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Central Asia's role in the Heartland, 30 years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union

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ABSTRACT

Three decades after its independence from the Soviet Union, widespread predictions of conflict eruption in Central Asia have proven to be exaggerated. The states' handling of the region's identities has allowed for a peaceful nation-building process. This has led the region to emerge as a stable geopolitical actor and develop its role as a transit nexus within the Eurasian continent. Eurasia -the Heartland- is currently immerse in a new cycle of revival, in which China is emerging as the main Pivot Area to the detriment of Russia, allowing Central Asia to materialize its historical geopolitical role.

CENTRAL ASIA'S ROLE IN THE HEARTLAND, 30 YEARS AFTER THE DISSOLUTION OF THE SOVIET UNION

1. Introduction

This year marks the thirtieth anniversary of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the vastest empire ever to occupy the Eurasian continent. This major geopolitical event, which resulted in the apparition of fifteen newly independent states, generated restlessness and a power vacuum in the territories surrounding the Russian Federation. The dissolution marked the beginning of a new cycle of revival in the Heartland, the territory conformed by the landlocked areas of Eurasia. Predictions on how the Heartland's geopolitics would develop after the fall of communism proliferated in the 90s. Within this context, many theorists focused on the newly independent states of the Central Asia region.

While there is no universal consensus regarding the specific states that conform Central Asia, there exist three main geographical interpretations which attend to historical and cultural interconnections in order to delimit this region. Firstly, according to UNESCO, Central Asia includes the five former soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, plus Afghanistan, Mongolia, Western China and several parts of India, Pakistan and Iran¹. Secondly, a narrower delimitation of Central Asia's geographical scope limits the region to the five post-soviet republics and Afghanistan, as part of what some academics refer to as Greater Central Asia². Thirdly, post-cold-war geopolitical studies have further narrowed Central Asia to include only the five former soviet ethno-republics that acquired its independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union³. Thus, in 1991 these five newly independent states became a distinct geopolitical entity of their own. The latter definition will be used as the spatial object of analysis for this article.

¹ Adle, Chahryar. Palat, Madhavan and Tabyshalieva, Anara. *History of civilizations of Central Asia. Vol. VI. Towards the Contemporary Period*. Unesco Publishing, pp. 30. 2005.

² Ismailov Eldar and Papava, Vladimer.. *Rethinking Central Eurasia*. Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program. Johns Hopkins University, pp. 63. 2010.

³ Cotter, Michael. *The New Face of Central Asia*. Caucasian Review on International Affairs, Vol. 2, pp. 1-5. 2008



Figure 1. Central Asia and the Caucasus. Source: Mapas del Mundo

This natural resource and energy-rich region has been of great importance to both western and eastern Eurasian states. Four of its most immediate and powerful neighbors, namely Russia, China, Turkey, and Iran have historical, cultural, security or/and economic aspirations and claims in the region. This makes it a vessel of high geopolitical competition. Its history and geographical location have brought this region to the core of the main geopolitical theories of the past century. Located in Mackinder's Heartland and bridging the internal spaces of the World Island to the seas through Spykman's Rimland, this region has long been subject to the strategic thinking and geopolitical design of many theorists and policy makers. Most of the geopolitical approaches to this region have portrayed it as an arena for hegemonic competition, whose dominance is key to project influence and to control Eurasia. While regarded as a key region, there was a generalized and widely accepted approach to Central Asia which viewed it as a cauldron for instability and civil, religious, or ethnic conflict. These internal disruptive factors would hamper the region's role as a key geopolitical pivot with a will of its own and maneuvering capability within the Eurasian dynamics and power games.

With independence from the Soviet Union the newly born states faced the task of nation-building and the opportunity to create a national identity that would match the concept of state. It is here precisely that the widespread assumption and prediction of internal conflict in Central Asia generated. Arbitrarily drawn borders, provision of territory to some national ethnicities while excluding others, Islamic radicalism and economic backwardness, are a few of the many issues that prompted scholars to predict the eruption of civil conflict and unrest in the region. While the Civil War in Tajikistan and the attacks on Kyrgyz territory by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan did provide a sound basis for these predictions in the first decade after the independence of the Soviet Union, the region has tended towards stabilization, and these predictions have proven to be disproportionate in the long run.

Thus the main purpose of this analysis is to revise previous geopolitical approaches to Central Asia, provide an explanation for the absence of religious or ethnic conflict and establish the region's geopolitical role within the Heartland's new cycle of revival. In order to do so, the article is divided into three main parts. The first one addresses the evolving geopolitical role of Central Asia over the past century and introduces the theory of the Heartland's new cycle of revival. The second part looks into the identity formation processes of Central Asia. These processes took place at both national and supranational levels and help to provide an explanation both to the absence of conflict in the region and to the development of its geopolitical behavior. Lastly, this article explains Central Asia's role within the new evolution cycle of the Heartland.

2. The geopolitical conceptions of Central Asia in the Heartland

A somewhat diffuse concept of Central Asia has been present in geopolitics since the beginning of the 20th century, through the theories of Spykman and Mackinder. However it is not until 1991, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, that Central Asia, composed of five newly independent states, begins to be addressed and studied as a geopolitical entity of its own. The emergence of new geopolitical regions and entities in the post-soviet state brought back studies of regional structurization principles for the geopolitical and geoeconomic space of the new Eurasian continent, which saw itself deprived of the largest empire ever to occupy it.

2.1 Theoretical foundations: Mackinder and Spykman

English geographer Halford J. Mackinder initially developed the theory of the Geographical Pivot of History in 1904. He claimed that the globe was divided into isolated areas, each of which had a special function to perform. He divided the globe into the World Island, and the outer islands. The World Island was further divided into the Pivot Area, and the Inner Crescent. In posterior adaptations of his theory, Mackinder renamed these areas, which were then addressed as the Heartland and the Rimland respectively⁴.

The Pivot Area or Heartland is composed of the landlocked regions of the vast Eurasian continent and incorporates Russia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Mackinder argues that most historical processes concentrate on the Heartland. Its function consists of the development of military and industrial powers that would outproduce other regions of the world, and thus allow for their dominance. He claims that the Heartland has a geographically advantaged position, protected from the sea powers located in the Rimland. Furthermore, Mackinder states that whoever controls Eastern Europe would command the Heartland; whoever controls the Heartland, would command the world-island; and thus, consequently command the world⁵.

⁴ Mackinder, Halford. *The Round World and the Winning of the Peace*, Foreign Affairs, Vol. 21, No. 4, pp. 595-605. 1943.

⁵ Mackinder, Halford. *Democratic Ideals and Reality*. p. 50. 1942.



Figure 2. The Heartland and the Rimland. Source: Monarch High School AP Human Geography

The Rimland, on the other hand, is characterized by its access to the sea. It comprises Arabia, Western Europe, East Asia and India. Mackinder saw the Rimland as the main firewall for the Heartland, whose role should be to stop it from taking over the seas around the world-island. Furthermore, he predicted that the colliding areas between the Heartland and the Rimland could represent focal points of conflict in the struggle for contention of the Heartland.

