources to its own markets.

The Turkish route via Ceyhan to Israel and then by tankers to India is disproportionately expensive. The route through the Iranian ports of Jask or Chah Bahar would be much shorter. The tankers could pick up oil at Jask for delivery in Mumbai or the Gujarat coast. The gas could be

---

<sup>9</sup> P. Stobdan, "Central Asia and India's Security," *Strategic Analyses* 28, 1 (January–March 2004): 69–70.

<sup>10</sup> Hari Sud, "India Looks to Central Asia for Energy," *UPIAsia.com*, June 17 2008, <[http://www.upiasia.com/Economics/2008/06/17/india\\_looks\\_to\\_central\\_asia\\_for\\_energy/5733/](http://www.upiasia.com/Economics/2008/06/17/india_looks_to_central_asia_for_energy/5733/)> (September 24 2009).

<sup>11</sup> For the past few years, strategic communities have been engaged in debating the Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) pipeline. It is reported that the IPI pipeline project is about 2,775 km long. Its capacity is reported to be 150 million cubic meters per day. The cost of the project is estimated at over US\$7 billion. See, Philip Sen, "Courting the Prize in Pakistan: India, China and the geo-politics of Iranian gas," *The Focus: Energy Security EU/Asia* (The Newsletter), No.51, Summer 2009.

transported from the IPI pipeline, but this presupposes that the United States and Iran will work out their differences in the short term. India could also access Central Asian oil through the Iranian port of Neka in the Caspian Sea.<sup>12</sup> It is believed that Kazakhstan delivers oil to Neka in a barter deal for Iranian oil. A Neka–Tehran pipeline already exists for delivering oil to a Tehran refinery;<sup>13</sup> this pipeline could be upgraded to transmit oil from Central Asia to the Arabian Sea. India already has a toehold at Chah Bahar and plans to expand that into a commercial port with access to both Central Asia and Afghanistan, avoiding a Pakistani transit. The road to connect Afghanistan to Chah Bahar is already in place.

### Expanding Military Relations

For India, seeking an enduring military presence in Central Asia makes both economic and strategic sense. An armed presence in Central Asia would certainly improve India's response potential during a crisis involving rebel elements in Afghanistan or Pakistan, as well as hugely assist India's plans to obtain greater access to Central Asian energy supplies. It is reported that India is planning to purchase from Russia US\$40 billion in weapon systems and is in the process of acquiring 126 fighter jets.<sup>14</sup> This military set-up may not be anything close to the military holdings sustained by Russia or to China's constant strategic upgradation in the region, but it offers India a strategic foothold in the region from which it plans to be a part of the emerging "new great game."

India has in recent years been constantly upgrading its bilateral relations with Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. With Tajikistan, though India formalized its diplomatic relationship following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the post-Soviet geo-strategic developments in the region have brought the two countries closer. Tajikistan borders Afghanistan and the People's Republic of China and is separated by a small strip of Afghan territory from Pakistan. India's role in fighting the Taliban and al-Qaeda, its competition with China and adversarial relations with Pakistan has made India's ties with Tajikistan important to its strategic and security policies. Tajikistan itself has emerged as a frontline state against the menace of terrorism and drug trafficking.

For India, the Air Force base at Ayni in Tajikistan opposite Afghanistan provides back-up security to counter possible Taliban and

---

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Blank, "Russian-Indian Row over Tajik Base Suggests Moscow Caught in Diplomatic Vicious Cycle," *Eurasianet.org*, November 1, 2008, <<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav011108f.shtml>> (September 25 2009).

Pakistani moves into the region. The airbase, which is just 10 km north-east of Dushanbe, is reported to be getting renovated with an investment of US\$25 million (Rs. 100 crore)<sup>15</sup> as part of a trilateral agreement among India, Russia, and Tajikistan. Tajikistan has also invited India to explore its massive hydropower potential<sup>16</sup> and seems interested in Indian companies partaking in the planned silver extraction project. Issues like direct air links, mining, transport, infrastructure, hydropower, etc. are some of the areas where the two countries are expecting to further the bilateral ties.

Kazakhstan is important for India particularly on account of its strategic location, its vast energy resources, and its secular and pluralist social structure.<sup>17</sup> Kazakhstan is also a leading country in the region in terms of promoting strategic alliances, such as the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), and has considerable influence in regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Eurasian Economic Community (EURASEC), Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

Ingredients for a strategic partnership between India and Kazakhstan exist particularly in areas like thermal power, pharmaceuticals, and food security. Kazakhstan is known to have the world's second-largest reserves of uranium, which could feed India's atomic reactors. Kazakhstan's increasing importance in India's foreign policy is evidenced from the fact that President Nursultan Nazarbayev was invited as the chief guest at India's sixtieth Republic Day celebrations. The chief guest at the Republic Day celebrations is afforded the occasion to assess the vast opportunities that are available in the host country; and to witness the military capabilities and strength of the host country as a potential partner in cooperation. Kazakhstan and India signed five agreements/MoUs in the field of civil nuclear energy, space research, hydrocarbons, and legislation covering an extradition treaty and a protocol on accession of Kazakhstan to the WTO. Civil nuclear cooperation presents a good opportunity for expanding the bilateral economic and commercial interactions.<sup>18</sup> Under the civil nuclear agreement, Kazakhstan is supposed to provide uranium and related

---

<sup>15</sup> "India's first overseas 'military base' taking shape in Tajikistan," *News Central Asia*, July 24, 2007, <<http://www.newscentralasia.net/Articles-and-Reports/137.html>> (September 25 2009).

<sup>16</sup> "Tajikistan invites India to invest in hydro power projects", *Deccan Herald*, September 8, 2009, <<http://www.deccanherald.com/content/23978/tajikistan-invites-india-invest-hydro.html>> (September 25 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Meena Singh Roy, "India- Kazakhstan: Emerging Ties," *Strategic Analysis*, XXVI, 1 (January-March 2002), <[http://www.ciaonet.org/olj/sa/sa\\_jano2romo1.html](http://www.ciaonet.org/olj/sa/sa_jano2romo1.html)> (September 29 2009).

<sup>18</sup> Ashok Sajjanhar, "India-Kazakhstan Relations," *Eurasian Report*, 2, 3 (Autumn 2008): 16.

products to the Nuclear Power Corporation of India (NPCIL). This agreement could also facilitate joint exploration of uranium in Kazakhstan and building of nuclear power plants in the future.

Military contacts between India and Kazakhstan go back to the Soviet era. The Indian Navy has been equipped with hundreds of torpedoes produced in Kazakhstan. Currently, the two countries are engaged in carrying out some joint projects aimed at modernizing and repairing these torpedoes. The two countries have also made steady progress through cooperation between the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) and the National Space Agency of Kazakhstan and are investigating the scope for cooperation in the fields of manufacturing and launching of satellites. The defense policy papers of the Kazakhstan government have mentioned India as a potential country from which to buy its arms requirements.<sup>19</sup> In terms of counterterrorism, the two countries have previously cooperated in the joint production of sophisticated military hardware and stepped up the sharing of intelligence.

