

Empire in Central Asia

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In the early 1990's the last 19th Century European empire crumbled. The longest lasting, although ironically originally one of the weakest. Just as other powers moved into the vacuum left by the relative weakening of the old West European ones, so too today this is happening with the decline of the Russian Empire.

The weakening of Russian power in what was its southern colonial empire is opening up the way for other imperialisms. Central Asia and the Caucasus, or the Caspian Region as it is also known, is a largely forgotten corner of the world, but with all the ingredients of a new Middle East, it may not be for much longer. Imperialist competition in the region is centred around the exploitation of its considerable resources of oil and gas, principally centred on the different costs and benefits accruing to different factions of the ruling class from various pipeline projects.

Firstly I'm going to look at those, before turning to look at the interests and goals of three different players in the carve up of Central Asia: Iran, the United States and Russia (others include Turkey, the E.U. and China but restrictions of time and space work against a full exploration).

Pipelines

The principal energy resources in the Caspian Region are to be found in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. All three states are essentially landlocked, the Caspian sea being an inland sea with no connection to the oceans. As a result, a major aspect of the international competition over the exploitation of these resources is the struggle over which route to take to the sea and the global market. There are a number of options, each with their own advocates and each reflecting rival agendas.

The Northern Route (via Russia): The Northern route would consist of an upgrading of the existing Kazak and Russian pipeline systems, plus a new one linking Baku in Azerbaijan with the Russian port of Novorossisk on the Black Sea. Obviously this is the option favoured by the Russian rulers, as it maintains their dominance of Central Asia and provides a source of revenue to them.

The Southern Route (via Iran): From a purely practical point of view this is the most sensible option, with the shortest distance as it is able to plug into the Iranian pipeline system and it provides access to the growing South Asian market. Opposed by the United States, both because of that state's hostility to Iran and because it doesn't represent a diversification of energy sources – which is a U.S. goal we will be returning to. Nonetheless this is the only one of the new routes which is actually up and running.

The Eastern Route (via China): The longest and most expensive route but favoured by the Chinese government, and being developed by them, it also allows them to exploit the resources in their western provinces.

The Western Route (via Turkey): This is favoured by Turkey, the United States and Israel. There are three options here; firstly a pipeline to the port of Suspa in Georgia and then through the Bosphorus straits to Europe. The Turkish claim is that the straits will not be able to handle the increased amount of shipping and propose instead a pipeline from Azerbaijan to Ceyhan on Turkey's Mediterranean coast. The high costs of this proposal have promoted an alternative American plan to bypass the Bosphorus straits with a pipeline going through Bulgaria and Greece.

The South Eastern Route (via Afghanistan): This is the reason why in years past Taliban hierarchs popped up in Texas and other unlikely places. It has been argued that this proposal

was a reason behind both Osama Bin Laden's war on the U.S. and the U.S. action in Afghanistan. With the fall of the Taliban this route has again entered the running. Note that it avoids Iran while delivering to the South Asian market, which is much more promising than the European one.

Readers, not even with long memories, will notice the amount of armed conflicts which have been found along these routes in recent years. Russia, China and Turkey have been engaged in suppressing revolt along their favoured routes, as well as of course the American intervention in Afghanistan, and the Afghan civil war prior to that.

The Afghan Pipeline

The Californian based UNOCAL energy corporation began its efforts to establish pipelines transporting oil and gas through Afghanistan in October 1995, the original idea was that of its Argentinean competitor Bridas. Lack of financing, the decline in world oil prices in 1998, the continuing civil strife in Afghanistan and the early phase of the U.S.-Bin Laden conflict, all these came together and blocked the Afghan pipeline project. However, the victory of American arms has changed the situation.

U.S. based business magazine *Forbes* reports that with *"the collapse of the Taliban, oil executives are suddenly talking again about building it."*

"It is absolutely essential that the U.S. make the pipeline the centerpiece of rebuilding Afghanistan," says S. Rob Sobhani, a professor of foreign relations at Georgetown University and the head of Caspian Energy Consulting."

