

Rethinking Geopolitics in Central Eurasia

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The need to apply neo-geopolitics to CEA stems from the radically changed distribution of control over territory and resources on the Eurasian landmass. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the creation of newly independent states out of former Soviet territory has unleashed a contest among state and non-state actors to penetrate states and societies in this part of the world. Faced with grave economic, financial, social, and political challenges, the internal sovereignty of the region's eight newly independent states remain weak while their societies remain marginalized, lacking the capacity to benefit from ongoing processes of globalization. As a result, a 'fourth world' of impoverished peoples is now living in incompletely formed states, characterized by contested identities and uncertain loyalties.

Traditional geopolitics studies the international order by making a spatial

Geopolitics in Central Eurasia (CEA) is today a more contentious issue than ever.¹ Organized crime, ethno-religious conflict, environmental degradation, civil wars, and border disputes reflect the region's instability. At the same time, Central Eurasia has huge oil and gas resources – the production and export of which could prove crucial to the region's economic and political development. The following key questions were addressed at the ICAS3 panel: (1) How should we conceptualize geopolitics as an approach to studying international relations in the post-Cold War period? (2) What is the nature of geopolitics as practiced by both state and non-state actors in the region? (3) What are the possibilities for and impediments to political stability and sustainable economic development in the countries of Central Eurasia?

map of the earth's productive resources and of the territorial actors that compete for control over resource-bearing locations. This approach to studying inter-state relations had its heyday at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, with Alfred T. Mahan and Halford J. Mackinder as its main proponents.

A new approach, neo-geopolitics, aims to synthesize traditional geopolitics and geo-economic analyses. It looks not only at states but at a variety of actors that operate across borders: national and transnational governmental and non-governmental institutions, organizations, firms, armed forces, terrorist groups, peace movements, human rights activists, and environmental organizations. The neo-geopolitics approach should help us to better understand the rapidly changing geopolitics of post-Soviet CEA.

Its geo-economic position and resource wealth is turning CEA into an arena where the major powers wrestle for control.

Regional state actors (Russia, Iran, Turkey, China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan) meet outsiders (US, EU and its member states) as well as NGOs and radical-fundamentalist Islamic and criminal groups operating across borders. This mixture of actors – and the scope of their activities – suggests that today's Great Game for the influence and control of the region's peoples and resources cannot be analysed through concepts invented during the nineteenth-century, when the region was dominated by the British and Russian Empires.

In her paper, Shirin Akiner (School of Oriental and African Studies) focused on the impact of the Soviet collapse on the level of social provision. She found that the relatively well-educated populations of the region are impoverished and have to cope with deteriorating health care systems. She argued that the states of CEA have low levels of both political awareness and political capacity. Since their independence, they have shifted from one-party to one-man systems. In Kazakhstan, for example, the president and his family control the press and key economic sectors. Akiner recommended regional cooperation as a step towards integrating CEA into the world economy.

Henk Houweling (University of Amsterdam) argued that the post-Cold War interregnum was brought to an

end with the 11 September attacks. In the post-Cold War period, American foreign policy makers draw upon self-conceptions from the nineteenth century, casting itself in the role of world redeemer. This self-concept fits in well with the needs of domestic society. Households, enterprises, and state organization have adapted their internal organization to uninterrupted access to fossil energy. The gradual exhaustion of domestic supply requires power projection beyond the borders of the US. Houweling, however, rejects the hypothesis that domestic energy needs are the direct cause of America's military power projection into the oil-rich region of western Asia and CEA. He argues that the creation of trade, investment, and transportation links between the industrial cores of Western Europe, Russia, and Northeast Asia are unifying these industrialized economies. Linking this integrated industrial complex to energy-rich western Asia and the Caspian would deprive America of its naval control over food and energy supplies to potential challengers in Western Europe, Northeast Asia, and China.

Eva Rakel (Humboldt University Berlin and University of Amsterdam) discussed the major obstacles for Iran-

ian policy makers to cooperate with the CEA countries. Iran's geopolitical position was buffeted by the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the 'disappearance' of the 1,700 kilometre Iran-Soviet Union border. Since then, Iran has been determined to reinforce its regional position. Iran has three main objectives in CEA: to expand its infrastructure (especially its railway network), to gain political and economic influence through the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), and to acquire shares in a number of Caspian oil and gas development and export ventures. Iran has been reasonably successful in the first of these aims, while the latter objectives remain unattained due to obstacles posed by its economic troubles, its divided leadership, and US sanctions. Rivalry between different political factions in Iran frustrates any attempt of developing a coherent long-term foreign policy, and is a potential threat to the survival of the regime itself.

Fully aware of these obstacles, the participants at the panel asserted regional cooperation to be a means not only to support economic development but also to solve existing and prevent potential future internal conflicts through peaceful means. To my mind, it deserves recommendation that this subject is elaborated on in the future. <

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- 1 Central Eurasia (Central Asia and the South Caucasus) consists of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.