While India's security and military connections with the Central Asian countries have grown steadily, relations with Mongolia have also taken a new growth trajectory. India signed a civilian nuclear agreement with Mongolia during President Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj's visit to New Delhi in September 2009. This agreement would enable India to look for uranium in the Central Asian region.<sup>20</sup> India could also take a serious note of Mongolia's mineral processing facilities and infrastructure to enhance its share in the trade of those minerals. Mongolia is strategically located in Central Asia between Russia and China, a factor which could be conducive to India's foreign policy and strategic interests. India could capitalize on its ties with Mongolia to expand trade relations with the Central Asian states. Though the military relations between India and Mongolia are good, the two countries need to re-craft their bilateral defense cooperation to synergize the ties and influence the geopolitics of Central Asia in their favor.

### India in Central Asia: Strategic Implications

By and large, India has the benefit of reaching the Central Asian region afresh with military measures because of its historical connection with the Soviet Union and now Russia. Over 70 per cent of India's current military hardware and support equipment are products of the Soviet era.

---

<sup>19</sup> Zakir Hussain, "India and Kazakhstan: New Ways Ahead," *IDSIA Strategic Comments*, February 18 2009, <<http://www.idsa.in/publications/stratcomments/ZakirHussain180209.htm>> (September 29 2009).

<sup>20</sup> India's MoU with Mongolia pertains to the development of "peaceful uses of radioactive minerals and nuclear energy." Other countries which have signed civilian nuclear agreements with India are the U.S., France, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Namibia.

This is conducive in dealing with the Central Asian republics and they find it convenient to link with India. The trust of the Russian military in dealing with India is a big boost for India in dealing with the Central Asian republics. India is Russia's principal market for armaments and still receives about 40 per cent of its arms imports from Moscow.<sup>21</sup>

Similar to the U.S., India's Central Asia expedition is closely linked to its stake in post-Taliban Afghanistan issues. India shares the objectives of countering terrorism and drug trafficking in the region and thus ensuring security and stability there. With this outlook, India wants to reinforce the goals of the SCO and holds an ambition to become a full-fledged member of the SCO. Indian policymakers have realized that the SCO is much more than a mere clearing-house for the Caspian hydrocarbon reserves; it is a security organization first.<sup>22</sup> The SCO was officially established as a bulwark against the threat of terrorism to Central Asia from the neighboring region of Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Over the last thirteen years since its inception, many analysts in India see that the SCO has matured as an organization. But qualms exist in India that the SCO as an institution has only been able to address China's goal in the region. Under the standard of the "three evils" of extremism, secessionism, and terrorism, China has been able to obtain the full support of the SCO member states in fighting against the extremist Uyghurs in Xinjiang and on its Western frontier.

India's interest in the SCO has been building up since the member states' emphasis on tackling terrorism became noticeable at the SCO summit meeting held in June 2009. SCO member states' security chiefs in Moscow had suggested earlier that at the Yekaterinburg summit Pakistan should be asked to take decisive actions to put an end to the terrorist camps and training facilities within its territory.<sup>23</sup> Experts and policymakers are optimistic that perhaps India has accepted the fact that the SCO could offer it an additional forum for dealing with terrorism and the terrorists operating in Pakistan. In a way, it helps India not to rely too much on the U.S. to counter terrorism in the region.<sup>24</sup>

Since Pakistan could attempt to involve some of the Central Asian states in South Asian politics to reinforce its own geo-strategic advantages, India is keen to play an active role in the SCO to balance this factor. The fact that an Islamic resurgence is taking place in Central Asia, which could become a rallying point for cultural identity with Pakistan,

---

<sup>21</sup> "India's first overseas 'military base' taking shape in Tajikistan", n. 15.

<sup>22</sup> M.K. Bhadrakumar, "India begins uphill journey with the SCO," *Asia Times Online*, March 25, 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Ranjit Devraj, "India takes security concerns to Shanghai Summit," *Global Geopolitics News*, June 18, 2009, <<http://globalgeopolitics.net/wordpress/2009/06/18/politics-india-takes-security-concerns-to-shanghai-summit/>> (October 1 2009).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

makes the region even more attractive for Pakistan's diplomacy. Pakistan wants to increase its political and economic role in Central Asia for three reasons: as a territorial aggrandizement in its quest for "strategic depth"; to use in its favor the huge Muslim population in the region by creating a notion of "Islamicization"; to develop its economy by linking with the Central Asian economies.

The bottom-line approach of New Delhi's diplomacy is that India should carve out for itself a role on the frontline in global and regional diplomatic efforts in search of a settlement to both the Afghanistan and terrorism issues in the region. Plainly, India shares the SCO's concerns over the ascendancy of the forces of religious extremism and militancy in the Afghanistan region.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, the Indian approach towards the Taliban remains rooted in the past, whereas the international opinion has evolved differently and nuances have appeared in Russian, Iranian, and Chinese thinking regarding these issues.<sup>26</sup> Part of the international opinion has evolved in terms of distinguishing between "good" and "bad" Taliban. China and Russia, on the other hand, are of the view that the Taliban do not form a colossal movement to create obstacles to their interests.<sup>27</sup> In this emerging scenario, there is a need for India to carefully re-craft its Central Asian approach in regard to the Afghanistan-Taliban issues. The SCO as a regional grouping could perhaps fruitfully coordinate the approaches to the Af-Pak conflict zone.<sup>28</sup> For instance, the members and observers of the SCO could plan an inclusive course to control the combined threat of violence and drugs in the region. In fact, the SCO could think of encircling the Afghanistan belt with anti-extremist and anti-drug security policy measures. In a way, that could wield collective pressure on Pakistan to desist from constructing "strength depth" with the help of the Taliban and extremist forces in the region.<sup>29</sup> To go one step forward, the SCO members also have the capacity to facilitate practicable state institutions as well as groom security measures that could take care of the unstable situation in the region. In this, India could play a strong role due to its historical, social, religious, and ethnic ties with the region.<sup>30</sup>

Putting it differently, India must view the SCO as a constructive body for facilitating and coordinating the policy priorities with Tehran, Moscow, Tashkent, and Dushanbe. Despite the Chinese opposition sometimes, the SCO holds the view that India should contribute to its vitality. The SCO Secretary-General has been quoted as having said:

---

<sup>25</sup> Bhadrakumar, "India begins uphill journey with the SCO."

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Mansoor Ali, "India in the SCO Today," *Mainstream*, XLVII,22, (May 16, 2009).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

"India has an important role to play in strengthening the SCO. We respect India's peaceful foreign policy. We share common positions on many issues. India has good relations with all SCO members and the prospects for future relations are very bright."<sup>31</sup> The operational procedure in the SCO also suits India's foreign policy criteria as the SCO works on the basis of consensus and values national sovereignty.<sup>32</sup> It would seem an opportune time for India to negotiate for full-membership within the SCO.