Nicholas Spykman carries Mackinder's legacy in the geopolitical conception that the world is divided into a spatial-functional structure, and further develops and builds upon the Heartland theory. In his work, *The Geography of Peace* (1944) he argues, however, that it is not the Heartland, but the Rimland that has the power to control the world-island⁶. Selon Spykman, the Rimland, composed by sea powers, is able to reach world-wide resources while containing the Heartland and denying its access to said resources.

Spykman also develops Mackinder's theory regarding the focal points of conflict. He calls them the buffer zone⁷. These focal points are the bridge between the Rimland and the Heartland, and where power struggles towards contention would therefore take place. Spykman predicted this zone to have more conflicts as compared to other parts of the world.

The historical events occurring in the twentieth century validated these geopolitical theories where the Russian Empire, later materialized in the Soviet Union, became the power that dominated Eurasia and thus the Heartland. During the cold-war period, the Rimland part of Western Europe, allied with the U.S. through NATO, represented the containment wall for the Heartland.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, geopolitical theorists developed new approaches to the Eurasian continent, building upon the geostrategic conceptions of Mackinder and Spykman. In the original Heartland theory, Central Asia is given little attention, as it is considered an integral part of the Heartland, dominated by whichever

⁶ Spykman, Nicholas. *The Geography of Peace*. Institute of International Studies. Yale University. pp. 35-44. 1944.

⁷ The Buffer Zone includes parts of Asia, Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, China, Korea and East Siberia. Spykman, 1944. p. 51.

power controls it, namely Russia or the Soviet Union. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asia, now composed of five independent states, commenced to be analyzed as a geopolitical entity of its own.

2.2 Central Asia in the immediate Post cold-war period

In his book “The Grand Chessboard” (1996), political scientist Brzezinski formulates a macro geopolitical theory addressing the global panorama after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the role of the U.S. in this new era and in the Eurasian continent. Brzezinski continues Mackinder’s legacy in considering Eurasia the central basis for global primacy, and, following Spykman, elaborates a strategy for the containment of Russia.

Brzezinski identifies two broad types of states in global geopolitics: active “geostrategic players”, and “geopolitical pivots”. He defines the first as states that have the capacity and the national will to exercise power or influence beyond their borders in order to alter the existing international balance. Geopolitical pivots, on the other hand, are states or regions whose importance is derived not from their power, but rather from their geographical location and their potentially vulnerable condition for the behavior of geostrategic players. Geopolitical pivots can also be defined as catalyst states and regions, in the sense that their spatial location gives them a special role in defining access to important areas or in denying resources to a significant player⁸.

In the first group, Brzezinski included France, Germany, Russia, China and India; while the second group was formed by Ukraine, Azerbaijan, South Korea, Turkey and Iran. While he did not include any of the Central Asia states, he emphasized that the list of geostrategic players and geopolitical pivots is not fixed. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Central Asia’s main regional powers -at the time, and in the present- could in the future be included in the geopolitical pivot category, ultimately turning the region into a catalyst one.

One of the main reasons these Central Asia countries were not included in the catalyst states category after the collapse of the Soviet Union, was the prediction of imminent and inevitable conflict. Brzezinski included these newly independent states in a volatile geopolitical space that he called the Eurasian Balkans⁹. The Eurasian Balkans are part of a larger oblong that was addressed as the Global Zone of Percolating Violence. Their main difference from this outer zone is that they are a power vacuum: not only are its political entities unstable but their richness in minerals and natural resources deposits attract more powerful neighbors, each determined to oppose the region’s domination by another.

⁸ Brzezinski, Zbigniew. *The grand chessboard: American primacy and its geostrategic imperatives*. New York, NY: Basic Books. pp. 40-41. 1997.

⁹ The original Balkans represented a geopolitical prize in the struggle for European supremacy. Brzezinsk. p. 124. 1997.

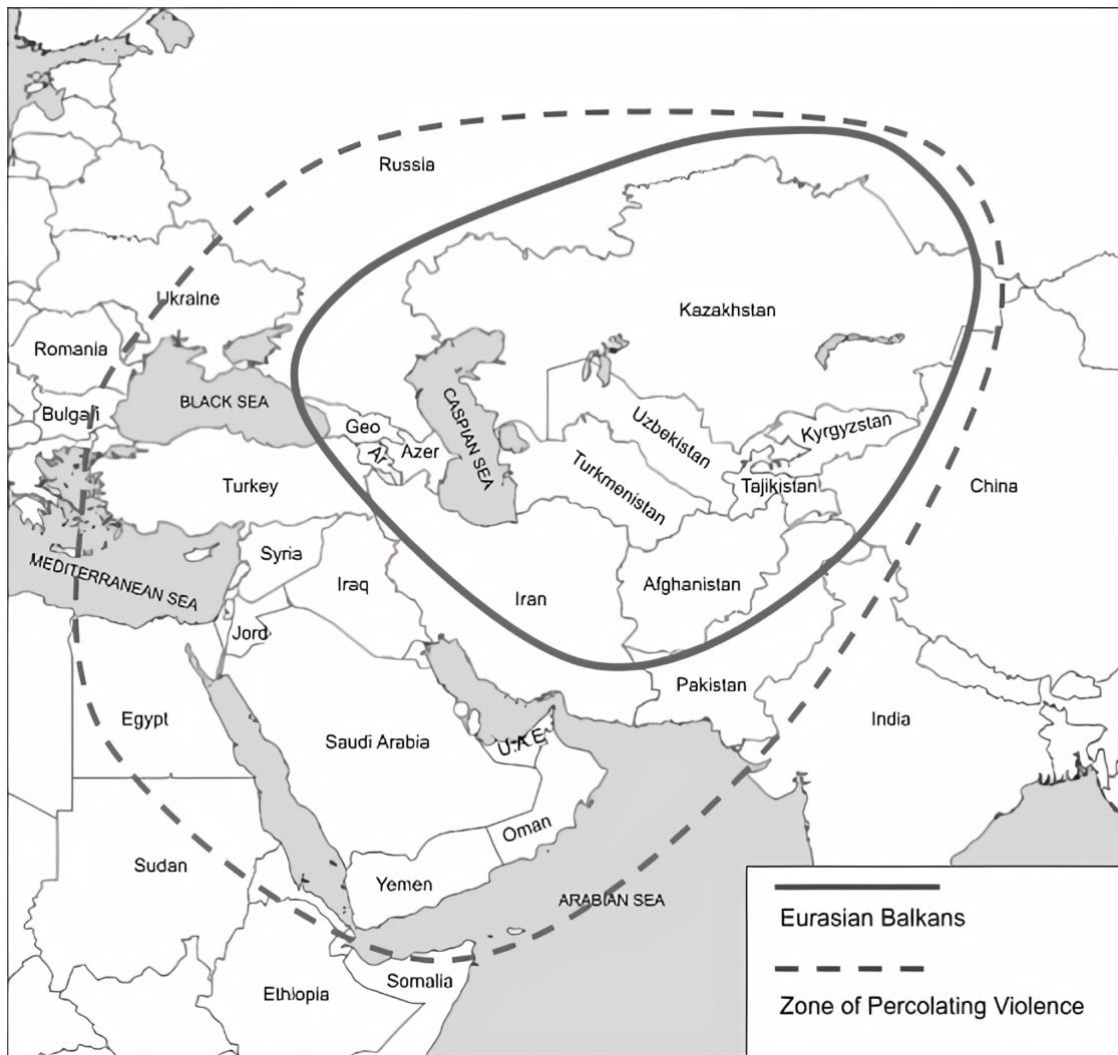


Figure 3. The Eurasian Balkans. Source: Self-made, based on Brzezinski's *Grand Chessboard Theory*

