

Contemporary Geopolitics Conflict between US and Central Asia

Kwang Ho Chun⁺

Center for Global Affairs, Chonbuk National University, 567 Baekje-daero, Deokjin-gu, Jeonju-si, Jeollabuk-do

Abstract

More than twenty years after independence due to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian countries remain their focus on a 'New Great Game'. From an initial narrative that surrounded the battle for energy between China and Russia, the power balance in the region is translating to a trilateral structure. The re-focus of US foreign policy to the region has fundamentally changed the nature of conflict in this area. This paper seeks to make a full assessment of the key regional characteristics of conflict in Central Asia and the post-9/11 US foreign policy in this region, particularly since the withdrawal of US combat forces from Afghanistan. It concludes by emphasizing several areas for opportunity in maintaining and resolving conflicts and bilateral and multilateral convergent interests. The paper also highlights that the three major powers in the region, US, Russia and China, lack trilateral cooperation efforts which could result in divergent local interests and elevated degree of conflagration.

Key words: Geopolitics, Central Asia, SCO, US, China, Russia

1. Introduction

The phrase 'New Great Game' (Kleveman, 2003: 2) entered common language amongst Central Asian analysts and scholars in the 1990s as the regional states, gaining independence from the Soviet Union, began to take on a new geo-strategic significance due to the conflation of natural resource exploitation, ethnic unrest and Islamic fundamentalism that threatened internal stability of the new states. With the strategic shock of 9/11, the onset of the global financial crisis and the

increase in transnational threats such as a resurgent Taliban, the fear of Afghanistan becoming a failed state and the consequent spread of ethnic unrest that threatens fragile states and authoritarian rule, the New Great Game, two decades on from the collapse of the Soviet Union, has taken on a different dimension.

China, Russia and the US are increasingly playing out trilateral (NCAFP, 2011: 140) political maneuvers within the 'new strategic region (Kerr, 2010: 133).' Russian hegemony, energy exploitation, Chinese influence to take advantage of energy

⁺ Corresponding author: Kwang Ho Chun, Tel. +82-63-270-2882, e-mail. khchun@jbnu.ac.kr

diversification and gain consequent stability on the frontier of its restless western province of Xinjiang and a re-focus of US foreign policy on the region are key factors that are both shaping fragile bilateral and multilateral convergent interests and the potential for divergence and confrontation(Lo, 2008: 110).

This paper will examine Central Asia in order to better understand the current balance of power issues between China, Russia and the United States (US) that are vying for influence in a region that is rich in natural resources and geo-politically at the epicenter of unrest caused by terrorism and separatism that are simultaneously having an effect on the borders of China and Russia. This paper intends to examine the current multifaceted complexity of the New Great Game thesis, a rapidly evolving geo-political landscape that has taken on a new dimension since the US re-focus on the region coincident with the withdrawal of combat forces from Afghanistan.

Analysis will reveal that Chinese aspirations to diversify energy security, coupled with the global financial crisis that has exposed Russia's business model based solely on oil exports, has already seen a surge in Chinese power in the region through both the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and bi-lateral agreements. The US rhetoric of competition and cooperation, coupled with investment complementary to China may see Russia relegated further from its legacy hegemonic status that it has enjoyed since the break-up of the Soviet Union.

In order to provide understanding to the conflict challenges present within Central Asian geopolitics, this paper will at the outset make an

assessment of the nature of conflict and vulnerabilities that within the region. It will then explore the role and presence of regional cooperation prior to the shift in policy direction of the US; this section focuses on Russia as a regional hegemon and the impact of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in fostering cooperation and understanding. Finally, an assessment is made of the contemporary conflict environment in response to shifts in US policy. This paper will conclude that a renewed US focus, whilst providing both China and Russia with a common enemy through its spread of liberal democratization, will also have a counter effect of cementing the current convergent geopolitical strategies with a focus on the common factors of stability through the maintenance of Central Asian regimes in the resistance to terrorism and separatism. As such, there are a many new and emergent dangers that need to be avoided if the positive opportunities are to be realized.

II. Analytical Framework: Central Asia as a Region of Conflict

Central Asia, defined in this paper as the relatively newly formed 5 republics born out of the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the border areas of Russia and China, has gone through uncertainty, conflict and increasing competition for political influence and economic resources in the past twenty years. In particular, Russian primacy through its post-Soviet hegemonic status provided the newly formed states with a constant through a troubled era. China's tacit agreement to allow Russia to act as the regional

security leader through the auspices of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) has enabled China to concentrate on its other priorities such as its extensive program of modernization and continuing issues with Taiwan (Lo, 2008: 106). The landscape, however, changed due to the terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001.

This paper argues that the differentiation caused by the complexity to each state individually leads to a deduction that regionalism only exists insofar as geography and, therefore, at a geo-political level. Furthermore, this is evidenced by the variance in foreign policy towards the region by China and the US; the former demonstrating an understanding of differentiation of the states whilst the latter adopting a policy more akin to regionalism (Rywkin, 2011: 228). However, it is noted that for the US, the opportunity to take a region-wide multilateral approach is undermined further by a series of bilateral agreements, whether economic or security based; a key reason being the differing rates of economic development that this paper suggests will widen as states with increased wealth and resources such as Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan pursue more robust multi-vector policies, together with a cultural diversity that is argued will lead to difficulty in establishing a mutually supportive political framework outside of the SCO (Shu, 2009: 17).