In short, in the post-9/11 global order, Central Asia is no longer perceived solely within the prism of boarder competition among the local powers like China and Russia, or only valued for its energy resources. The region's importance has evolved one step further, and become significant as a pivotal arena of international security. This is primarily because of the enhanced strategic importance that has superseded the Central Asian geographic isolation which has become a point of attraction for many major powers' national interests. With regard to India, since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, it is steadily expanding its security links with Central Asia. It is worth taking note of the fact that despite India's efforts to encourage increased economic interaction with the region, the dynamics of the local-great power politics in the region compels India to increase its security and military maneuvers in the region as a priority. In economic terms, this increasing security contrive by India in the region will facilitate its businessmen to modify their approach and look at Central Asia as a region of great opportunities. Therefore, in the given context, it is necessary for many around the globe to understand the dynamics of the Central Asian politics carefully and proceed accordingly.

---

<sup>31</sup> "SCO invites India to attend meeting on Afghanistan," *People's Daily*, March 1, 2009, <<http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90777/90851/6603296.html>> (October 1 2009).

<sup>32</sup> M.K. Bhadrakumar, "Why India is Sleeping on Foreign Policy?" *Rediff.com*, August 7, 2007, <<http://www.rediff.com/news/2007/aug/07guest.htm>> (October 1 2009).



# The Dynamics of Bilateral Relations in the South Caucasus: Iran and its North Neighbors

*Farhad Atai\**

## ABSTRACT

The Islamic Republic of Iran enjoys close and friendly relations with the small Christian Republic of Armenia, rather than with the larger and seemingly more important Shi'ite Republic of Azerbaijan. While Iran's close relations with Yerevan have a great deal to do with Armenia's geographic and economic isolation, the Islamic Republic's distant relations with Azerbaijan are a result of mutual suspicion and mistrust. Historically, Russia's special relationship with Iran has been a product of Russia's rivalry with Western powers rather than genuine mutual interests between the two neighbors. In the South Caucasus, where Russia still wields considerable influence, it blocks Iran's economic influence in Armenia and Georgia. As Yerevan expands its foreign dealings with the West as well as with Russia, Iran should no longer take its close relations with Armenia for granted.

*Keywords* • South Caucasus • Iran, Armenia • Azerbaijan • Georgia • Russia • Caspian Sea

## Introduction

Until Iranian territories in the Caucasus were ceded to Tsarist Russia in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Armenia, Georgia, and what is today called the Republic of Azerbaijan were part of the Persian Empire. The Armenian and Azeri communities within Iran lived safely and prospered. But history alone cannot account for Tehran's relationships with those countries today. There are other explanations that have to do with the economic, geographic, and political situations of those countries.

---

\* Farhad Atai, PhD, is Associate Professor of Regional Studies at the School of Law and Political Science, University of Tehran. He is a member of the editorial board of the Central Asia and the Caucasus Review and Central Eurasia Studies Journal in Tehran. Professor Atai was Yarshater fellow at Harvard University in 2000-2001. He can be contacted at [atai53@gmail.com](mailto:atai53@gmail.com).

The Islamic Republic of Iran was one of the first countries that recognized the newly independent states of the Caucasus and Central Asia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In some of these countries, like Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan, the Islamic Republic has been viewed with suspicion. Even though the initial suspicions have largely been replaced with a more realistic understanding of Iran's interests and policies in the region, Iran's relations with most of these countries is far from close. In spite of a shared history and religion, Iran and Azerbaijan remain distant neighbors. With Armenia, however, Iran has enjoyed a close and friendly relationship. Only three months after its independence, Iran officially recognized Armenia on December 21, 1991, and established diplomatic relations with Yerevan in 1992. In fact, Armenia is the only country among Iran's neighbors with which Iran has close ties and a relationship free of tensions. Armenia, in spite of its close relations with the United States and the European countries, has refrained from voting against the Islamic Republic in international organizations and did not endorse sanctions against Tehran over the nuclear issue.

The close relationship between the two countries may look odd. Iran is a vast country of 1,648,000 square kilometers with a predominantly Shi'ite population of more than 70.5 million people (2006 census)<sup>1</sup> and a GDP of US\$270 billion.<sup>2</sup> It is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural country. It bridges the two energy regions of the Persian Gulf and the Caspian, and is the shortest route connecting the land-locked Central Asian states to the outside world and the open seas. It has the longest shore with the Persian Gulf, where 70 per cent of the world's energy reserves lie. It presents itself as a religious state, with a declared policy of cooperation with Muslim countries as a priority. Emphasis on Islam, particularly Shi'ite Islam, has been a constant in Iran's foreign policy ever since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. Iran is an energy rich country,<sup>3</sup> whose economy is heavily dependent upon Western countries for revenue, technology, and goods.

Armenia, by contrast, is a tiny country of 298,000 square kilometers and a population of 3 million.<sup>4</sup> That is less than a third of the population

---

<sup>1</sup> Statistical Center of Iran, <[http://www.sci.org.ir/portal/faces/public/sci\\_en/sci\\_en.Glance/sci\\_en.generalinf](http://www.sci.org.ir/portal/faces/public/sci_en/sci_en.Glance/sci_en.generalinf)> (June 2 2009).

<sup>2</sup> World Development Indicators Database, <<http://www.ddp-ext.worldbank.org/ext/ddpreports>> (September 1 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Iran's proven crude oil reserves are 137.62 billion barrels and its proven natural gas reserves are 29.61 billion cubic meters. OPEC, Iran Facts and Figures (ASB 2008), <<http://www.opec.org/aboutus/member%20countries/iran.htm>> (February 2 2009).

<sup>4</sup> World Development Indicators Database, <<http://www.ddp-ext.worldbank.org/ext/ddpreports>> (September 1 2008).

of the Iranian capital, Tehran.<sup>5</sup> Armenia, a secular state, is Christian. The poorest country in the Caucasus upon independence from the Soviet Union, it went through a bloody war with neighboring Azerbaijan over the Karabakh region. Even though Armenia has close ties with the West, the Soviet legacy is very much present in that country; Russia still maintains a large military presence in Armenia, owns the entire thermal energy industry, provides 40 per cent of Armenia's gas, and runs its telecommunications network. After the war over Karabakh ended, Armenia embarked on an economic development project with the help of the World Bank. Over 15 years, the Armenian economy grew by double-digit rates annually. Its GDP rose to US\$9.18 billion in 2007 with an annual growth rate of 13.9 per cent.<sup>6</sup> Yet, Armenia's per capita income is still one quarter of that of the former Soviet Baltic states.<sup>7</sup>

This article looks at Iran's relations with its neighbors in the Caucasus. In particular, it examines the factors contributing to the rather unique relationship that has developed between Tehran and Yerevan, relations between Iran and Azerbaijan, and Russia's policy vis-à-vis Iran in the South Caucasus. Finally, it examines the American factor affecting Iran's bilateral relations with its neighbors in that region.