*"The State Department thinks it's a great idea, too. Routing the gas through Iran would be avoided, and Central Asian republics wouldn't have to ship through Russian pipelines"*¹

Furthermore on the 9th of February the *Irish Times* carried an agency story outlining a pipeline co-operation deal between the Pakistani military dictatorship and the new Afghan government:

*"Pakistani President, Gen Pervez Musharraf, and the Afghan interim leader, Mr Hamid Karzai, agreed yesterday that their two countries should develop "mutual brotherly relations" and co-operate "in all spheres of activity" — including a proposed gas pipeline from Central Asia to Pakistan via Afghanistan."*²

God told me to do it — The Iranian Challenge

"Iran's interests are briefly to getting the Caspian and Central Asian oil to the Gulf and establish close political and economic ties with the region. First, Iran has a desperate need for foreign exchange and would benefit from oil and gas transit fees.

Second, with oil and gas transit, Iran would be in a better position to develop trade with the region. Central Asia could eventually become an important market for Iranian

¹ www.forbes.com

² 'Irish Times' 09/02/02

manufactured goods. In turn the combination of oil and gas transit and trade could establish Iran as regional power in Central Asia.

Third, with oil transiting from Central Asia to Iranian Gulf ports, Iran would strengthen its position in the Gulf, essentially in relation to Saudi-Arabia, potentially also in relation to Iraq. Emerging as a Central Asian power would also reinforce Iran's position in relation to the Gulf neighbours.”³

American opposition to the Iranian route is based on a number of factors. Principally and most importantly; the Iranian revolution of 1979 was a challenge and remains such from the point of view that it is the so-called ‘Threat of a Good Example’. What this means is essentially it is an ever present reminder that it is possible to break out of neo-colonial domination, or at least try to, such states must be isolated, obstructed, and attacked whenever possible.⁴

This is in the long term collective interests of the American ruling class for the simple reason that if it tolerated Iran, given the popular alienation from the ruling authorities in the Middle East, and given the region's long history of nationalist and quasi-nationalist revolt, it would only be an encouragement for others to follow the Iranian example. Such a course would, in the long run, be possibly fatal for the profits of the American banks and arms companies who do so much business with the Arab elite. Nationalist regimes would be more concerned with developing a native industrial base.

Also, in the particular case of the Middle East, loss of American influence would also mean a loss of some American influence over Japan and Europe (the places which actually are dependant on Middle Eastern oil – unlike the U.S.). Thus in the last twenty odd years Iran has been both directly attacked by the United States and as well as by Iraq with U.S. support.

The problem is that it is in the short term, individual interests of U.S. companies (not to mention French ones, Japanese etc..) to trade with Iran and indeed use the opportunity offered by the Iranian route to export Central Asian energy resources to South Asia. Furthermore it is in the interests of the governments of the Central Asian republics to do so. The Iranian option simply makes the best economic sense, all the more so because it already exists. Unless an alternative is developed, market forces will compel companies to develop the resources of Central Asia via Iran. Thus it is imperative for the U.S. Government to facilitate an alternative pipeline to the Indian and Pakistani markets.

Fortunately for them they have just radically altered the political landscape of Afghanistan. For the civil war in Afghanistan was a major barrier to constructing the only possible pipeline which could deliver straight to the South Asian market while avoiding Iran.

However as we have seen, the potential for proxy war very much remains in Afghanistan, as does the potential for limited insurgency by Taliban remnants. The potential for the former is underscored by the opportunity presented to the rulers of Iran by the oil and gas of the Caspian

³ ‘Oil in the Caspian Region and Central Asia – the Political Risk of the Great Game Continued’ By Øystein Noreng www.caucasus.dk

⁴ This phrase ‘Threat of a Good Example’ was coined in the 80s to describe the Sandinista Government in Nicaragua. I do not use it as a gesture of “anti-imperialist” support to the murderous (and Imperialist) regime in Iran, but rather in recognition that it's existence as a state born from the downfall of a American backed government is an example to people who would like to do the same to other American clients in the region and expel Western influence altogether. I think this is the case irrespective of sectarian disputes within Islam and that it shapes the American Imperialist attitude to Iran.

region. Not to mention the threat presented to them by what would amount to, if reported American plans for Iraq go ahead and are successful, an American encirclement, with a client regime to the east in Afghanistan and to the west in Iraq.