At the time, Brzezinski considered the Central Asia states to be in the process of nation-building. He considered this region to be a boiling cauldron not fully prepared for their newly independent status, whose tribal, ethnic, and religious identities would bring forward internal dissension and civil conflicts. This internal situation would, in theory, delay the role of Central Asia as an emerging transportation network meant to link more directly Eurasia's richest and most industrious western and eastern extremities, and thus hamper its catalyst region status.

2.3 The new waves of Eurasianism

Just as Brzezinski developed a theory of containment for the Russian Federation as the heir of two historically expansionist political entities -the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union- Russian theorists and foreign policy makers worked on the development of a new wave of Eurasianism to cope with the loss of territories and maintain a grip of their historical influence in the region. This Russian geopolitical school of thought first surfaced in the 19th century but became pervasive and systematic in Russia's geostrategies during the 20th century, as an alternative to soviet communism and the new geographical space now allotted to Russia. According to Russian Eurasianism, in geographical terms, the Pivot Area and Russia are one and the same thing, occupying the

dominant space in the Heartland. In this approach, the Pivot Area is not the Heartland per se, but the dominant space within it. This school of thought, paradigmatically represented by political philosopher Alexander Dugin, perpetuates Russia's imperial ambitions of dominating the center of Eurasia and creating an empire which counterbalances and opposes the West¹⁰.

In this theoretical approach, Central Asia is considered the extreme southern joint inserted into the Heartland, which provides a landbridge between it and the Indian Ocean, while separating it from the Islamic world and the Turkic area sphere of influence¹¹. The U.S.-led War on Terror, however, brought Central Asia into the international spotlight. The Central Asian republics offered their territory and aerial space for the U.S. and their allies to operate against the Talibans in Afghanistan¹². This reignited the geopolitical debate regarding the region and led scholars to revise the Eurasianist conception of Russia as the Pivot Area. It was argued that, given the geopolitical importance that Central Asia had on the War on Terror, in the future this region will not be covered by the Heartland or the Rimland as a subordinate entity, but will represent itself in the region as a separate and fully endowed geopolitical power¹³. These predictions fit in what scholars Ismailov and Vladimer called the Heartland's new cycle of revival.

2.4 The Heartland's new cycle of revival

The previously assessed geopolitical theories review the geostrategic importance of Central Asia and its evolving role in different times in history. Geopolitics analysts Ismailov and Vladimer (2010), building upon the theories have established a recurrent pattern of historical processes to which the Pivot Area (understood as the dominant space in the Heartland) is contingent. In their work *Rethinking Central Eurasia* these scholars argue that the Pivot has undergone historical processes of contraction and expansion within empires that have replaced one another for several centuries. They establish that the principles according to which the Heartland and the Rimland were formed were mainly ethnic, religious or political-ideological, and thus the historical evolution of the Pivot Area proceeded in the following pattern: i) an empire would emerge through the rising of a titular nation, often composed by an ethnic group that would dominate other ethnic groups; ii) this empire would gain total control over main pivot segments, becoming the most stable geopolitical unit of the Pivot Area; iii) when domination was established over the Heartland and Part of the Rimland, the pivot segments would detach from the titular nation, becoming separated territories, creating new frontiers and causing its disintegration¹⁴. As a rule, each empire has left behind stable administrative units within which the historical evolution of the Pivot area unfolded.

¹⁰ Dugin, Alexander. *Last War of the World-Island. The Geopolitics of Contemporary Russia*. London Arktos. pp. 79-92. 2015.

¹¹ Ambrish, Dhaka. *Mackinder's Heartland and the Location of the Geopolitical Tetrahedron*. Central Asia and The Caucasus, No. 4 (34), p. 57. 2005.

¹² For further information on the topic check: De Goñi, Helena. 2020. *Terrorismo en Asia Central: Una explicación de los diferentes niveles de radicalización en la región (II)*. Documento OIET.

¹³ Tolipov, Farkhad. *Are the Heartland and Rimland Changing in the Wake of the Operation in Afghanistan?*. Central Asia and the Caucasus, No. 5 (23), pp. 99-106. 2003.

¹⁴ Ismailov and Vladimer, pp. 90-97. 2010.

Ismailov and Vladimer refer to these historical processes as evolution cycles¹⁵, the last of which was the rise and fall of the Soviet Union. This empire emerged from the Russian titular nation, based on a communist ideology; it gained control of Central Asia, the Caucasus and Eastern Europe becoming a geopolitical hegemon, and the vastest Pivot Area ever to occupy the Heartland; and it finally disintegrated in separated territories. The dissolution of the Soviet Union is the concluding state of the Pivot's last evolution cycle, which marked the first stage of the Heartland's new cycle of revival.

The geopolitical transformations that came with the dissolution of the Soviet Union pushed the frontiers of the fallen empire back, isolating Russia as a Eurasian geopolitical subject in the northeastern part of the continent and narrowing the Pivot Area in its central part. From the Pivot Area emerged three distinct and independent geopolitical entities: Central-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia¹⁶.

This new cycle of revival calls for an alternative geopolitical conception of the Pivot Area in the 21st century. While Russia, yanked as it is from its historical zone of influence, has been quick in the development of geopolitical theories and politics that could turn around this situation, it is no longer Eurasia's only hegemonic power. Likewise, Eurasianism is no longer monopolized as a geostrategic approach by the Bear of the East.

In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping launched China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an ambitious infrastructure project that would stretch from East Asia to Europe, connecting the East and the West. The BRI incorporates the geopolitical approaches of both Mackinder and Spykman, through the creation of land corridors that cross all the way through the Heartland, and sea corridors that navigate all countries in the Rimland. China, located between both geostrategic locations aims to dominate, at least economically, the world-island. Through this geoeconomic initiative, China is investing in order to improve the interconnectedness of landlocked Central Asia. Beijing is building roads and railroads to connect the autonomous region of Xinjiang with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. That way, access to natural resources and ports from the Indian Ocean, otherwise locked due to the various straits separating it from the South China Sea, could be ensured. This economic initiative will provide Central Asia access to the sea, allowing it to join the world markets and trade routes¹⁷.