### **Geography, Energy, and Transit**

Iran borders three major regions: the Middle East, Central Asia and the Caucasus, and South Asia. Yet, it is not part of any of them. It is not a member of any strategic or political alliance in these regions. It is a Middle Eastern country, yet, it does not share the same history, language, or aspiration of its Arab neighbors. Along with Turkey and Israel, it is one of the three non-Arab states in the Middle East. It borders Central Asia and the Caucasus and shares a long history with that region. Yet, it is not in the same predicament as the newly independent states that share the seventy-year experience of Soviet rule. It borders the Indian subcontinent. However, it is not involved in the conflicts and crises that have afflicted that region. While not isolated, Iran is, nevertheless, a lonely state. Ever since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, there have been varying degrees of misunderstanding and mistrust between the revolutionary regime in Tehran and its neighbors. Under such

---

<sup>5</sup> A former senior Iranian diplomat in Yerevan observed: "Iranian investors are more interested in buying eggs in Tehran than investing in Armenia," conversation with M.R. Tabatabai, Tehran, December 13, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> World Development Indicators Database, <<http://www.ddp-ext.worldbank.org/ext/ddpreports>> (September 1 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Saumya Mitra, *The Caucasian Tiger: Policies to Sustain Growth in Armenia*, World Bank Report, June 1, 2006.

circumstances, relations free of tension with even a small neighbor like Armenia are welcomed by Tehran.

Armenia is a land-locked country that has a 566 km border with Azerbaijan-proper, 221 km with the Azerbaijan-Nakhichevan exclave, 268 km with Turkey, 164 km with Georgia, and 35 km<sup>8</sup> with Iran.<sup>9</sup> The war with Azerbaijan over Karabakh shortly after independence caused the closure of Armenia's long borders with both Azerbaijan and Turkey. Armenia is thus mostly surrounded by hostile or unfriendly neighbors and is connected to the outside world only through Georgia and Iran. The political instability in Georgia because of Abkhazia and Ossetia and the recent war with Russia has meant that Georgia cannot be a reliable transit route for Armenia. The effects of this on Armenia's potential external economic relations cannot be underestimated.

### Economic Relations with Armenia

The volume of trade between the two neighbors rose from US\$62.2 million in 1999 to US\$162.75 million in 2009, most of it in the field of energy. In 1999, Iran's value of exports to Armenia stood at US\$37 million, which increased to US\$141.18 million in the Iranian calendar year ending in March 2009.<sup>10</sup> Armenia is heavily dependent on foreign gas and oil, but has surplus electric energy from its hydroelectric plants. Iran provides Armenia with natural gas through a pipeline that was completed in March 2009<sup>11</sup> and receives Armenian electricity in return. Iran spent US\$100 million to build the Khodafarid dam on the Arax River bordering the two countries. The dam was inaugurated in 2008. The related hydroelectric power plant is near completion.<sup>12</sup> In a trilateral cooperation

<sup>8</sup> "Armenia Country Brief 2009" April 1 2009, <<http://www.worldbank.org.am/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/ECAEXT/ARMENIAEXTN/0,,contentMDK:20628754~menuPK:301586~pagePK:141137~piPK:141127~theSitePK:301579,00.html>> (October 2 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Since the takeover of Karabakh by the Armenians, the actual border between Iran and Armenia is 120 km.

<sup>10</sup> "Iran Sees 10-Fold Rise in Trade Balance with Armenia," *Tehran Times*, May 24, 2009, <[http://www.tehrantimes.com/index\\_View.asp?code=195346](http://www.tehrantimes.com/index_View.asp?code=195346)> (September 3 2009).

<sup>11</sup> The spokesman for the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources of Armenia announced the completion of the project on March 16, 2009, in Yerevan. The pipeline is 140 kilometers long, 40 kilometers of which lie in Armenia and the rest in Iran. It is to carry 10 million cubic meters of natural gas per day to Armenia (1.1 billion cubic meters per year). Interestingly, the Russian Gazprom, not an Iranian company, is the contractor for the project. "Maqam-e Armani: Khat-e Loula-ye Iran-Armanistan Amadeh-ye Bahrebardari Ast (Armenian Official: Iran-Armenia Gas Pipeline is Ready for Operation)," *Iran News Agency (IRNA)*, July 23, 2009, <<http://www2.irna.ir/ar/news/view/line-15/8801046081120306.htm>> (March 26 2009).

<sup>12</sup> The dam is built on the territory occupied by Armenia since the beginning of the Karabakh conflict. The Arax Dam and its hydroelectric plant were already in operation within the Armenian-Iranian territory.

agreement, Iran also receives electricity from Turkmenistan's thermal power plants in winter and transfers energy to Armenia. Transit is another area of cooperation between Tehran and Yerevan. Armenia's railway network is presently connected to the outside world only through Georgia. Iran acts as a transit route for Armenia's needed goods. Iran exports a limited number of automobiles as well as food products to Armenia.

There are infrastructural projects underway that would further expand the transit of goods between the two countries. This is also in line with the creation and expansion of the "North-South Corridor" favored by Moscow. The corridor is to facilitate the transit of goods from Russia via the South Caucasus and Iran to the Persian Gulf, Pakistan, and India. In November 2008, the construction with Russian cooperation of an 80-kilometer railway route connecting the Arax River to Marand in north-west Iran was announced.<sup>13</sup> This is a part of a 470-kilometer project, most of which lies in Armenia.<sup>14</sup> The project is estimated to cost US\$2 billion. The World Bank, Asia Development Bank, Russia, and Iran have expressed interest in the project.<sup>15</sup> The North-South Corridor has been suggested as an alternative to the east-west TRASICA route supported by the United States and its European allies that would connect the Western countries via the South Caucasus to Central Asia. It is seen as a modern Silk Route that excludes both Russia and Iran.

## **Azerbaijan**

Armenia's war with Azerbaijan and the mutual distrust between Tehran and Baku have affected the relations between Iran and Armenia. Ever since the emergence of the Republic of Azerbaijan as an independent nation-state, there has been a great deal of suspicion and accusation between Iran and Azerbaijan. Most of this arose from religious and political considerations. Immediately after the Islamic Revolution, expression of the desire to export the Revolution and its ideals to the neighboring states became a source of concern for countries of the region. This was especially true in the countries where there was a sizable Shi'ite community. Azerbaijan, after the Soviet breakup, as a predominantly

---

<sup>13</sup> Nina Mamedova, "Monusebat-e Iran va Rusiyeh dar Sal-e 2008 Miladi [Iran-Russian Relations in the Year 2008]," *IRAS* 5, 23 (2009): 6.