So we have seen Iran exploiting the power vacuum in post-Taliban Afghanistan and possible American missile strikes on Iran's Afghan proxies. Expect in the very least to hear much more ranting like "The Axis of Evil" and "The Great Satan".

The Democracy of the Oil Barons — the American Expansion.

*"when the Afghan conflict is over we will not leave Central Asia. We have long term plans and interests in this region."*⁵

— U.S. Assistant Secretary of State, Elizabeth Jones.

The central objectives of American Imperialism in this region include:

1. Containment of Iran.
2. Detaching Central Asia and the Caucasus from Russian domination.
3. Opening up the area as a major supplier of oil and gas, — in order to diversify global energy production and thereby reduce the power of oil states.
4. To realise the commercial opportunities offered to American corporations.

The document "*U.S. Military Engagement with Transcaucasia and Central Asia*" outlines these goals and was published by the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College. Some extracts from it serve to illustrate the U.S. interests and activities in the area:

"The 1998 National Security Strategy states why this region is important to the United States. It has estimated reserves of 160 billion barrels of oil, comparably large natural gas reserves, and will play an increasingly important role in satisfying the world's future energy demands."

"U.S. officials publicly maintain that this region's energy sources could be a back up to the unstable Persian Gulf and allow us and our allies to reduce our dependence on its energy supplies. In pursuit of this goal we have worked to establish governments with open markets, i.e., openness to U.S. firms (and not only those associated with energy) and democracy.

We have also moved to check any possibility of their one-sided military dependence upon Russia. The determination to prevent either Moscow or Tehran from dominating the area, either in energy, or through penetration and control of their defence structures goes back at least to 1994."

A few pages later and the rhetoric of promoting democracy is admitted to be rhetoric:

⁵ Quoted in The Guardian 12/02/02

“In practise, energy and security have dominated the agenda as the means to achieve this broader Westernisation to the point that evidently little pressure is being directed towards democratisation of local governments.”

In fact foreign imperialism, be it Russian or American, is marching hand in hand with local despotism, as is always the case. The document then turns to the military aspects of these policies:

“the oil producing states are now members of the Pfp [Partnership for “Peace” — N.A.T.O. front organisation — FE], and Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Georgia overtly seek NATO’s direct participation in the area, the U.S. or Western contest with Russia and Iran has assumed a more openly military aspect.”

“This stimulates an equal and opposing reaction. Armenian officials proclaim the vital importance of joint exercises with Russia to defend Armenia’s security and talk of an ‘axis’ with Russia and Iran. Consequently and due to the spiralling strategic stakes in the Transcaspian, NATO’s collective engagement, as well as the specifically U.S. engagement, with the region is likely to grow.”

“In September 1995, U.S. experts on Central Asia met at NATO headquarters and cited the extensive U.S. interests in Caspian energy deposits as a reason why Washington might have to extend its Persian Gulf security guarantees to this region.”⁶

U.S. involvement has only taken off since then. While U.S. officials intone visions of a win-win situation for everyone, where everyone has shared interests in developing these energy markets, they have really aimed to deny and break Russia’s monopoly over the energy producing states.”

“Russia could sabotage many if not all of the forthcoming energy projects by relatively simple and tested means and there is not much we could do absent a strong and lasting regional commitment. Therefore, for a win-win situation to come about, some external factor must be permanently engaged and willing to commit even military forces, if need be, to ensure stability and peace.