Central Asian states' multi-vector policies have been characterized by using the US as a 'hedge' against expansionism by Russia in the early part of the 21st century (NCAFP, 2011: 137), and latterly by more sophisticated and economically based security negotiations and decisions; off-setting

Russian hegemony against Chinese economic development. This makes the regimes unpredictable and is the cause of significant concern to Russia who is reliant on energy resources such as gas from Turkmenistan and threatened by the enduring nature of US basing in Kyrgyzstan that volunteered readily to support the US-led coalition post 9/11 (Nygren, 2008: 210).

Uzbekistan's ever-changing relationships towards the three principal powers in the region can be rightly viewed as unstable. On joining the SCO in 2001, it also aggravated relations with Russia by allowing the US to base forces at Khanabad in order to conduct combat operations in Afghanistan. Indeed, Karimov further fanned the flames of dissent with Moscow by openly criticizing Russia's dislike of an Uzbek 'independent (US foreign) policy' (Nygren, 2008: 211).

In the event of a collapse of the Karimov regime, Tajikistan, despite its own internal problems, has openly stated that the Tajik minority would be protected (Quinn-Judge, 2010: 57). Although the steps to do this are unspecified, any such action would have critically damaging regional consequences. Furthermore, any major unrest precipitated by regime collapse would have a likely impact on the fragile neighboring infrastructures of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan with massive population movements, as evidenced by those following the 2005 Andijon massacre, having significant impact (Quinn-Judge, 2010: 55). Other effects such as ethnic unrest brought by a combination of regime collapse and the potential for resurgent terrorism would test the resolve of the CSTO and ultimately affect the SCO-CSTO association and, therefore, the Sino-Russian relationship (Quinn-Judge, 2010: 57).

Tajikistan, despite being the weakest state in Central Asia and the most dependent on Russian security (Oldberg, 2007: 37), has also sought to extend its international status by allowing NATO to use it a base. This, however, does not detract from the fact that it is increasingly fragile with unemployment estimated at 40% (Quinn-Judge, 2010: 56). To counter this, the Tajik government has, in the recent past, encouraged approximately 50% of its labor force to work in Russia; this had brought in 40% of the nation's GDP (Quinn-Judge, 2010: 56). With widespread unemployment exacerbated by the global financial crisis, Russia has been unable to maintain the employment of this work force. This, in turn, has precipitated a drop in remittances to 35% of GDP (Quinn-Judge, 2010: 56). This leaves a disenfranchised, 'youth bulge' (NCAFP, 2011: 140) of unemployed and poor; a breeding ground for potential uprising and social unrest (NCAFP, 2011: 140).

Although not a member of the SCO, Turkmenistan has emerged as a significant player in the new geo-political landscape of Central Asia. Indeed, the opening of the Central Asia gas pipeline in December 2009 linking the gas rich state to the western border of China heralded a significant coup for both nations, causing commentators to assert that this was truly the beginning of a '21st century Silk Road'; a phrase that was swiftly adopted by the Obama administration in the US (Escobar, 2010: 216). Turkmenistan has developed cooperation through mutual advantage in bilateral agreements with China and has sought to take advantage of the energy diversification policies that China has followed; an issue that will be examined elsewhere in this paper.

For now, the primary stability that has been created by the autocratic regimes now needs to tackle the thorny question of accession. However, changes to the current political landscape in the republics looks increasingly unlikely with the secretive and secular nature of government characterized by a common fear of social unrest and militant Islam (The Economist, 2011). It is against this backdrop that the future of the Central Asian republics rest.

Therefore, a clear differentiation exists in rates of economic growth, consequent power and leverage at the multi and bi-lateral levels and disparate motivations culturally and politically within the states. However, there is a considered argument that there are sufficient interdependencies that require regional integration to tackle the cross-border problems of water, electricity and energy (Blank, 2010a: 105). Furthermore, a destabilizing effect from one state to another remains a real possibility (Blank, 2010a: 73). This is where the SCO could become the regional glue required; the effectiveness of which, in relation to both the Central Asian states, China and Russia, will be examined in this paper.

III. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization

The efficacy of the SCO attracts a broad school of thinking from deep-seated US paranoia at one end of the spectrum to more positive leanings regarding its ability to ingrain governance and promote stability at the other.

Currently the SCO and the CSTO survive alongside each other with a delicate balancing act that enables each to follow its own agenda.