¹⁵ The history of the Heartland as a single and integral region began with the Hun Empire and unfolded through the consecutive changes of geopolitical actors: the Turkic and Khazakh Khanates, the Arabic Caliphate, the empires of the Seljuks and Mongols, Timur's Empire, the Ottoman and Safavid empires, and the Russian and Soviet empires. ISMAILOV and VLADIMER, 2010.

¹⁶ Sloan, G. *Sir Halford J. Mackinder: The Heartland Theory Then and Now*, Journal of Strategic Studies, Vol. 22, pp. 15-38. 1999.

¹⁷ De Goñi, Helena. *The Central Asia chess-game: renewed hopes for European energy security*. Opinion Paper, IEEE. p. 5. 2020.

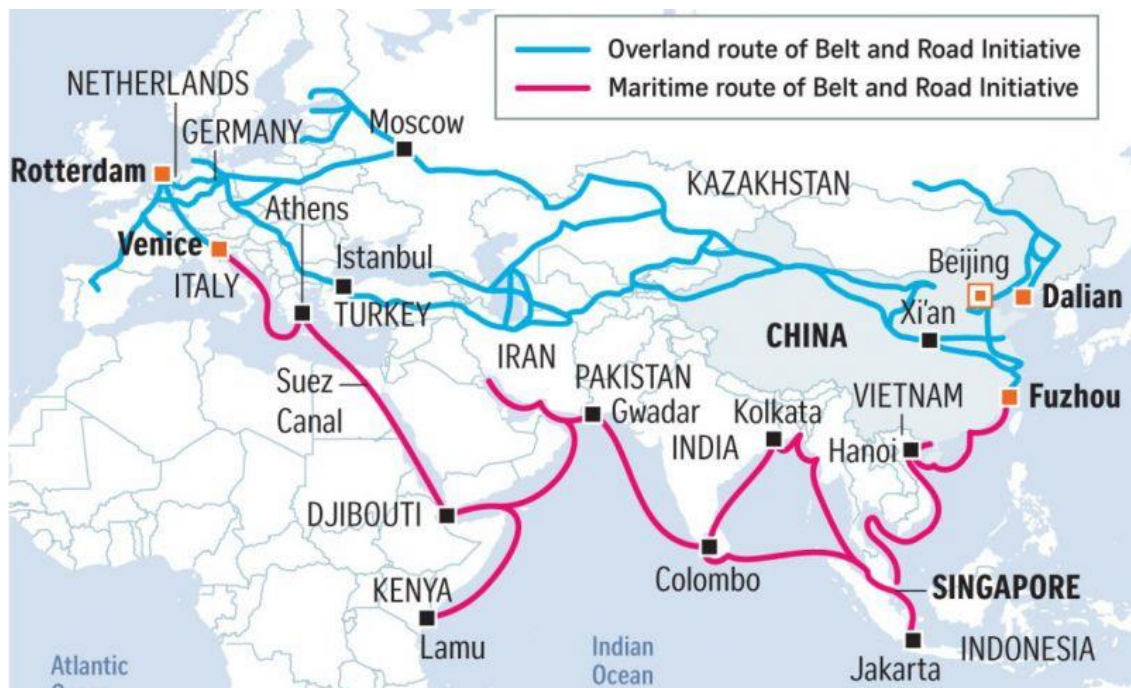


Figure 4. China's Belt and Road Initiative *Source: Asian Green Real Estate*

This Sino-Eurasian approach assigns Central Asia a key role in the Heartland's geopolitics and geoeconomics. This region, rich in natural resources, is both a producer and a transportation network, meant to link Eurasia's riches and most industrious western and eastern extremities. While this does not turn Central Asia into a geostrategic player, it enhances its role as a catalyst region, and not a mere buffer zone between Russia and the conflict prone states of the Middle East.

3. Central Asia's identity-building and its impact on geopolitics

One of the main reasons why Central Asia was not considered a geopolitical pivot after its independence from the Soviet Union was the widespread prediction of a civil conflict based on ethnic, religious, or tribal motives. Three decades after its independence, these predictions have proven to be exaggerated. In order to understand the relative stability of this region, it is paramount to analyze the identity and nation building¹⁸ processes carried by the Centro Asiatic states.

Thus, this section provides a historical analysis of the region to comprehend the repertoire of identities upon which the Central Asia states and nationals had to choose to redefine themselves. It then assesses the most important nation and identity building factors in Central Asia, taking into consideration three dimensions. The first is the state dimension, which concerns the states' efforts by political elites to legitimize their regime.

¹⁸ Nation-building is a state-led process of evoking national identity to promote unity and social cohesion within the state, often directed towards the enhancement of legitimacy, stability and capacity of state institutions. In other words, nation-building is the process of matching national identity with the state, and whereby the inhabitants of a state's territory come to recognize the state as legitimate.

The second dimension is the societal one. This section addresses how the state handled the most potentially disruptive factors to nation-building and state stability as predicted by scholars: ethnicity and Islam. The third dimension is supranational. It consists of the construction of a national identity based on opposition to Russia. This identity is shared with other regions of the post-soviet state and has allowed for the development of foreign policies which affect the overall geopolitics of the region.

3.1 A historical approach to Central Asia's identity

While the Central Asia states did not exist as such prior to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the peoples of this geographical region had all converted to Sunni Islam by the 18th century and shared a common Turkish cultural heritage that dated back to the time of the Mongols¹⁹. Its peoples were - for the most part - nomadic in nature, and organized themselves in multiethnic khanates, serving an Emir each. Internal battles for regional supremacy between khanates allowed the Russian Empire to easily start colonizing the region in the late 1860s. Nonetheless, the Russians did not represent any formidable interference with indigenous identities or customs. After the 1917 Russian Revolution and the Bolshevik establishment of the Soviet Union, Central Asia was incorporated into the new socialist state in 1922.

Soviet policies and institutions created and politicized regional identities by building interests and capacities based on regional affiliation and promoted these identities while minimizing and excluding socio-political cleavages based on tribe, religion, and nationality. Soviet policies displaced tribal affiliation and depoliticized Islam, while politicizing regional status. Thus, regionalism emerged as the most salient socio-political cleavage, and only regional identities acquired an enduring political significance²⁰.

The Soviet administrative divisions fostered the regionalization process. According to archival documents of the Uzbek Socialist Soviet Republic, administrative divisions were created on the basis of three characteristics: ethnic composition, economic peculiarities and the influence of neighboring republic borders²¹. When the Soviets established republican boundaries in Central Asia according to nationality, there were no clear territorial delineations based on ethnic groups nor a national form of identity corresponding to territory upon which republics could be established²².

Republican boundaries were created artificially, drawn on the basis of major ethnic groups as defined by russo-soviet ethnographers. Five dominant groups became national republics based on their linguistic and tribal distinctiveness. Each ethnic group became the titular nationality of its own respective national Soviet socialist republic²³. Communist historians took the creation of titular nationalities yet a step further. In the Central Asian Congress of Historians and Scholars held in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, in

¹⁹ Except the Tajik population, which is descendent from the Persians.