This does not necessarily mean a unilateral commitment, but more likely a multilateral one, e.g., under the U.N.’s auspices but actually under U.S. leadership. Without such a permanent presence, and it is highly unlikely that the United States can afford or will choose to make such a presence felt, other than through economic investment, Russia will be able to exclude all other rivals and regain hegemony over the area.”⁷

Well that was published in June 2000, a year and a half later and the United States does have military bases in Central Asia, and has just moved into Georgia in the Caucasus — also on a potential pipeline route (The Western, via Turkey one). September 11th has spectacularly increased the potency of the American military by effectively defusing the American public’s long standing opposition to foreign military adventures.

⁶ “Persian Gulf security guarantees” would presumably, given the situation in the Persian Gulf, involve a great deal of American military intervention and a permanent military presence plus an attempt to exclude/contain all other powers.

⁷ ‘U.S. Military Engagement with Transcaucasia and Central Asia’ carlisle-www.army.mil

Yes the last two decades has seen lots of those, but always in forms calculated to minimise a public opinion backlash at home. Some examples, covert action (Nicaragua), military support to proxies (El Salvador, Columbia), overwhelming force in ideal territory (Iraq), air war (Serbia) or simply actions against opponents without the slightest chance of putting up effective resistance (Granada). We should not doubt that American militarism has moved up a gear or two.

A House Divided

These areas were incorporated into the Russian Empire in the 19th Century, with the intent of protecting trade routes and using them as a bargaining chip with the British Empire. Under both Tsarism and Bolshevism a classically colonial pattern of development was put into place. While Azerbaijan was an oil producer⁸ the Central Asian republics were generally under a mono-culture/cash crop system of cotton production, and in both cases had unequal trade relations with the metropolis. The exception is the northern part of Kazakhstan, adjoining Russia, which was industrialised, with a workforce largely of Slavic origins.

This colonial dependence persisted following the break up of the “Soviet” Union, while Kazakhstan’s trade with Russia accounts for 42.5% of the G.D.P. of that country – trade with Kazakhstan is a mere 1.7% of that of Russia. Kazakhstan is actually dependant on Russia for it’s energy supplies, as all the infrastructure was developed in the “Soviet” period running north-south, rather than west-east from Kazakhstan’s oil fields to it’s urban centres.⁹

The fact that exports must go through Russia provides a further stranglehold. As with economy so with security and a number of these states – Armenia and Tajikistan in particular, have been forced to lean on Russia for military support, for the lack of an alternative power.

However Kremlin influence is not what it once was, due to the Russian economic situation, and because of, the, generally speaking, post-independence eagerness for real independence on the part of local elites. There is insufficient capital in Russia for investments in and loans to the new States on a level with that of outside interests. Thus there are now American, Chinese, Turkish, South Korean, European, Iranian interests in the region. The arrival of multinational corporations is actually to the Russian benefit as these provide the investments necessary to develop the exploitation of resources, which can then provide revenues to the Russian “elite” due to their control of the export routes. Plus that control can be used as leverage for Russian companies to muscle their way into the energy consortiums developing the region.

Since the U.S. turned against the Taliban there has been a community of interest between the two powers in regard to the destruction of the Taliban. The Russian establishment has long feared the ‘Talibanisation’ of Central Asia as it’s border with Kazakhstan is porous, there are considerable ethnic Russian populations in these states, as well as Muslim minorities in Russia itself.

Nevertheless Putin’s U.S. friendly policy is not without it’s detractors in Moscow. On February 21st a group of former military chieftains, including a former defence minister, launched a literary attack on the Russian president, claiming that:

“With your blessing, the United States has received military bases in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyz Stan, and, maybe, Kazakhstan.

⁸ Abridged History of Central Asia by William M. Brinton www.asian-history.com

⁹ Quoted in ‘The Guardian’ 22/02/02

“In the long run, these bases are for dealing a strike against Russia, not Bin Laden ... We would not be surprised if tomorrow they call you the best American, European or NATO official.”¹⁰

Since the break up of the “Soviet” Union there have been a number of Russian military interventions in the region. The Russian army has popped up in Georgia and Armenia and still has a presence in Tajikistan, but have been removed from Turkmenistan and Kyrgyz Stan. Furthermore in the early 1990’s Russia backed Armenia in it’s dispute with Turkish backed Azerbaijan. Not to forget the long running conflict in Chechnya (it self on the Russian favoured pipeline route from Azerbaijan).