However, although there appears to be little debate regarding primacy at present, there remains the potential for a source of competition or conflict to surface in the future where the motivations of both organizations start to converge and the current relationship consequently begins to diverge. For now, although both China and Russia hold joint authority over the SCO, the organization is seen very much as a vehicle for China to exert influence and promotes its expansion in the Central Asia region; a key factor of its 'peaceful rise(Blank, 2011b: 263)' in becoming a dominant world power as the global structure changes to that of multi-polarity. This influence has been demonstrated since the inception of the SCO in terms of 'soft' power(Lamoureux, 2011: 2), although it is perhaps an obvious argument that it is easier to persuade through soft power when you have the capability to deploy hard power to back up any diplomatic negotiations.

1. Background

The precursor to the SCO was known as the 'Shanghai Five', was set up by China in 1996 (Rothacher, 2008: 69). This organization's remit was to provide a forum for debate on the Chinese border issues with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, one which culminated with the 'Treaty on Deepening Military Trust in Border Regions'; essentially an agreement that saw China gain territory and an assurance that a border region of 3000 kilometers was demilitarized (Rothacher, 2008: 69). However, these negotiations took far longer than China anticipated due largely to the pride and nationalism felt by the new Central Asian states; after years of Soviet rule the fear

of Chinese hegemony saw robust negotiations (Peyrouse, 2009: 5). The resolution of these long standing boundary issues did, however, precipitate a dramatic rise in cross-border trade; in particular between China and its Central Asian neighbors, with volumes growing from 459m to 2.4Bn US Dollars between 1992 and 2002(Yuan, 2010: 859).

Its objectives largely complete, it was at this stage the 'Shanghai Five' could have ceased to exist. However, the security situation in Central Asia had been worsening since the Taliban victory in Afghanistan in 1996. Further Islamic uprisings such as the Tajikistan civil war and the rise of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) increased Chinese concerns on its border; particularly as these conflicts provided an ideal location for an upsurge in Uyghur training that directly threatened the Chinese western province of Xinjiang, previously known as East Turkestan.

In 2001, Uzbekistan joined the 'Shanghai Five' and the SCO was born. The SCO's charter, adopted in St Petersburg in 2002, articulates it stated aims of promoting 'stability, diversity and non-interference (Frost, 2009: 95).' This is an unsurprising strategy, given the inherently undemocratic regimes in Central Asia located within the SCO. It may also go some way to explain the deep-rooted suspicion of the organization in the eyes of many Western commentators. Indeed, the SCO goes further by also stating that it is opposed to any import (to its member states) of other 'models of social development (Frost, 2009: 95)'; a clear message to the US. Rothacher takes this suspicion further by asserting that the SCO represents a cartel to keep the five Central Asian governments and 'their clans' in power(Rothacher, 2008: 68). This raises the

fundamental question of what, in the view of the SCO constitutes regional stability.

2. SCO Aims and Achievements

The SCO's stated aims are to fight against the 'three evils of terrorism, separatism and extremism (Lo, 2008: 106)', 'codewords(Wayne, 2008: 4)' for Chinese fears in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) and the goal of domestic security through regional stability. Indeed, during the years leading up to the formation of the SCO, China exerted pressure on both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan governments to cease discourse with the wider Uyghur diaspora within their states (MacHaffie, 2010: 373). The concern over the Islamic uprisings of the 1990s, ironically, were alleviated by the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 that, paradoxically, brought the US to the doorstep of both China and Russia, yet diffused the increasing threats to the region and their border areas. Despite the anti-American rhetoric, there was no concrete policy articulated regarding removal of US forces from bases in the Central Asian states, lest the increasing radical Islamic violence spill over the border areas. That mood changed in 2005 at the SCO Astana summit. Following the Uzbek leadership's massacre of unarmed civilian demonstrators in Andijan, and the subsequent sanctions imposed by the west, the SCO used this as a pretext for a strategic move to expel US forces from the region(Rothacher, 2008: 70). Although expulsion from Uzbekistan followed, it is arguable that this was strategically inept of the SCO considering that the war in Afghanistan was far from over and the threat of Taliban influence towards the Islamic populations of Central Asia

remained extant. Only recently further evidence of Central Asian insurgent factions have surfaced in the border areas of Afghanistan, with a senior commander of the IMU killed by NATO forces(BBC Monitoring, 2012), targeted as the senior IMU commander responsible for attacks on NATO forces.

Bobo Lo posits that the SCO has the potential as an economic regional integrator(Lo, 2008: 111), albeit driven primarily by Chinese aspirations. This positive argument views the SCO as a forum for debate where even the weakest states of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan can make themselves heard demonstrates that it is a truly multi-lateral organization(Lo, 2008: 107). This is despite the fact that it is clearly led by the dominating factors of China and Russia, with the Chinese economic agenda at the forefront of priorities. Furthermore, whilst Lo ensures that he does not overstate the achievements of the SCO and cites the blatantly anti-American rhetoric as self-fulfilling western suspicion of the organization, he dispels the myth of the SCO as 'the most dangerous organization that American has never heard of(Lo, 2008: 108).' In fact he goes further, stating that there is an 'intrinsic logic of intra-regional cooperation due to enough common interests that do not need the reference point of a common enemy(Lo, 2008: 109).' The implication is that there are enough mutually beneficial interests amongst member states such as regional stability, counterterrorism and trade that will likely be drivers for increased integration rather than divisive competition. A supporting position is adopted by Yuan who suggests that this makes the SCO a 'stabilizer (Yuan, 2010: 865)' and aligns the notion of regional security with SCO institutionalization and the

interdependency of the provision of energy resources to China(Yuan, 2010: 869).