<sup>14</sup> "Ehdath-e Rah-Ahan-e Iran-Armanistan Ejra'ee Mishavad [Iran-Armenia Railway Gets Underway]," *ECO News*, April 25, 2009, <[http://www.econews.ir/fa/NewsContent-id\\_102292.aspx](http://www.econews.ir/fa/NewsContent-id_102292.aspx)> (April 25 2009).

<sup>15</sup> "Russia Backing Iran-Armenia Rail Link," *Zawya*, November 10, 2008, <<http://www.zawya.com/Story.cfm/sidZAWYA20081110053316/Russia%20Backing%20Iran-Armenia%20Rail%20Link>> (October 8 2009).

Shi'ite country, was particularly concerned and accused Tehran of instigating Shi'ite insurgency in the new state.

Relations with Azerbaijan got off to a rocky start when Azerbaijan gained its independence after the Soviet breakup. When Abulfazl Elchibey, the leader of the nationalistic Popular Front of Azerbaijan (PFA), was elected president in June 1992, he took a decidedly pro-American, pro-Western stance with an emphasis on the Turkish character of the newly independent nation. Elchibey's orientation towards the West seemed to be aimed at blocking Russian and Iranian influence in the South Caucasus, a move that alarmed both Moscow and Tehran. Elchibey, with his extreme pro-Turkish stance, went so far as calling for the "reunification" of the "north" and "south" Azerbaijanians – south Azerbaijan meaning the entire north-west provinces of Iran with their Azeri community that comprises 24 per cent of Iran's population of 70 million.<sup>16</sup>

The ethnic issue, even though not a major factor, has nevertheless affected relations between the two countries. There appear to be two fundamentally different views on Azeri identity and nationalism in Iran and Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan, like the rest of the new states of Central Asia and the Caucasus, is in the process of nation-building. This process of nation-building requires a romantic emphasis on ethnic characteristics, language, and culture different from others. It seems natural for the people of the newly independent state of Azerbaijan to turn to their ethnic Azeri nationality. The Soviet actions of the 1920s and 30s in forging separate histories for each people and creating distinct ethnic-based republics have served as the foundation for the post-Soviet nation-building process in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

In Azerbaijan, the idea that the Azeri people were a people divided by their powerful neighbors – the Persian and Russian Empires – is widely propagated by the state and many Azerbaijani officials and nationalists have called for the reunification of "north" and "south" Azerbaijan, mentioned above. From an Iranian point of view, historical documents do not hint at the presence of a "north" and "south" Azerbaijan. The name "Azerbaijan" was given to the newly created Soviet Republic by Moscow, whereas the area north of the Arax River had hitherto been called "Arran." The Turkemanchai Treaty of 1928 signed between the Qajar

---

<sup>16</sup> When, in 2001, tensions in relations between the two countries rose over Azerbaijan's oil explorations in the disputed territory in the Caspian, a high ranking Iranian official threatened that Iran might think of retaking [the Republic of] Azerbaijan. "Azeri officials should govern the country in such a manner so that the Iranian people do not demand the return of Azerbaijan to Iran," said Mohsen Rezai, secretary of the powerful Expediency Council of the Islamic Republic of Iran. "Iran Might be Pushed to Recover Azerbaijan, Says High-ranking Official," *Iran PressService*, July 30, 2001, <[http://www.iran-press-service.com/articles/2001/jul\\_2001/iran\\_azerbaijan\\_dispute\\_30701.htm](http://www.iran-press-service.com/articles/2001/jul_2001/iran_azerbaijan_dispute_30701.htm)> (July 30 2001).

Persia and Russia refers to the ceded territories by Iran to Russia as Yerevan, Nakhichevan, Karabakh, Talysh, and Arran, not Azerbaijan.<sup>17</sup>

For Iranians, there always existed a sense of nationalism or “Iranianness.” Yet this sense of nationalism, as exemplified in the epic work of Ferdowsi *The Shahnameh* had more of a cultural and linguistic than political nature. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries Iran, too, experienced the spread of European-style romantic nationalism. This was particularly present during the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi in the 1920s and 1930s. Aspects of the Perso-centric policies of the central government linger to date, even though after the Revolution there was a shift of emphasis to Islam and Shi’ism.

The feelings of the sizable Azeri minority in Iran concerning their ethnic identity vis-à-vis the state is, therefore, markedly different from that of the Azeris in the Republic of Azerbaijan. While the regional grievances of the Azeri community concerning the central government’s policies continue, the Azeris of Iran have shown their political loyalty and sense of national identity with Iran.<sup>18</sup>

Elchibey’s fall in June 1993 led to Heydar Aliyev’s presidency. During his rule, tensions in the relations between Azerbaijan and Iran were reduced, but relations nonetheless remained strained. Expulsion of Iran under U.S. pressure from the giant consortium that was formed to exploit Azerbaijan’s oil resources and disagreements over the legal status of the Caspian were among the issues that contributed to the strained relations.<sup>19</sup>

## **Legal Status of the Caspian**

Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Caspian Sea was shared between its only two littoral states, the Soviet Union and Iran. The two countries’ relations in the Caspian were governed by accords dating from 1921 and 1940. In theory, the two had the right to use all parts of the sea together. In practice, the Soviet Union maintained a naval force, whereas

---

<sup>17</sup> For an interesting exchange of views on this issue from the perspective of Iranians and Azerbaijanis, see The Central Asia-Caucases Institute at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) panel discussion entitled “Iran, Iranian-Azerbaijan, and Azerbaijan after the Iraq-Iran War.” The panel included former Azerbaijani Ambassador to Iran Nasib Nassibli, Chief of the Azerbaijani Service of Voice of America Dr. Hassan Javadi, and former linguistics professor of the University of Tabriz Dr. Mahmud Ali Chehregani. Reza Breakstone, “Azeri Separatist Meets Policy Makers in Washington,” *National Iranian American Council*, April 10, 2003, <[http://www.niacouncil.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=137&Itemid=2](http://www.niacouncil.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=137&Itemid=2)> (May 21 2008).

<sup>18</sup> For more on this topic, see Farhad Atai, “The Ethnic Issue in the Relations between Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan,” *Regional Security Issues*, 2 (2006): 61-66.

<sup>19</sup> Kaweh Sadegh-Zadeh, “Iran’s Strategy in the South Caucasus,” *Caucasian Review of International Affairs* 2, 1 (2008): 38-39.

Iran did not. Iran limited itself to the southern part of the Caspian Sea. While both of the Soviet republics of Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan did produce oil, there was no off shore drilling in the Caspian Sea. Fishing, especially for caviar, was the main economic activity, and both Iran and the Soviet Union benefited from it.

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Iran's position has been that the legal status has not changed and that it should still be governed by the 1921 and 1940 treaties. Therefore, the new littoral states should share the Caspian Sea. The division of the Caspian Sea would be particularly advantageous to Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan that can drill for oil off their shores in the Caspian. The consensus is moving toward dividing the seabed, while sharing the surface.