²⁰ Jones, 2002.

²¹ Akhunova, M. and B. V. Lunin, B. *Istoriia istoricheskoi nauki v Uzbekistane: kratkii ocherk*. Tashkent: Akademiia nauk USSR, Institut istorii i arkheologii, pp. 118-19. 1970

²² Abazov, Rafis. *Concise Historical Atlas of Central Asia*. Palgrave Macmillan. 2008.

²³ Abazov, 2008.

1936, communist ideologists censored and banned jadidist²⁴ historical approaches to the region, claiming they promoted nationalistic and pan-turkic movements against the Soviet Union. Furthermore, they parceled out and labeled portions of Central Asian history as Kazakh, Tajik, Uzbek, Kyrgyz or Turkmen, working on a fake construction of nationalism based on regionalism²⁵.

Boundaries were also designed under the lenses of economic specialization, which further reinforced regional cleavages. Economic specialization under the Soviet Union was based on a division of labor among the republics. Central Asia provided the agricultural basis for the soviet economy. The production of cotton relied on Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, the production of wheat was assigned to Kazakhstan, which also held animal husbandry along with Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan specialized in the production of animal fodder²⁶.

Even after the development of other economic sectors such as the production of fossil fuels, soviet drawn divisions promoted interdependence within the Central Asian republics. Downstream countries -Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan- while richer in fossil fuels, depend on water inflows to irrigate their agricultural crops. The water inflows come from the Syr Darya and Amu Darya rivers, whose hatcheries and dams are located in the upstream countries - Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Upstream countries trade water to downstream countries for energy²⁷.

This served a double purpose: promoting competition among the republics and creating economies that were wholly dependent on other Soviet republics as sources of both income and manufactured goods. This in turn constrained Central Asia's interests and capacity for the mobilization of separatist and or national sentiments²⁸.

3.2 The state as the main actor of nation-building in Central Asia

When the Soviet Union disintegrated there was no widespread social movement demanding independence in Central Asia, nor did an alternative ideology emerge within the first few years of the transition to effectively displace the Soviet one. Central Asian leaders were the last to declare their independence, gaining it by default. The Central Asia ex-soviet republics were for the first time in history sovereign states. This, along with the fact that Central Asia's identities had been suppressed by soviet policy makers, had Central Asian leaders embarking in a complicated nation-building process.

The most important pillar of nation-building in the Central Asian republics was political legitimacy. The nonrevolutionary transition between being soviet socialist republics and becoming independent states, strengthened the institutional residues of the

²⁴ The Jadids were Muslim modernist which promoted a socio-political reform movement in Central Asia at the beginning of the 20th century, when the region was a protectorate of tsarist Russia. While the jadidist movement attempted to elaborate a communal Turkestan history, they depended on outsiders to portray accurate representations of Central Asian history

²⁵Smith, G., Law, V., Wilson, A., Bohr, A., & Allworth, E. *Nation-building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands: The Politics of National Identities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-20. 1998.

²⁶ Lerman, Zvi. *Agricultural recovery in the former Soviet Union: an overview of 15 years of land reform and farm restructuring*. *Post-Communist Economies* 20 (4), pp. 391-412. 2008.

²⁷ De Goñi, 2020.

²⁸ Rumer, Boris. *Soviet Central Asia: A Tragic Experiment*. Routledge. 1989.

Soviet Union. All Central Asia leaders following the disintegration of the Soviet Union belonged to the Soviet Communist party, and they had to legitimize their continuation in power.

This legitimization was -and remains- intricately intertwined with regime-building and the construction of the cult of the leader's personalities. Central Asian leaders held dictatorial or quasi dictatorial regimes, some of them even implementing life tenures. Leaders placed themselves at the center of the national narrative as the founding fathers of the newly born states. They appropriated the nation-building processes embarking on aggressive campaigns of branding and ideological promotion designed to popularize conceptions of nationhood and nationality in accordance with priorities and political agendas. Central Asian states articulated national symbols through the creation of new institutions and symbols of nationhood, and through the resurrection of older dormant ones. This proliferation of new institutions articulated national symbols and delineated the nation's parameters²⁹.

Once the regime legitimization was consolidated, political elites had to choose from a repertoire of preexisting cultural and historical identities that would appeal to the population and redefine them in a way that they would promote a strong state. The most salient socio-cultural cleavages that could be addressed by the state were ethnicity and Islam. However, it was not only the theorists on geopolitics and nation-building that saw ethnicity and Islam as potential sources of conflict in the region, but also the Central Asian states and leaders themselves.

3.3 States' handling of socio-cultural cleavages: Ethnicity and Islam

While the state is the main driver of the nation-building processes, equally important in are social and cultural dynamics. In the case of Central Asia two stand out: ethnicity and Islam. Both these cleavages are double-edged swords, being potentially unifying or disruptive social factors. The state's handling of these socio-cultural cleavages clarifies the absence of protracted conflict in the region despite theoretical predictions.

3.3.1 Ethnicity

The Central Asian soviet socialist republics were established according to the five largest ethnic groups as identified by russo-soviet ethnographers: Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Tajiks, Turkmens and Kyrgyzs. All these groups speak languages related to turkish, except for the Tajik, who are Persian descent. Arbitrarily drawn borders based on soviet perceptions of local ethnicities and economic peculiarities, as well as effective displacement of populations to cover labor force necessities created multiethnic republics. The largest foreign ethnic group that contributed for most of the multiethnic character of Central Asia were the Russian and Ukrainian Slavs. It was in the Slavic ethnic composition that resided the fear of conflict eruption. In post-soviet states, the ruling elites were invested in promoting the titular national majority through symbols of ethnicity at

²⁹ Kamrava, Mehran. *Nation-Building in Central Asia: Institutions, Politics and Culture*. The Muslim World. Hartford seminary. 2019.

the expense of ethnic minorities. This would spark social distress since minorities would feel oppressed or left behind by the state.

All Central Asian states' constitutions claim that the states are civic and inclusive in theory³⁰. However, it is true that in practice, the states' nation-building processes have pushed forward cultural standardization practices. The states have tried to displace Russian as a vehicular language while promoting their national languages. Furthermore, language has also been used as a positive discrimination tool to deny or provide access to high-ranking job positions. It is true that these practices promote the titular majority at the expense of the ethnic minorities. Nonetheless, the states were aware of the disruptive potential of enhancing one ethnicity over the others. In countries with high Slavic ethnic composition, such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Russian has been given the role of the official inter-ethnic communication language by political elites³¹.

Despite the states promoting national symbols of identity, such as language, to unify and homogenize their populations, this is not enough to prove that titular elites have undertaken active policies and campaigns in the detriment of other ethnic groups.