Any positive outlook is, however, tempered by the potential for the SCO to become embroiled in a balance of power confrontation between China and Russia; a situation that may well be brought about by the divergence of interests either as a natural consequence of events or catalyzed by the US and consequent changes in policy of the Central Asian republics as they seek to establish conditions for national survivability. As long as the SCO's ambitions are constrained the relationship between Beijing and Moscow can remain on a relatively even keel. However, as China increasingly becomes a more dominant player in terms of influence, Russia is unlikely to remain passive. For now, the SCO is a vehicle through which China and Russia are able to play out strategic tension, in addition to ensuring that the four other members from the Central Asia region have voices in negotiations, and there remains a widely-held view that the SCO summits actually make Russia behave more appropriately towards the four states(Oldberg, 2007: 35). In essence, the four Central Asia states within the SCO play a complex and multi-faceted balancing act with China and Russia. It is perhaps no coincidence, therefore, that priority has been given to the CSTO for the provision of regional security(Oldberg, 2007: 36).

The convergent-divergent debate regarding China and Russia is characterized by a number of issues that could create a condition of competition spilling over into confrontation. With the SCO and the CSTO operating in the same sphere of

influence, albeit with, for now, differing agendas, there remains potential for a likely divergence of their relationship(Wilhelmsen & Flikke, 2011: 885). The convergence-divergence argument has been based, at least by analysts prior to 2009, on a Sino-Russian motivation in maintaining any US influence in Central Asia at arm's length (Wilhelmsen & Flikke, 2011: 866). In terms of the SCO, the geopolitical narrative is one of a Sino-Russian relationship that has given a voice to newly formed states in Central Asia whilst at the same time having a mutual motivation in ensuring a balance to limit potential US influence in the region (Wilhelmsen & Flikke, 2011: 893). However, the 'internal glue' of the SCO remains in doubt by skeptical analysts(Wilhelmsen & Flikke, 2011: 893). Diverging interests in terms of membership, difficulties over military co-ordination and the seemingly impossible challenge of integration of diverse economies to give the SCO more of a regional group feel are limitations that cause the organization to be viewed as fragile. However, there remain issues on which normative convergence holds forth, not least the fact that the largely authoritarian regimes view that SCO as the means on which to retain power(Lo, 2008: 109). This situation suits China in particular, with regional stability through a resistance to any imported model of democratic change a key tenet in its political rhetoric and economic program of diversification that will be examined next. The threat to the *status quo* remains complex, not least due to the gathering pace of change that will likely accelerate due to the re-focus of the US towards the region.

IV. The USA – Central Asian Foreign Policy Re-focus

1. US Influence

As examined, one of the key factors driving strategic convergence of China and Russia in Central Asian geopolitics is, to a great extent, driven by the motivation to oppose, or at least limit, the US aspirations to extend its influence (Lo, 2008: 110). However, there is an argument that should displacement of the US be achieved, either through diplomatic means or the US deciding to leave once counter-insurgency operations cease in Afghanistan, then Sino-Russian co-operation will quickly descend into confrontation and conflicting interests (Wilhelmsen & Flikke, 2011: 894).

So, the question is whether the US re-focus on Central Asia actually plays into the hands of the current Sino-Russian relationships forged within the SCO or will catalyze divergence. A counterpoint to this is whether this reinvigorated US perspective towards Central Asia as a region (that incorporates Afghanistan and Pakistan) will actually strengthen the resolve of the SCO member states to act more as a regional grouping rather than rely on a series of bi-lateral arrangements that is actually counter-productive to the regional debate as it undermines the multi-lateral aspirations of the SCO. However, this is far from clear cut and the multi-vector policies demonstrated by the other member states will potentially come to the fore to the detriment of the regional grouping. This section will analyze the US re-focus and, therefore, motivations towards Central Asia as a region. This will enable a clearer idea of how well the other two principal powers, Russia and China, and the other

Central Asian states are placed to achieve their own geo-political aspirations two decades on from the break-up of the Soviet Union and one decade on from the irreversible consequences caused by the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

A comprehensive review of US strategy in Central Asia took place under the Obama administration in 2009. At the core of the review was an aim to build up long-term relationships. This is tied into the evolution of such partnerships articulated by Robert O. Blake Jr, Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, in January 2012 in which he spoke of policy drivers such as: 'the continuance of Central Asia assistance in combating the insurgency in Afghanistan; the continued strive for democracy and human rights; combating narcotic and people trafficking; and a re-focus of the possibilities for the development of energy opportunities by ensuring a balanced energy policy in the region (Blake, 2012).' These stated policies are perhaps obvious or, at the least, a reaffirmation of what would be expected from a principal power in the region, particularly considering the strategic basing of forces since 2001 and the acknowledged influence of both China and Russia. That said, despite the strategic shock of the 9/11 attacks precipitating an unprecedented focus towards the region, US foreign policy interests remained difficult to discern in the first part of the decade (MacFarlane, 2004: 449). This has been the focus of the issue for the US over time and it can be argued that the lack of a coherent US foreign policy approach to the region from 2001 left a vacuum that has been ably filled by China through the use of the SCO as its political vehicle to enable

enlargement of its influence footprint(Rywkin, 2011: 227).