This would be the worst solution as far as Iran is concerned; the best caviar of the Caspian is to be found near its southern shore within Iran's territorial waters, while oil and gas reserves are located close to Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan. Despite Iran's objections, the division of the Caspian seabed would seem to be going ahead anyway. As the division becomes more and more of a reality, talks are focused on the percentage of the sea that each of the littoral states takes. If the two northernmost points of its borders (Astara in the west to Hassanquli in the east) were connected, with 832 kilometers of shore on the Caspian, Iran would get only 14 per cent of the sea. Azerbaijan, on the other hand, would get 18 per cent with 760 kilometers of shore. This is because of the concave shape of Iran's shores.

The question, however, is not just the percentage of the sea that each of the two countries will get. The issue between the two countries boils down to the Guneshli oil field that is claimed by both Iran and Azerbaijan. Iran has said it would start exploration in the area while Azerbaijan has already taken actual steps towards drilling for oil. As far as the legal status of the Caspian is concerned, this is the real point of contention between Iran and Azerbaijan.<sup>20</sup>

In August 2004, Iran's President Khatami visited Elham Aliyev, who had assumed the presidency after his father's death. This was the first visit by an Iranian president since Azerbaijan's independence after the Soviet breakup. Hopes were raised in regard to improving the hitherto strained relations, but no major improvements followed.<sup>21</sup> In 2006, there was an increase in official visits and agreements between Tehran and Baku. Elham Aliyev visited Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the new Iranian

---

<sup>20</sup> Conversation with Dr. Seyyed Rasul Musavi, Director of the Center for Central Asia and the Caucasus, Institute for Political and International Studies, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tehran, April 28, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Shahin Abbasov, "Iran-Azerbaijan Relation: On A Better Footing After Khatami's Baku Visit," *Eurasia Net*, August 8, 2004, <<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eavo81004a.shtml>> (October 8 2004).

president in Tehran. Several Iranian ministers also visited Baku and a number of protocols were signed on bilateral cooperation in fighting drug trafficking, energy swap, trade and transit. The two sides even signed an agreement that banned launching attacks on each other's territory.<sup>22</sup> *Baku Today* quoted the Iranian Ambassador to Azerbaijan as saying the annual volume of trade between the two nations would reach US\$450 million by the end of the year.<sup>23</sup>

From Tehran's point of view, Baku has been suspected of colluding against Iran together with the United States and later Israel, perceived to be the two major enemies of the Islamic Republic. Lingering suspicions and misunderstandings remain the main causes of the not-so-close relationship between Tehran and Baku. It has also led Iran to opt for a closer relationship with Christian Armenia, rather than Muslim Azerbaijan.

## Georgia

Georgia is the only country in the South Caucasus that does not share a border with Iran. The two countries established full diplomatic relations after Georgia's independence, but Georgia's relations with Iran have been limited. After Georgia's independence, Gamsakhurdia's Western orientation prevented Iranian policy makers from considering Georgia as an ally. Shevardnadze's gradual tilt towards Moscow meant the possibility of assuming bilateral relations between the two countries. When Mikhail Saakashvili assumed the presidency after the so called "Rose Revolution" in 2003, Iran saw him as too Western-oriented to work with. This view has changed, however. Iranian policy makers found Saakashvili to be genuine in his fight against corruption, and more inclined towards democracy. Saakashvili is seen by Tehran as Western-oriented, but independent.<sup>24</sup> His visit to Tehran in July 2004 also seemed to have positively changed his views on the Islamic Republic and on prospects of expanded bilateral relations.

Relations between Moscow and Tbilisi have been on a downward spiral since Saakashvili assumed power, culminating in the August 2008 war over Abkhazia. Georgia has been heavily dependent on Russian energy. In 2006, Moscow decided to more than double the price of gas it exports to Georgia. Tbilisi would, therefore, like to get its needed energy from alternative sources. Theoretically, Iran should be the ideal

---

<sup>22</sup> Sadegh-zadeh, "Iran's Strategy in the South Caucasus," p. 39.

<sup>23</sup> "Iranian Ambassador: Relations Have Developed Fairly Well over the Past Year," *Global Challenge Research*, January 10, 2006, <<http://www.axisglobe.com/news.asp?news=5599ars>> (March 20 2006).

<sup>24</sup> Conversation with H. Askari, senior Iranian diplomat stationed in Tbilisi, December 20, 2006.

alternative. Indeed, Iran did briefly provide Georgia with energy in February 2006, when Moscow shut off its gas supply to Georgia. It lasted for only five days. Nevertheless, it was a positive gesture that could have been the beginning of a long and expanded cooperation in the field of energy between Tehran and Tbilisi. A proposed project that was to provide Iranian gas to Georgia via Armenia was effectively blocked by Moscow. While interested in exporting energy to Georgia, Tehran did not want to make Moscow unhappy over the issue. It is worth pointing out that in the August 2008 war between Georgia and Russia, the official news agency of the Islamic Republic of Iran and related media sided with Moscow rather than Tbilisi.

In the long run, Iran must and will become an important supplier of gas to both the South Caucasus and Europe. Had there not been the American sanctions in place against Iran, the EU would have opted for Iran as an alternative source of energy. If one accepts this argument, then Georgia becomes an important transit route.

### **The Russian Factor**

Russia has, understandably, interests in the Caucasus. Economically, its priorities are transit and electricity. It also has security concerns. The Caucasus is the link between the Caspian and the Black Sea. It is also Russia's vital link to the Middle East and Europe; hence, Russia's dissatisfaction over NATO's presence in the Caucasus and its eastwards expansion towards Central Asia. Russia is still Armenia's strategic partner and this is believed to have been the reason why NATO, that has no direct role in the conflict, could not intervene and take Karabakh and give it back to Azerbaijan.<sup>25</sup>

The relations between the Soviet Union/Russia and Iran have been influenced by a number of factors, many of which have remained constant since the early 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>26</sup> Ever since the defeat of Crown Prince Abbas Mirza in 1828 and the loss of the whole of the Caucasus to Russia, relations between the two countries have been accompanied by mistrust. During the Second World War, Iran was occupied by Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union. British and U.S. forces were withdrawn immediately after the war ended. Russia, however, refused to pull out its troops; it was instrumental in the creation of the socialist republics of Kurdistan and Azerbaijan in the north-west of Iran, and demanded an oil concession in Iran's Northern provinces as a condition

---

<sup>25</sup> Mikhail Alexandrov, "Russian Interests in the South Caucasus," *SPECTRUM*, 1 (2006): 53-62.

<sup>26</sup> See Farhad Atai, "Iran, Russia, and the Caucasus," *SPECTRUM Conference Papers; The South Caucasus -2006: Main Trends, Threats and Risks*, 2 (Yerevan, 2007): 61-68.

for the withdrawal of its troops.<sup>27</sup> Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, when Mohammad Reza Shah was in power, he firmly placed Iran in the Western camp. Suspicion about the banned communist party (Hezb-e Tudeh) and Moscow's activities in Iran continued.