Given the Soviet Union's regionalizing and land-division policies, most fears of conflict eruption along ethnic lines were placed on land redistribution. It was expected that in post-Soviet Central Asia, state-led land distribution would benefit the titular nation in detriment of the minorities³². However, Brent Hierman and Navruz Nekbakhtshoev (2014) carried an empirical study which denies this hypothesis. Despite their initial claim that Central Asian states undertaking land reform policies had benefited the titular group, they found that formal land laws do not advance the interest of the titular group at the expense of non-titular groups. Hierman and Nekbakhtshoev have perceived a tendency in state discourse to favor the titular majority, but this discourse has not materialized in land reform policies³³.

3.3.2 Islam

Prior to the soviet decades, Islam had been an integral aspect of Central Asia's culture. During the soviet years, however, Islam was subject to strict control and censure by the communist elites. The few permitted practices were regulated in the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan or SADUM, by its acronym in Russian. This statal institution, founded in 1943 and based in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, oversaw educating the Muslim clergy and filter publications of spiritual material so they would commune with the communist ideology³⁴.

³⁰ Access to the Central Asian States' Constitutions Library: http://www.cawater-info.net/library/const_e.htm

³¹ Bekmurzaev, Nurbek. *Language Policies of the Central Asian States*. CABAR. pp. 22-29. 2020.

³² Brubaker, Rogers. *Nationalism Reframed. Nationhood and the National question in the New Europe*. Cambridge University Press. pp. 23-54. 1996.

³³ Hierman, Brent and Nekbakhtshoev, Navruz. *Whose land is it? Land reform, minorities and the titular "nation" in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan*. Nationalities Papers. Vol. 42. No. 2. Routledge. pp. 336-354.

³⁴ Olcott, Martha. *The Kazakhs. Studies of Nationalities*. Stanford California: Hoover Institution Press. 1995.

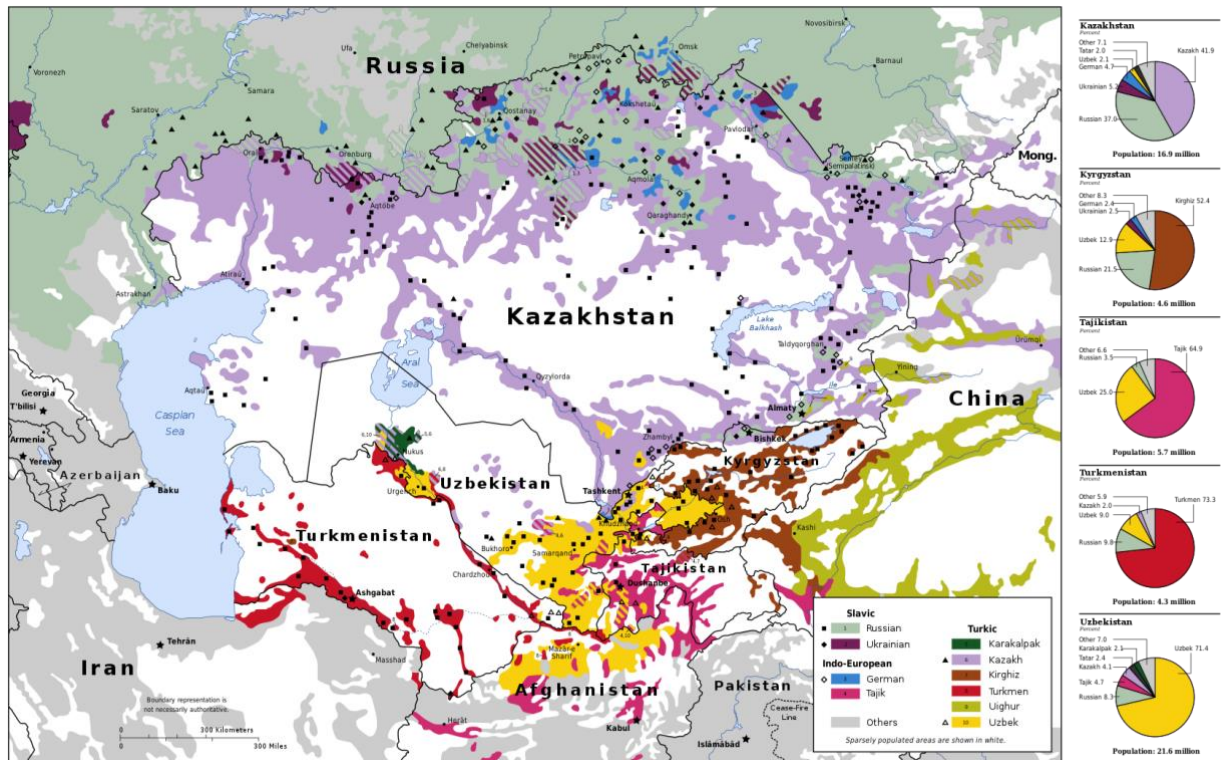


Figure 5. Ethnic composition in Central Asia Source: Central Intelligence Agency

When communism failed in Central Asia and elsewhere in the soviet space, it left an ideological vacuum to be filled, and Islam became the new source of ethical and spiritual identity, as well as a sociopolitical ideology to incorporate and use in the nation-building process³⁵. Islam was -and still is- a salient source of cultural identity and a potential basis for a unified nation. Imagined communities, such as religious communities, often surpass fragmentation based on tribal or ethnic lines.

Despite perceiving it as a cornerstone of nation-building, Central Asian leaders soon saw it as a double-edged sword. They were aware that they could lose control over the religion's political impulses, its transnational nature and its potential for mobilization and opposition.

For this reason, all five republics kept their respective SADUM headquarters and incorporated them in their respective national institutions. State leaders monopolized the use of Islam and sought to use it instrumentally, as one of the constitutive elements of civic nationalism, but without empowering it politically. They have coopted Islam at some points and repressed it at others, with a constant eye towards the utility -and consequences of their efforts in relation to nation-building.

Islam was also addressed as a potentially disruptive factor. However, there is a cultural reason for the absence of Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia. Historically, Islam has needed infrastructures to institutionalize its practices. This becomes clear in the region, since there are deep differences in Islamic practices in between the Uzbeks and Tajiks on the one hand, and the Turkmens, Kazakhs and Kyrgyzs on the other. The latter group was nomadic, and Islam was incorporated and assimilated into their already

³⁵ Olcott, 1995.

existing practices and beliefs. Preexisting clan and tribal structures limited the impact of Islam, since these loyalties prevailed over religious identity. This cultural assimilation gave rise to moderated religious practices, adapted to the already established nomadic ones, which prevail nowadays³⁶.

Uzbeks and Tajiks, on the other hand, were sedentary and already established in urban centers. This allowed for a classic assimilation of Islam, through written teaching and the construction of schools and mosques. Uzbek cities of Samarkand, Bukhara and Urgench, and Tajik Hulbuk, became the centers of Islamic teaching in the region³⁷.

