On the Other Side: The View From Continental Asia

By Dmitri Trenin

Most of the recent discussion and debate about the security architecture of East Asia has focused on the coastal areas of Asia. In short, the Asia-Pacific region has been defined as Pacific Asia.

Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, argues that Continental Asia, which has for centuries been a contested region, deserves greater attention because of its potential for both conflict and co-operation.

Most contemporary discussions of Asian security focus on the Western Pacific Rim. Interests of the key players — China, Japan, South Korea, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and, above all, the United States — are concentrated where the waters of the Pacific hit the coast of East Asia. Prolong that line to the west, and add India and Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Do not forget to look south and include Australia, New Zealand and Oceania. This more or less completes the overview of strategic Asia, which turns out to be almost synonymous with Coastal Asia.

There is no doubt that Asia’s coastal territories are exceedingly important: economically, financially, politically and militarily. Indeed, the very term Asia-Pacific means, in practice, Pacific Asia. This may be the heart of the matter, but not the whole story. In this article I want to complement the view from the ocean with the one from the continent. As I sit in Moscow and look east, I see a lot of the Asian landmass before I can see the shoreline. And for me the shoreline is where Asia, except for its great islands, stops.

For most of the past two centuries, Continental Asia was at least as important strategically as Coastal Asia. (Before that, from the times of Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, Tamerlane or the Great Moguls, it was more important.) The Russian and British empires spent the entire 19th century competing for primacy from the Caspian to the Hindu Kush. Turkestan, Tibet, Tuva, Afghanistan, Mongolia and Nepal, what used to be referred to as Inner Asia, were hard-fought prizes in the so-called Great Game played out for influence and control of the region by St. Petersburg and London. In the 20th century, to name but a few examples, Manchuria and Mongolia were a battleground between the

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1 For the purposes of this article, the term “Asia” does not include the Middle East; i.e. Pakistan and Central Asia are “in,” but Iran, the Arab States and Israel are not. The discussion of “Continental Asia” will focus on relations among China, India, Pakistan and Russia; the security situation within these countries; and developments in Central Asia, Mongolia, and the Himalayan states.
Russians and the Japanese; Kashmir became a tug-of-war between India and Pakistan, while the glaciers of the Himalaya saw border clashes between China and India. Intermittent fighting along the Soviet-Chinese border once threatened a large-scale war between two nuclear powers. Toward the end of the century, Afghanistan, once a neutral buffer between Russia and Britain, then a sleepy mountainous kingdom, and later a permanent war zone, became a sanctuary for Al Qaeda. The Continent, in short, matters.

**BIG-POWER (RELATIVE) STABILITY**

At the start of the 21st century, traditional big-power relations in Continental Asia are more peaceful and stable than they were 50 or 100 years ago. China’s steady rise has been accompanied by improved relations with its neighbors. The Sino-Japanese situation, for all its suspicions and sensitivities, is one of growing interdependency and integration. China’s relations with India are becoming closer, and far less acrimonious than they used to be. The Moscow-Beijing connection has been flourishing ever since the end of the 30-year Cold War between them in the second half of the last century. True, China has been expanding its influence on the Asian continent, gently but firmly displacing other powers. India’s influence has declined in Nepal, Sri Lanka and Burma, just as Russia’s sway in Central Asia and Mongolia has faded somewhat. But this has not yet produced the kind of friction likely to lead to confrontation. China has shown a fair amount of flexibility and willingness to compromise on a wide range of issues. Essentially, Beijing takes a hard-line stand only on issues pertaining to territories that it regards as a part of China: Tibet, Xinjiang or Taiwan. All the rest is essentially negotiable.

India’s rise has been marked by its acquisition of nuclear weapons, a controversial but predictable move. Its navy has been looking at the Indian Ocean as its natural zone of operations and eventual dominance. Delhi, too, has been working to expand its influence, in particular in Afghanistan and Central Asia, but also competing with Beijing in Nepal, Bhutan and Burma. India’s relations with China have grown warmer in comparison to the 1960s to 1990s, as both countries are now focused on economic development, but underlying tensions remain. India’s nuclearization, after all, is really a move toward strategic parity with China rather than a product of the stand-off with Pakistan. Yet, it is Indo-Pakistani relations that pose one of the main dangers to security in Asia. The Kashmir situation has produced Islamist militants supported by Pakistan. In recent years, these militants have engaged in terrorist attacks against high-profile Indian targets, from the parliament in Delhi to luxury hotels in Mumbai. A new attack might well lead to an Indian retaliation against Pakistan, and thus pave the way to a new war, the first since both India and Pakistan have deployed nuclear weapons.