The first decade of the 21st century was characterized by the notion amongst commentators that the US only had a 'fleeting interest(Mihalka, 2007: 21)' in the region and would withdraw from Central Asia once the Taliban had been defeated in Afghanistan. Indeed, a 2005 RAND report stated that the Central Asia region (from a US perspective) remained 'remote, landlocked and of little strategic consequence(Mihalka, 2007: 35).' The widespread view from Moscow and Beijing was that the US had only a transient policy towards the region. This US foreign policy of 'quiet diplomacy(Quinn-Judge, 2010: 61)' was posited alongside US objectives to tackle terrorism, energy concerns and promote democracy; the US view that the first two were relatively straightforward to achieve whilst the third point perhaps demonstrated US arrogance in assuming that it could import its own form of liberal democracy. This is borne out by the fact that, despite significant US presence in Central Asia between 1999-2006, there was a sharp decline in the Freedom House (funded by USAID) democracy index across the five states during this period of time(Mihalka, 2007: 35).

So why has US policy towards Central Asia changed so significantly from that proposed by analysts as recently as 2007? Of note in Blake's speech is the focus on Central Asia's relationship with Afghanistan and, in what could be determined as a challenge to China and Russia, a reaffirmation of the US policy towards democratic development (Blake, 2012). One of the important aspects was the US articulation of the five Central Asian states

as a region, rather than a group of disparate regimes all at different stages of political and economic security and stability(Rywkin, 2011: 228).

This confirms the US trend of never being quite sure how to categorize the Central Asian states and has led to frustration and resistance from the regimes. An example of this is the seemingly stark refusal by the US to acknowledge the legacy of Soviet rule and the enduring effect that this has had on the sociological and cultural aspects of Central Asia(Rywkin, 2011: 226); a position that this paper has already stated is the antithesis of Chinese policy which has recognized the differentiated nature of the states(Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2009: 5). Indeed, past US policies in Central Asia have been very much developed in isolation from any real understanding of the unique characteristics of each state, relying instead on a regional approach based on an opposition to a post-Soviet Russian hegemony and the continuing influence of China in the region characterized by Central Asian policy officials openly criticizing the transfer of Central Asian policy in the US State Department from the bureau dealing with Russian affairs to that dealing with Afghanistan and Pakistan(Rywkin, 2011: 223). Whilst this could be argued as an own goal in policy terms when dealing with a complex set of states, a counter position is that the setting of US foreign policy by widening the region actually represents a politically astute acknowledgement of the likely impact on the region when the US-led coalition ceases operations in Afghanistan. However, relationships in such a dynamic international region are about perspectives and the cultural and historical aspects matter.

The irony is that as the US converges on Central Asia the very states that it is trying to influence will continue to diverge in order to maintain and promote their own cultural identities and autocratic systems of government. However, there is another potential effect in that US actions, in terms of a regional approach, could actually increase the power of the regimes as they posture further against the twin dynamics of China and Russia. This increased influence would, therefore, have the consequence of an increasing array of multi-vector policies, thus creating the potential for confrontation competition for influence increases.

However, whilst putting forward US policy views on infrastructure development, the tackling of global terrorism and re-stating the importance of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) in combating Islamic insurgency on the doorstep of the Central Asian states, US policymakers have stopped short of any mention of the SCO(Blake, 2012). Whilst there is little doubt that the NDN and current basing requirements need to remain established to ensure the optimal withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan, US policy on how to implement democratic values and ensure economic integration amongst the states appears little more than rhetoric. What is important is the change in the geo-political narrative emphasis over a five year period.

Indeed, this paper suggests that the very reason that the Sino-Russian relationship has endured for such a protracted period, to counter a common 'enemy' in the guise of the US, is reason enough for US re-engagement insofar as its presence may be enough to affect Russian hegemony (increased

through bi-lateral and collective security agreements) and Chinese soft power policies that are based largely on economic development and the need to fulfill its burgeoning appetite for energy resources. Moreover, this essay agrees that the very nature of the Russia and China striving to minimize US influence will catalyze the differences in their respective motivations, thus contributing to the greater independence of the Central Asian states(Blank, 2010b: 3).

This theory, however, aligned with the convergent-divergent theses(Lo, 2008; Wilhelmsen & Flikke, 2011) considered by a number of analysts cannot predict the unintended consequences. For instance, a further consequence that should be considered is that the presence of the US through a re-focused foreign policy that attempts to promote liberal democracy on the Central Asian regimes against the stated charter of the SCO could create conditions of civilian unrest that leads into insurgency and the potential for revolution as already demonstrated in the region. Moreover, the ingredients for mass demonstrations such as those seen in Uzbekistan in 2005 are, arguably, more apparent now due to the effect of the global economic crisis on a vast majority of young, unemployed people.