These divergent assimilations of Islam are still relevant in present day practices and have influenced to an extent radicalization levels in the Centro Asiatic states. While all states portray low indexes of Islamic radicalization, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have suffered the worst part of religious extremism. The influence of classic forms of Islam in these states led some groups to resist secular governments and the statal handling of Islam in the first years after independence. This materialized into a civil war in Tajikistan, lasting from 1992 to 1997. In Uzbekistan, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) emerged as a militant Salafist movement. Their objective was to topple Uzbekistan's illegitimate secular government and create an Islamic State governed by sharia in all Central Asia³⁸. After the U.S.-led war on terror, however the IMU, allied with the Taliban, debilitated.

A more recent event which proves that Islam is not a potentially destabilizing factor in Central Asia was the Arab Spring (2011). Central Asian leaders feared that the Arab Spring would have spill-over effects in the region, but these fears never materialized³⁹.

The recent events in Afghanistan, however, are not to be overlooked. While Taliban leaders have pledged not to support their transnational terrorist agenda and operate within national borders, the Central Asian states fear that the Taliban victory will boost enthusiasm for militant extremist ideologies in the region⁴⁰.

3.4 The supranational geopolitical system as The Other

The Central Asian states have promoted internal stability through the instrumentalization of a repertoire of preexisting identities which they have used in their nation-building processes. There exists, however, yet another dimension of Central Asia's identity which has been developed in relation to its surrounding geopolitical context and its historical legacy. This dimension, supranational in nature, has affected the overall

³⁶ De Goñi Ayerra, Helena. *Terrorismo en Asia Central: una explicación histórico-cultural a los diferentes niveles de radicalización en la región.*, Revista Internacional de Estudios sobre Terrorismo, nº1, pp. 28-36. 2020.

³⁷ Abazov, 2008.

³⁸ De Goñi, 2020.

³⁹ Koldunova E. *The Impact of the Arab Spring on Central Asia: Regional and Macro-regional Implications.* Security in Shared Neighbourhoods. New Security Challenges. Palgrave Macmillan, London. pp. 145-169. 2016.

⁴⁰ Weitz, Richard. "Central Asia's Taliban Surprise". *Middle East Institute*. September 16, 2021.

geopolitical dynamics of the region, and has led to the materialization of Central Asia's role in the Heartland's new cycle of revival.

The most defining aspect of the historical identity of Central Asia is its post-soviet nature, an identity which it shares with other fifteen states. This common sense of identity is transnational in nature and provides a sound basis for the development of international relations and establishment of foreign policies. This identity is strongly rooted in the perception of "The Other". The conception of "The Other" is built upon the juxtaposition of "us" vs. "them"⁴¹. It consists of identifying and codifying national and ethnic groups in terms of opposition to an external actor which has threatened the preexisting identities of the nation⁴².

The construction of "The Other" is a fundamental aspect of the overall identity formation prevailing in all the Eurasian states. Russia itself is the most important Other for all the post-soviet states. As a Eurasian hegemon, Russia is the embodiment of the continuation of the Soviet Union. Perceived images of Russia by the ex-soviet republics range from imperialist aggressor to cunning wielder of influence. In Central Asia, and most particularly in Kazakhstan, Russia is perceived as a Slavic defender and a potentially -but not dispositional- threatening hegemon⁴³. The perception of Russia as "The Other" translates into geopolitical dynamics and ultimately shapes the countries' foreign relations.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union three new geopolitical entities emerged: Central Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. These entities share a common identity opposition to Russia and its imperial ambitions. Despite each region having differing policies towards Russia, they are all wary of its power and former influence⁴⁴.

Central Asia states' geographical proximity and past as soviet republics places them in the center of the Russian zone of influence. This aspect of Central Asia's geopolitical identity has shaped its foreign policies in two main ways. Central Asian republics seek to maintain a balanced and amiable relation with Russia, which is still a geographically proximate and regionally powerful hegemon. Kazakhstan is particularly interested in ensuring smooth relations, given the large Russian diaspora living within its borders and being the only republic sharing frontier with Russia.

Despite the interest placed in bilateral relations with Russia, the Central Asian republics have diversified its international partners. A key driver of this diversification and establishment of cooperation ties lies in Central Asia's post-soviet identity. This shared supranational identity has led Central Asia to develop energy-politik maneuvers

⁴¹ Paasi Anssi. *Inclusion, Exclusion and Territorial Identities*. Nordisk Samhallsgeografik Tidskrift, no. 23, p. 10. 1996.

⁴² Smith, Anthony. *Culture, Community and Territory: The Politics of Ethnicity and Nationalism*. International Affairs, vol. 72 (3) p. 450. 1996.vol. 72 (3) p. 450. (1996).

⁴³ Blum, Douglas. "Contested national identities and weak state structures in Eurasia." In *Limiting Institutions? The Challenge of Eurasian Security Governance*. Manchester University Press. pp. 29-41. 2018.

⁴⁴ Ehsan, Ahrari. *The Strategic Future of Central Asia: A View from Washington*. Journal of International Affairs, Vol. 56, No. 2, pp. 164-165. 2003

with the Caucasus and Central Eastern Europe regions. These maneuvers are ultimately materialized in the currently developing Southern Gas Corridor project.

Central Asia, geographically closed for the West, is dependent on Russian transit corridors to sell its gas and oil to European markets. The development of the Southern Gas Corridor will unify these three geopolitical entities, leveraging their position vis-à-vis Russia and circumventing the hegemon's energy monopolies and influence in the region.

The Southern Gas Corridor is a complex chain of pipelines bringing natural gas from the Caspian region to Europe, without passing through Russian territory. The corridor is composed of three pipelines. One is the Trans-Anatolia Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP), which brings Azeri gas through Turkey and into Europe. The Trans-Adriatic-Pipeline (TAP), which comes from Turkey and enters Greece, Albania and Italy. Then the gas is redistributed through Europe. Thirdly, the South Caucasus Pipeline, which connects Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey and Europe⁴⁵.

This allows for Europe and Central-Eastern Europe to reach some of the Caspian Sea resources without relying on Russian transit lines. Central Asian states remain contingent to Russian control in their resource exports. Transit pipes into Europe all cross through the Russian Federation. For this reason, Central Asia's main energy exporters, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, in accordance with Azerbaijan have proposed yet another pipeline: The Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline (TCGP). This project is vehemently backed by Europe as well. The TCGP is a proposed subsea pipeline between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan which would connect to the Southern Gas Corridor, and transport Central Asia's natural gas into Europe⁴⁶. The TCGP constructions are expected to start in 2022. These energy transportation projects are all key geostrategic movements to erode Russia's energy monopoly and influence in its former post-soviet space. The post-soviet shared identity between these regions, has allowed them to unify in geopolitical pacts which circumvent and diminish Russia's power.

⁴⁵ Roberts, John. *Europe's Southern Gas Corridor*. Atlantic Council. Global Energy Center. 2018.

⁴⁶ Cutler, Robert. *The Trans-Caspian is a Pipelinr for a Geopolitical Commission*. NATO Association of Canada. 2020.