The American military presence is something of a new development. The interests of the Russian ‘elite’ in the area are in maintaining it’s influence over economic development, so it can have it’s cut. Along with this, in the future Russian energy needs are likely to expand and so the Caspian region, as it stands now, could provide a cheap source.

They have formed a body for maintaining co-operative relations with China, which like the U.S. is a new player in the region, called the Shanghai Co-Operation Council and have forged a relationship with Iran, particularly in regard to disputes over territorial rights in the Caspian sea, the Armenian-Azerbaijan conflict, and in supporting the Northern Alliance against the Taliban. This has lead “Some observers to warn” of a “growing similarity of interests among Russia, Iran and China in countering the West and attempting to increase their own influence”.¹¹

Those are the words of a briefing paper produced by American civil servants for Congressmen. However the Russian establishment is divided. According to New Delhi based research group the Institute for Defence Study and Analysis:

“It is believed that a difference of opinion exists in present day Russia regarding its future course in response to the US geo-political challenge. The “imperialists” and the “traditionalists” would like Russia to dig in its heels in defence of its historical positions in the region.

The “pragmatists” or the “realists”, who include Russia’s major oil and gas companies, would like to adjust to the changing geo-political realities in return for a share in the region’s lucrative oil and gas deals. It appears that the country’s policy-making establishment, in the pursuit of perceived national interests, is constantly synthesising the differing views among the Russian political class and strategic community.

Despite its current weakness, Russia still has the requisite force projection capability in the region. Moreover, the proposed pipeline by-passing Russia is likely to pass through conflict-ridden areas in the former Soviet republics where Russia has established itself in the role of a peace-keeper.

There are also reports that Russia has of late stepped up support to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) which is behind the Kurdish insurgency in eastern Turkey from where the proposed Baku-Ceyhan pipeline would pass. Russian geo-politicians feels that as a consequence of its victory in the Cold War, the USA has driven to the minimum Russian influence in the Baltic and Black Seas.

¹⁰ ‘CRS Issue Brief for Congress: Central Asia’s New States and Implications for U.S. Interests’ cnie.org

¹¹ ‘Russian Policy Towards Central Asia, part 2’ www.idsa-india.org

It has forced Russia out of the zone of the warm sea the Indian Ocean with the loss of Central Asia and Transcaucasus. Making use of the CARs [Central Asian Republics] desire to assert their independence from Moscow, it is seeking to irrevocably change the geo-political equations in the region. It seems to them that Russia can protect its vital interests in Central Asia in partnership with Iran and China against Western machinations and designs.”¹²

Conclusion

Just as within Afghanistan rival warlords compete for control over road tolls, smuggling, and heroin production, so to on a world level is the same process at work, on a larger scale. State power is the representative of economic power, and rival states carve up resources and markets in perpetual competition, in doing so representing the long term collective interests of their national ruling class (rather than short term interests of individual corporations).

While the buying of influence and individuals moving from political office to the corporate boardroom (and back again) may show us aspects of this process at work it is not its source. Rather the source is the division of society into classes, with a ruling class based on control over production. The state is the mechanism by which the ruling class advances its interests both at home and overseas. At home against its subjects, overseas against rival rulers.

It has been amply shown how imperialist competition fuelled the Northern Alliance-Taliban war, and this is true of the earlier Afghan conflicts also¹³. The Afghanistan situation then is not one of a “failed state” but one of successful states (Russia, Iran, Pakistan, the United States) and rather being an aberration is the by-product of the competition between hierarchies intrinsic to the world capitalist system.

¹² See the Human Rights Watch report ‘Afghanistan The Crisis of Impunity’ for the Northern Alliance-Taliban war – www.hrw.org or ‘Silent Soldier: The Man behind the Afghan Jihad’ for the Pakistani involvement in the ‘Soviet’-Islamist conflict of the 1980’s – www.afghanbooks.com

¹³ Missing footnote.

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