Whilst articulation of US foreign policy goals accentuate the spread of liberal democracy and insist on human rights there have been enough precedents over the past decade where the US has downgraded its rhetoric when the situation dictates, adopting a policy of 'quiet diplomacy (Quinn-Judge, 2010: 61).' This policy choice has sought to ensure, in particular, Central Asian states continue to support the NDN and major

basing in the war in Afghanistan. An example of this is the *volte face* in the US relationship with Uzbekistan. From a low point following the 2005 condemnation of the Andijan massacre that precipitated the expulsion of US forces endorsed at the SCO Astana Summit, the US is again reliant on the Karimov regime as a key cog in the wheel of the NDN. This is of strategic importance given the current relationship with Pakistan following the unintended consequences of drone strikes in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATAs) that has led to the closure of the southern logistic routes into Afghanistan. However, this paper argues that this US–Uzbekistan *rapprochement* (Blank, 2010b: 4) could give way to longer term negative consequences. Not only does it give a tacit endorsement of the Central Asian state regimes and the consequent insipient level of corruption, it could also incentivize Islamic extremists such as the IMU to reinvigorate operations in their homeland, returning from the tribal areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan citing imperial US presence (Quinn–Judge, 2010: 62).

This weakening of US soft power will likely have long-term effects; US motivations to promote liberal democracy and human rights are already in direct contradiction to turning a blind eye to repression carried out by the regime (Quinn–Judge, 2010: 61). With organizations such as the IMU now pan–Central Asia rather than only consisting of Uzbeks, and the effects of the global economic crisis starting to take a hold, Central Asia remains a fragile grouping of states that requires a deft political touch. The US relationship with Tashkent has been further exacerbated by the skillful political response by Karimov to

Obama stating that there would be ‘realism and pragmatism in foreign policy approaches of the US administration’ by asserting that this meant that the US understood that ‘imposition of values on other countries...is counterproductive (Shaikhutdinov, 2010: 85).’ How the US will extract itself from foreign policy positions such as this remains to be seen. For now, the effect of progress in relations with Central Asia states has rendered at least some resistance to the hitherto Russian domination of the security sphere exercised through the auspices of the CSTO (Shaikhutdinov, 2010: 85).

The growing dominance of China remains a concern amongst the Central Asian states but, whilst acknowledging that the Obama administration has inherited a complex legacy in the region, it is the need for a ‘differentiated approach’ to the states that chimes with the views of western analysts (Shaikhutdinov, 2010: 91), with the potential for US presence to further empower the republics in the face of Chinese influence and Russian hegemony. This prevailing attitude is evident even within those states regarded as ‘failing (Quinn–Judge, 2010: 56).’ Tajikistan has openly acknowledged that it wished to avoid dependence on a single power, much to the chagrin of Moscow, by actively supporting many of the Obama Administration’s policies in the region, including the US troop surge into Afghanistan (Shaikhutdinov, 2010: 87).

However, the US re–focus has already been the subject of several own goals that will encounter resistance from an already skeptical set of states that fear US motivations. The initial re–focus, in addition to failing to differentiate each state by attempting to adopt a regionalist approach (Shaikhutdinov, 2010: 91), further offended both

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan by referring to them as 'failed states' when outlining the five key priorities of US policy in Central Asia (Shaikhutdinov, 2010: 90). If the US is going to succeed in executing its stated policy of building a 'New Silk Road (Clinton, 2011)' it will need to engage first and foremost with the SCO, and for different reasons, the CSTO. If it does not then the first decade assessment of US strategy by Chinese commentators of establishing bases in order to follow a policy of Chinese containment would be endorsed (Mihalka, 2007: 32); this would not create the conditions for constructive negotiations and would more likely increase animosity and confrontation.

Therefore, a difficulty with renewed US foreign policy aspirations towards Central Asia remains. Whether the US have left it too late to affect the increase of Chinese influence and the retention of Russian hegemony remains to be seen. However, what can be argued is that a re-focused US influence on the region, by acknowledging the disparate cultural and political aspects of each state, will affect Sino-Russian relationship that has, to date, sought to exclude the US from the geo-political narrative in the region. Therefore, the effect of the US presence could, by causing a divergence of China and Russia, and the consequent empowerment of the Central Asia states that has already been evidenced by multi-vector policies, could actually create the conditions for attainment of US foreign policy goals of greater independence in the region (Blank, 2010b: 4).