Figure 5. Gas pipelines circumventing Russia Source: Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline Project

4. Central Asia's role in the Heartland's new cycle

Geopolitical and nation-building approaches after the collapse of the Soviet Union have been developed under a constant augury of conflict potentiality. However, neither Islam nor ethnicity have become important sources of conflict and instability in the Central Asian region. Rather, they have been instrumentalized by the political elites and incorporated into the national narrative as key pillars of the nation-building process. The handling of these socio-cultural cleavages has kept their disruptive potential to a minimum, turning Central Asia into a relatively stable region. This, added to its transnational post-soviet identity, has allowed the region to affect the geopolitical dynamics of the Heartland and fully develop its geopolitical role as a catalyst region.

Brzezinski (1996) claimed that Central Asia had a potential role as a transportation network meant to link Eurasia's western and eastern extremities. However, he considered that the Central Asia republics were not fully prepared for their newly independent status as sovereign states. Embarked in the simultaneous process of state and nation-building, the republics would not be able to provide internal and regional stability. This would hamper the region's role as a transportation hub.

He did however claim that Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan could in the future become geopolitical pivots, should they overcome internal instability. These states' handling of potentially disruptive factors, as well as their demographic, military and economic might has allowed them to stand as regional hegemony, and thus acquire the role of geopolitical pivots. Recalling Brzezinski's definition, geopolitical pivots or catalyst states are states whose geographical location allows them to deny or permit geostrategic players the access to resources or important geopolitical areas.

Central Asian states have allowed China and Europe to access their resources, diversifying their market and eroding Russia's monopoly. This exercise of sovereignty,

coupled with the emergence of China as a Eurasian hegemon, has allowed for the materialization of Central Asia's geopolitical role within the Heartland.

Russia, on the other hand, has tried to maintain its historical grip in the Central Asia region. It perceives it as its traditional zone of influence, as well as an instrument for geopolitical maneuver. Russia is still viewed as the predominant regional power in the region, due to its linguistic, geographic and historic ties. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and following the guidelines of Neo-Eurasianism, Russia strengthened its ties to Central Asia through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The first, founded in 1996, is an intergovernmental organization created to ensure security cooperation between China, Russia, and the Central Asian republics except Turkmenistan⁴⁷. Despite not being considered a military block, it has been perceived as a menace and a counterbalance strategy to NATO and the West⁴⁸. The latter, founded in 1992, is an intergovernmental military alliance of post-soviet states. The CSTO is used by Russia to maintain its role as a security provider, and an influence grip in Central Asia.

Despite Russia being more present in the region in military terms, its economic presence and influence in Central Asia -and at a global scale- are being eroded by China. Aware of its diminishing strength, Russia has no option but to ally with China, as it has done through the SCO. While Russia wishes to maintain Central Asia under its influence and use it in its geostrategic games, it must resign, and allow the Chinese hegemon to step in and take the lead of Eurasia's geopolitics⁴⁹. The Asiatic giant is a lucrative alternative to Russia. It is investing in infrastructure projects in the Central Asian republics, to ensure its own access to energy resources. Furthermore, China has included the region in its overland route of the Belt and Road Initiative, building roads and train rails to link Eurasia's western and eastern parts. This pragmatic Sino-Eurasianist approach to the region reinforces Central Asia's geopolitical role as a transportation network and marks a new evolution cycle within the Heartland's dynamics.

Recalling Ismailov and Vladimer's theory, the Pivot Area, understood as the dominant space in the Heartland, is sensitive to historically recurrent evolution cycles. The last evolution cycle was the rise and fall of the Soviet Union. Three decades later these authors have not further elaborated on what evolution cycle is the Heartland submerged in. Ismailov and Vladimer established the evolution pattern of the Pivot Area. First, an empire emerges through the rising of a titular nation. This empire gains total control over other pivot segments (understood as other geopolitical entities), becoming the most stable geopolitical unit in the Heartland. Finally, when domination is established over the Heartland and Rimland, the pivot segments detach from the titular nation, disintegrating into separated territories⁵⁰.

⁴⁷ Turkmenistan is a member of the Non-alignment Movement, and does not participate in any regional integration or cooperation initiatives. Rather it engages in bilateral relations.

⁴⁸ Lukin, A., & Mochilskiy, A. *Shanghai Cooperation Organization: structural formation and perspectives of development*. Analiticheskiye Zapiski, 2. 2005.

⁴⁹ Vinokurov, Evgeny. *Belt and Road From a Russian Perspective*. Eurasian Fund for Stabilization and Development. 2019.

⁵⁰ Ismailov and Vladimer, 2010.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia was still viewed as the Pivot in the Heartland, although weakened. As of today, the source of power in the Heartland has pivoted towards China. The Asiatic Giant is becoming Eurasia's hegemon, and Russia has no alternative but to allow it and ally with China. China has emerged as an empire, through the rising of a titular nation. This consists of the first phase of the evolution cycle. Now, Ismailov and Vladimer remarked that these cycles were influenced by ethnic, religious or political-ideological principles. The main ideological principle pushing China's unstoppable growth is globalization and economic pragmatism. China establishes its empire on the basis of economic accords⁵¹. These economic pacts have materialized in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It is through the BRI, that China is gaining control over the pivot segments that detached from the Soviet Union. These are Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Central-Eastern Europe, all of which have made use of their geopolitical pivot status to erode Russia's power through energy-politik accords. In this new evolution cycle, China is the Pivot Area in the Heartland.

5. Conclusion

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian region, composed of the ex-soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, became subject of great geopolitical debate. Undergoing complex nation-building processes, there was a generalized augur for conflict eruption in the region on the basis of ethnic and religious divisions. These potentially disruptive factors were believed to hamper the development of Central Asia's role as a fully endowed geopolitical actor within the Heartland -the landlocked territory of Eurasia.

Three decades after their independence from the Soviet Union, the Central Asian states have proven to be more stable than initially predicted. The Centro Asiatic sates addressed and instrumentalized ethnicity and Islam, as key cornerstones of the region's identity, diminishing their potentially disruptive nature. Given their soviet past, the Central Asian republics have also built their national identity based on their relation to Russia. This supranational post-soviet identity, shared with other fourteen ex-socialist republics, is based on the conception of Russia as "The Other", a potentially aggressive hegemon, with imperial aspirations. This post-soviet identity has materialized in energy-politick accords, enhancing Central-Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia's role of catalyst regions or geopolitical pivots. Through the Southern Gas Corridor project, these geopolitical entities will be able to diminish Russia's historical ambitions and power monopoly in the region.

Furthermore, there is yet another geopolitical event favoring and enhancing the development Central Asia's geopolitical role in Eurasia. The collapse of the Soviet Union marked the beginning of a new cycle of revival of the Heartland. In this cycle, China is rising as the titular nation, and is looking to dominate Eurasia through the establishment of pragmatic economic accords with the geopolitical entities conforming the Heartland. These accords are ultimately materialized in the Road and Belt Initiative. This project

⁵¹ Callick, Rowan. *Pragmatism, politics and the rise of China*. The Strategist. 2019.

provides a Central Asia a very special role, as the nexus in between the Western and Eastern extremities of Eurasia.

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