There is a prevalent view in Iran that for most of this long relationship, Moscow has looked to Tehran as a means of gaining concessions from its rivals. During the Qajar period, even Iran's independence was dictated by the need of its two powerful neighbors – Britain and Russia – to have it as a buffer state between them. While this need may have reduced during the Pahlavi regime, it seems to have been the case since the beginning of the Islamic Republic in 1979. Only this time the Western Camp, led by Washington, is the rival.

After the Revolution, because of the United States' attempts to isolate the Islamic Republic on the international scene, Tehran gradually tilted towards the Soviet Union/Russia – a former superpower and still the major power in the region – and looked to Moscow as an ally against the United States. A very important aspect of this policy has been the recognition that Russia's influence and interests in the region cannot be ignored. This has apparently meant avoiding actions and comments that may annoy Moscow.

Iran and Russia are not antagonists in the Caucasus. Even in the North Caucasus, where Russia has been struggling with a prolonged and bloody conflict with Muslim extremists in Chechnya, the Islamic Republic has decided that it is an entirely domestic matter and has, therefore, stayed away from lending any support to the Chechens. This is in sharp contrast to other conflicts such as those in Lebanon, Iraq, and Palestine, where Tehran has felt a religious duty to intervene and help its Muslim brothers. Yet, in all areas of security, economic, and cultural activities in the Caucasus, Iran is generally limited to what Russia would allow it to do. Somehow Iran is not able to engage in any major cooperation with its neighbors in the South Caucasus without Russia's tacit approval. Russia has been quite sensitive to Iran's cooperation in the energy field with both Georgia and Armenia.<sup>28</sup> Russia, for instance, blocked Iran's attempt to build a refinery in Armenia. In the end, Yerevan gave the project to Russia.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> See Kaveh Bayat, *Iran wa Jang-e Sard: Bohran-e Azerbaijan 1325* [*Iran and the Cold War: The Azerbaijan Crisis of 1946*] (Tehran: Daftar-e Motale'at-e Siyasi va Beynolmelali, 1373/1994): 151-195.

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, Emil Danielyan, "Russia Tightens Control over the Armenian Energy Sector," *Eurasia Insight*, October 10, 2006 <<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/business/articles/eav101706.shtml>> (October 10 2006).

<sup>29</sup> Emil Danielyan, "Kocharian confirms Russian Control of Iran-Armenia Pipeline," *Armenia Liberty*, October 30, 2006 <<http://www.armenialiberty.org/armeniareport/report/en/2006/10/F20C558F-A566-4192-9BBF-7EF0CF256EEA.ASP>> (October 31 2006).

Even though Moscow is the main supplier of arms and defensive weapons to the Iranian military, Tehran is not a signatory to any strategic or military alliance with Moscow. The volume of trade between the two is US\$3.7 billion, miniscule given the size of the two economies.<sup>30</sup> But, even in the area of transit, Moscow would like Iran to conduct such in the Caspian Sea, where Russia has a fleet of 80-90 ships as opposed to Iran's 8, rather than by means of a land route via the Caucasus. Russia blocked the port of Makhachkala on the Caspian and would rather see Iran use the icy port of Astrakhan, where Iran has no historic and cultural ties. This has served to virtually block Iran's transit route to Daghistan.<sup>31</sup>

Russia and Iran have been neighbors for over three centuries.<sup>32</sup> Their relations have seen ups and downs and have gone through various stages. Since the beginning of this "neighborly" relationship, Iran has been the smaller and weaker partner in terms of size, military capability, and international stature. This relationship has always been affected by Moscow's rivalry with other major powers. Tehran has always viewed Moscow with suspicion and mistrust. Yet, since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Tehran has looked to Moscow in order to escape the international isolation imposed upon it by the United States. This meant that Tehran has pursued a policy of appeasement towards Moscow. Moscow, for its part, has made sure that Tehran would not go as far as gaining influence and economic presence in the former Soviet south. The Caucasus is a case in point. Tehran's attempts to be involved in Armenian energy, transportation, and infrastructure projects have mainly been hindered because of Moscow's opposition, whether perceived or real.

## The American Factor

Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the government in Iran has seen itself as the main "crusader" against American imperialism in the world. On their part, successive American administrations – from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush – have accused Tehran of supporting terrorism, producing weapons of mass destruction, destabilizing the region, and opposing the Palestinian-Israeli peace process. Accordingly,

---

<sup>30</sup> "Iran-Russia Trade Turnover Hits \$3.7 bln," Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries & Mines, February 21, 2009, <[http://en.iccim.ir/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=721&Itemid=53](http://en.iccim.ir/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=721&Itemid=53)> (October 7 2009). This figure does not include military sales and those related to the nuclear project.

<sup>31</sup> The Russians blocked Iran's transit route to Daghistan because of "security concerns" in Chechnya. It is open for the trucks coming from Turkey. Interview with H. Nemati, Iranian diplomat in the Caucasus, Tehran, December 6, 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Technically, since the break-up of the Soviet Union, the two countries have no longer any common borders and, therefore, are not neighbors. But, both are regional powers of significance in the Caspian region.

they have kept up relentless pressure on the Islamic Republic. This pressure has come in the form of unilateral sanctions, sanctions pushed through the UN Security Council, vetoing Iran's attempts at joining international organizations such as the WTO, punishing other countries and companies for doing business with Iran, and issuing direct threats of invasion and even regime change. The self-assumed mission of taking on a superpower like the United States has significantly affected Iran's bilateral relations with other countries, including those in the South Caucasus. At times, it has been through direct political pressure by Washington. Expulsion of Iran from the Azerbaijani oil consortium mentioned above is a case in point.

More generally, though, the antagonism with the United States has had a distinct effect on how Tehran defines its bilateral relations with other countries. It seems that, consciously or otherwise, Iranian policy makers have defined Tehran's relations with other governments based on the degree of their closeness to the United States, and not necessarily on Iran's national interests. Conspiracy theories are widely popular among Iranian officials, so is the deeply rooted belief that the United States operates through its numerous stooges and puppet governments around the world. This has meant that Tehran has shunned governments it considers close to Washington. When examined with the American factor in mind, there emerges a pattern in Tehran's bilateral relations in the Caucasus. Interestingly, this argument seems to hold true not with the different countries in the Caucasus *per se*, but with the various governments that have assumed power in each given country. There were, therefore, relatively closer relations with Azerbaijan under Heydar Aliiev than under Elchibey, who is perceived to be too close to Washington, and closer ties with Shevardnadze than with Gamsakhurdia in Georgia.