Ultimately, a renewed US foreign policy focus was inevitable and whether politicians argue that

it does not represent a strategic priority to the US, the reality is that Central Asia borders four regions of primary interest to the US (Rywkin, 2011: 223). The debate that Russia hegemony has been checked by Chinese influence through the SCO is beginning to look increasingly fragile (Peyrouse, 2009: 11). A US presence, particularly post-2014, is required to not only provide a balance of power that is necessary for the region, but to provide the potential for stability should the Afghanistan become a failed state with the consequent spill-over of terrorism to the fragile states of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

This is perhaps where the foreign policy goals of the US and China will collide, necessitating cooperation that China, with its fears of separatism in Xinjiang, may be eager to promote. US posturing of a New Silk Road lags behind Chinese actions and the effect on the US of Chinese investment could arguably represent the real driver for engagement. The US will not shy away from the task in hand, with the Obama administration stating that 'the region is at the fulcrum of key US security, economic and political interests (Blank, 2010b: 3).' Such rhetoric has been argued implies an effort to 'control the region to the exclusion of others (MacFarlane, 2004: 450)' but, more realistically, the prevailing attitude should seek to influence through competition and cooperation rather than confrontation as both powers seek to maximize the economic positives from the region (Rywkin, 2011: 227).

The 2016 US presidential election leaves room for significant policy shifts which would influence the region, and as President Trump takes office at the time of writing this paper, strong evidence for

the Trump administration's policy goals is not yet available. However, several caveats may be amended to previous considerations. Firstly, Trump has public stated on multiple occasions that he seeks greater cooperation with Moscow, particularly in fighting ISIS in Syria. While external to the region in question of this paper, early indications of his policy goals suggest strong leadership in coordination with Russia and this would have a direct effect on how conflict is approached bilaterally in Central Asia too. However, such positivity does not extend to Beijing; potentially causing a squeeze and a new round of power-rebalancing. Moreover, the region examined has not been detailed in Trumps foreign policy platform as part of his election campaign and as such may be expected to be of lower priority as an international focus; potentially allowing other states to fill the void. At this time, future realities are highly susceptible to change as policy positions are not yet institutionalized. As such, conclusions made below are premised on the trends that have persisted since 2000. Finally, both opportunities and risks are equally considered to be more likely to manifest as a result of current uncertainty.

2. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the US – Next Steps and Implications

With the US re-focus set against the motivations and challenges that China and Russia face, one of the primary dilemmas is how the SCO should respond? The US remains vehemently against the SCO's stated aims that ultimately seek stability through maintenance of the Central Asian regimes.

This paper posits that engagement is inevitable; there are areas of common concern for the SCO and the west such as transnational terrorism inspired by Islamic extremism emanating from Afghanistan and Pakistan. This coupled with consistently high yields of narcotics for export across seemingly porous borders are key common threats to the Central Asian states. The potential dialogue vacuum is however, two-way and China and Russia as the SCO leaders need to decide how to engage with the US during this critical period. Furthermore, the increased US presence, decreasing Russian hegemony and increasingly Chinese political and economic influence will inevitably drive competition and confrontation as these powers compete for energy resources. This competition can only be good for the Central Asian states as evidenced through bilateral agreements that this paper has examined. These states have already demonstrated a willingness to play one off against the other in support of their own national interests. However, these political and economic multi-vector policies could, if continually managed bi-laterally rather than on a regional basis, dilute the influence of the SCO. Therefore, the challenge for the SCO and China will be how best to corral the disparate cultures and widely differing economic strengths (and weaknesses); a strong SCO that delivers collective economic security could be the mechanism for success.

It is argued that the demise of the SCO, given the mutually incompatible policies of China and Russia in Central Asia, is assured (Rothacher, 2008: 73). However, a US re-focus necessitating maintenance of a broad relationship to ensure that any US presence is limited in scope, despite

rhetoric to the contrary, could enable a renewed Sino-Russian relationship that seeks to resolve the differing agendas between the SCO and the CSTO. A counter argument is that a renewed US presence would catalyze the divergent Sino-Russian strategies that already exist in the SCO. Whether this would result in a reassertion of Russia using the vehicle of the CSTO remains to be seen. China and Russia have it within their gift to promote a consolidated position to rival the US and achieve a balance of power in the region as the geo-political game becomes increasingly trilateral in nature(NCAFP, 2011: 140).

Whilst the inexorable rise of China seems assured and is demonstrated through the SCO and its bilateral arrangements with other Central Asia states, the question is whether Russia, with its reliance on energy as its main source of economic stability and the issues of a reducing demographic, will be a principal player or a supporting act. Furthermore, with Central Asia widely viewed as the 'core area' of the SCO(Shu, 2009: 23), there remain inherent difficulties within the intra-SCO member relationships that will be exacerbated by an increased membership. In particular, recent Russian media announcements(TASS, 2012) regarding an enhanced SCO membership by admitting India and Pakistan will have very different effects on China and Russia which will, in turn, further complicate the already strained relationships between the 4 Central Asia member republics.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion this paper's analysis of the New Great Game geopolitical thesis has revealed that

it is increasingly trilateral in nature due to a renewed US foreign policy towards the Central Asian region(NCAFP, 2011: 136). This re-focus has raised a number of interdependent regional security issues that affect the Sino-Russian relationship and the five Central Asian states.