## **Conclusion**

Iran's involvement in the South Caucasus, and its relations with its neighbors in that region, has generally been limited. Except for the tiny state of Armenia, with which Tehran has close ties, relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia leave a great deal to be desired. The good relations with the former have in part been due to Armenia's initial instability and its war with Azerbaijan. For Iran, the South Caucasus should be seen as an opportunity, not a challenge. In a way, Tehran has neglected the South Caucasus since the Soviet collapse. The potential for expansion of relations with Azerbaijan is considerable. There are no major unmanageable obstacles in the way of a closer relationship. Russia does not want Tehran to go beyond a certain point in economic, security, and political cooperation with its neighbors in the Caucasus. This has

been shown in the case of Armenia. But, the rather distant relationship with Azerbaijan has to do more with Iran's lack of enthusiasm and actual initiatives than any Russian practical opposition.

The Islamic Republic has mostly viewed the South Caucasus as a security concern. Azerbaijan has been viewed as a base for the United States for invading Iran, for instance. NATO's activities in the South Caucasus have likewise been a cause for concern. Armenia, in its bilateral relations with Iran, has viewed that country as an economic partner, and not as a security risk. In fact, there is reason to believe that Yerevan views Iran as a strategic asset, should another war break out with Azerbaijan over the Karabakh issue.

Since Armenian independence, Iran has provided Armenia with goods and a badly needed transit route to the outside world.<sup>33</sup> Yet the volume of trade between the two has never exceeded US\$200 million, a small amount given the size of even the Armenian economy. Today, though, Armenia is acquiring most of what it needs from its Western partners or from Russia. It is only in the area of energy that Armenia still needs Iran. In that area, too, Moscow does not like Iran to go beyond providing part of Armenia's energy needs. Any Iranian attempt that would result in the eventual transit of energy through Armenia to Georgia and beyond is blocked.

The Islamic Republic should not take the status of good relations with Yerevan for granted. Yerevan's initiative over the last decade in the diversification of its foreign relations has meant closer political and economic ties with Europe and the West. Yerevan's priorities since then seem to have been focused on securing growth and stability, quietly increasing relations with EU, and reducing its dependence on Russia. Even with Turkey, signs of improvement in relations can be seen. Already, there seems to be a flourishing border trade developing between Turkey and Armenia. Finally, Iran's bilateral relations with its neighbors in the Caucasus are heavily influenced by Russia and the United States. A fundamental change in Tehran's attitude and policy towards the United States, and consequently towards Russia, is a pre-requisite for a meaningful improvement in bilateral relations with its neighbors in the South Caucasus.

---

<sup>33</sup> In 2007 alone, over 65,000 trucks crossed the Iran-Armenian border. Interview with H. Najafi, Iranian diplomat in Yerevan, Tehran on April 25, 2007.

# Submission Guidelines and Process of Selection

Many of the articles are solicited, but authors are encouraged to send their work directly to the Editor who will suggest changes and determine the relevance of the articles for each issue. Articles can also be sent to any of our senior advisors, but the Editor has full responsibility on accepting or refusing individual articles. Shorter articles will be responded to within a week, whereas the response to longer analytical pieces could take up to three weeks. Some articles will be dealt with by the editors immediately; most articles are also read by outside referees. Copyright of articles remains with *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program*, unless another agreement has been reached.

**Manuscript.** Each submitted article should be sent to the Editor by e-mail attaching the word document. All correspondence will be conducted through e-mail during the process. The Editor reserves the right to edit the article to conform to the editorial policy and specifications of the CEF Quarterly and to reject the article should it not be acceptable to our editorial committee for publication.

**Regular Articles:** Articles should be in-depth and offer a long-term analysis of the particular problem. References are preferred to support your evidence according to the Chicago system. The articles should aim at 7000 words. Each article should be summarized in an abstract of not more than 150 words and include keywords.

**Commentaries:** Commentaries require a three to four sentence introduction to the article based on a news hook. Rather than a general, overarching analysis, the article must offer considered and careful “judgment” on the issue supported with concrete examples. Recommended length is 2000 words.

**References.** All authors should adhere to the Chicago reference system in their articles. These should appear in the form of footnotes. References to books and articles should be contained in the notes and not in a separate reference list. Provide translations of non-English language titles.

Articles from Journals: Phil Williams, “Transnational Criminal Organizations and International Security,” *Survival* 36, 1 (1994): 96.

Books: Patrick L. Clawson and Rensselaer W. Lee III, *The Andean Cocaine Industry* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998)

Newspapers, News-agencies & Magazines: Toby Harnden, “Drug Trade ‘Reaches to Afghan Cabinet,’” *Daily Telegraph*, February 5 2006.

Electronic Sources: George Bush, “Principles of Ethical Conduct for Government Officers and Employees,” Executive Order 12674, April 12 1989, pt. 1, <[www.usoge.gov/exorders/eo12674.html](http://www.usoge.gov/exorders/eo12674.html)> (October 30 1997).

**Subsequent references:** a reference to a single source in the previous note should be replaced by ‘*Ibid.*’; in later notes by author’s surname, title and page number.

**Style:** American spelling throughout; percent rather than per cent or %; Capital letters for the East, West, North and South, when global; western, eastern, northern and southern; Dates: November 6 2005.

**Figures & Tables.** All figures and tables must be discussed or mentioned in the text and numbered in order of mention. Define all data in the column heads. Figures and tables should be of good quality, and contain full references to the original source.

**Affiliation.** On the title pages include full names of authors, academic and/or professional affiliations, and the complete address of the author to whom correspondence and hard-copies should be sent.

NOTE: Submissions which are likely to require undue editorial attention because of neglect of these directions or poor presentation or language will be returned.

---

*The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* (ISSN: 1653-4212) – formerly *CEF Quarterly* and *CEF Monthly*. Volume and issue numbers follow the sequence of *CEF Quarterly* and *CEF Monthly*. The first issue of *The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* was numbered Volume. 3, No. 3, November 2005.

# THE CHINA AND EURASIA FORUM QUARTERLY

*Volume 7, No. 3*

*October 2009*

**Presidential Elections in Kyrgyzstan: Strategies, Context, and  
Implications**  
*Asel Doolotkeldieva*

**Stabilization of Afghanistan: Bringing the Region Back:  
U.S./NATO Regional Strategy and the Role of SCO**  
*Simbal Khan*

**Reassessing the SCO's Internal Difficulties: A Chinese Point of  
View**  
*Yang Shu*

**Iran and India's Cooperation toward Central Asia**  
*Mahmoud Balooch*

**Revisiting Female Suicide in Muslim Tajikistan: Religious,  
Cultural, and Public Health Perspectives**  
*Alisher Latypov*

**Perspectives on the SCO: Images and Discourses**  
*Selbi Hanova*

**The Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Shanghai  
Cooperation Organization, and Russia's Strategic Goals in Central  
Asia**  
*Alexander Frost*

**India's Approach to Central Asia: Strategic Intent and Geo-  
political Calculus**  
*Jagannath P. Panda*

**The Dynamics of Bilateral Relations in the South Caucasus: Iran  
and its Northern Neighbors**  
*Farhad Atai*

ISSN: 1653-4212