This paper firstly examined whether the Central Asian states could be characterized as a region, concluding that, despite the innate 'regioness' associated from outside the geopolitical sphere, the widening gulf in economic growth and differing levels of political stability means that each state should be differentiated by the principal powers. However, this paper also concluded that there are a number of factors that bond the states together: the ex-Soviet legacy still in existence through Russia acting as the regional 'security manager(Blank, 2011a)'; the vehicle of the SCO; and the exercising of multi-vector policies that seek to gain economic growth and security from the balance of power shifts between the three principal powers.

This paper then examined the roots, aims, achievements and challenges of the SCO concluding that bilateral agreements between China, Russia and the Central Asian states are currently undermining the notion of the SCO as a truly multilateral organization. However, a further deduction from analysis revealed that the SCO, through Chinese leadership, is required to play a long game, particularly with the divergent motivations of the CSTO and, therefore, Russia regarding regional security. Moreover, the SCO has given a voice to the newly formed Central Asian states, providing a vehicle for economic growth.

This paper examined Chinese and Russian

challenges concluding that the key strategy of provision of domestic security drove a number of interdependencies. For China, the interrelated factors of repression of separatism; import of Han Chinese and investment in Xinjiang Province; diversification of energy resources; the continuance of authoritarian regimes in the Central Asian states; and the threat of transnational terrorism from Afghanistan and Pakistan were deduced as the significant drivers for China to attain regional and domestic stability. However, this paper also concluded that, despite mutually beneficial bilateral agreements that are based on China becoming the dominant economic power in the region, suspicion of motivations remains within the post-Soviet states, requiring a differentiated Chinese approach. For Russia, characterization is made of it as being increasingly a junior partner to China in the region; the increasing multi-vector policies exercised by the Central Asian states are affecting Russian economic power and have exposed Russia's fragile economic model.

This paper then turned to the US foreign policy re-focus on Central Asia concluding that, despite the rhetoric of political democratization, the US would continue to exert 'quiet diplomacy (Quinn-Judge, 2010: 61)' in order to maintain the mission critical basing and transit rights for operations in Afghanistan. Furthermore, it was agreed that the US needs to develop differentiated policies towards the Central Asian states in order to have the desired level of influence; if not then the re-focus on Central Asia will have the opposite effect from that required, driving the states towards national survivability and closer to China and Russia. Analysis of US motivations also

led to the notion that the US and China may find some common ground in economic investment opportunities, although this would likely cause a divergent effect on the Sino-Russian relationship and, therefore, the efficacy of the SCO.

Finally, this paper drew together previous analysis positing that the US re-focus, when set against the SCO and Sino-Russian relationship has the potential to catalyze divergent strategies that will affect the Central Asian states. However, security through stability are key tenets of Sino-Russian cooperation in Central Asia and the common threats of transnational terrorism, separatism, and US influence will cement this strategic partnership for the time being. The notion of the New Great Game regarding balance of power geopolitics remains relevant as security threats in Central Asia emerge as increasingly trilateral in nature(NCAFP, 2011: 136). Strategic compromise through competition will be required to ensure divergent motivations do not end in confrontation.

감사의 글

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미국과 중앙아시아의 현대 지정학적 분쟁

국문초록 구소련의 해체로 인한 20여 년이 넘는 독립 이후 중앙아시아는 ‘새로운 거대 게임’ 이론에 집중하고 있다. 중국과 러시아의 자원분쟁이라는 틀에 갇힌 상황에서 중앙아시아는 점증하는 삼각구도의 틀 속으로 재편되고 있다. 미국 외교정책의 이 지역에 대한 재조명 역시 분쟁의 성격들을 근본적으로 바꾸어 가고 있다. 본 논문은 중앙아시아의 지역적 특성과 9/11 이후 변화하는 미국의 외교정책, 특히 미군 전투병력의 아프가니스탄 철수로부터 야기된 중앙아시아 분쟁의 고립된 분쟁의 특성을 분석하려 한다. 본 논문은 분쟁을 관리하고 해결해 나가는 과정, 그리고 매우 불안정한 상호 간, 다자 간 이해관계들을 관리할 수 있는 방법들을 제시해 볼 것이다. 그러나 본 논문은 근본적으로 중앙아시아 지역의 3강, 즉 미국, 러시아, 중국이 각기 상이한 지역에의 이익들 때문에 상호 간 협력 체제가 부족하고 때로는 더 큰 갈등을 야기할 가능성도 상존함을 분석할 것이다.

주제어 : 지정학, 중앙아시아, 상하이협력기구, 미국, 중국, 러시아

Profiles **Kwang Ho Chun** : He is a professor and the director of Center for Global Affairs, Chonbuk National University. He was previously an associate professor and Course Leader in Asia Pacific Studies, University of Central Lancashire, an assistant professor at the Defence Studies Department King's College London and the Defence Academy of the United Kingdom. He also taught as an assistant professor at Unité de science politique et des relations internationales, Université Catholique de Louvain, Belgium. He completed his B.A. and M.A. at Kyung Hee University, Seoul, Korea before completing his M.A. in European Studies, and Ph.D. in International Relations at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium. His research interests are grand strategy, asymmetric warfare and irregular warfare and published more than 10 books and monographs with more than 70 journal articles(khchun@jbnu.ac.kr).