Japan, Asia’s first modern military power, has been absent from Continental Asia since the end of World War II. Starting with Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto in the late 1990s, its leaders have been attempting to craft a “Eurasian strategy” of more active diplomatic engagement, but this has yet to produce lasting results. Japan has been growing increasingly concerned over the rise of the Chinese navy, even as Tokyo tries to redefine and rebalance its relations with Washington. Logically, Japan needs to strengthen its strategic US connection, and to establish closer ties with India. It may also explore ways to normalize relations with Russia. It is time Japan looked again at the Continent and engaged politically with the key players there.

Russia, which is virtually absent from Coastal Asia, still plays an important role in Asia’s interior. Over the past two decades, it has built a good-neighbor relationship and even partnership with China that allowed fixing, for the first time, the entire 4,500-kilometer Sino-Russian boundary. Moscow has close, if under-fulfilled, relations with New Delhi. Despite the continuing lack of a territorial settlement over the disputed Kuril Islands, Russia’s trade with Japan has been on the increase. Moreover, the Kremlin has been able to consolidate a measure of influence in Central Asia, and has lately rediscovered Mongolia.

Following the demise of the Soviet Union, however, the US became the dominant power in
Eurasia. Following the 9/11 attacks, the US inserted itself deep into the heart of the Asian continent. The outcome of the US/NATO mission in Afghanistan, still unclear at the time of writing, is likely to have important consequences for the future of US power in Asia, and for the future role of NATO. Likewise, it will have a major impact on the Muslim world. The stakes are extremely high for all those concerned.

**INTERNAL POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS**

Afghanistan underlines a seminal trend. With the end of the Cold War, internal developments in Asia’s small and medium-sized countries have become the main challenge to security in the region. Pakistan, of course, with its 140 million people and nuclear weapons, is only a middling power in comparison to its giant neighbors, India and China. Since its foundation in 1948, Pakistan has been notoriously unstable politically. To many outsiders, a political meltdown in the home of the “Islamic bomb” is the ultimate threat to security in Asia and beyond, more serious for the time being than Iran’s evolving nuclear program. However, Pakistan’s radical Islamists, though vocal, are not likely to come to power through the ballot box, and the Pakistani military, though notoriously implicated with the Taliban through their semi-independent intelligence services, are secular nationalists. Conventional wisdom contends that the US and China are the only two powers capable of influencing Pakistan politically and, in extremis, the only ones capable of averting a nuclear catastrophe. It makes more sense to argue that Pakistan’s future lies in the hands of its own political and military elites. Should they fail, Washington and Beijing will not be able to do much.

After gaining their independence from the Soviet Union, the Central Asian countries were compared to the Balkans. A cauldron of combustible tensions, it was feared, would implode and affect other parts of the ex-Soviet Union, starting with Russia’s own Muslim republics on the middle reaches of the Volga, and also into western China. Yet, almost two decades on, all five states in the region have survived. None has been taken
over by Islamist radicals, and none has gone to war against another. The land-locked region has experienced a civil war, a revolution, a sudden death of the founding father of a nation and all sorts of tensions, but so far peace has largely prevailed. It may continue or not, depending on domestic developments in the individual countries.

Of those, Uzbekistan, the region’s most populous, is pivotal. If Uzbekistan manages in the short-to-medium term to organize succession to its still reigning first head of state, President Islam Karimov, and keep tensions in the Ferghana valley below boiling point, chances for peace in Central Asia will be massively bolstered. If this is not the case, not only will Uzbekistan experience disorder and create openings for radicals, but its neighbors will suffer from the spillover effect: the Ferghana valley is shared by two other countries, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Kyrgyzstan’s increasingly authoritarian regime is still weak, and Tajikistan, which looks stronger, has to deal with a legacy of a bitter civil war. Both are torn between their own northern and southern regions, and both have difficult relations with the Uzbeks. Weakness and insecurity breed problems.

Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan appear more solid, albeit for different reasons. The former is the region’s most advanced energy-based economy, boasts a nascent middle class, and is a paragon of Turkic-Slav coexistence in a single state. It is ruled by an enlightened autocrat, President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who has been in office since the end of the Soviet era. Kazakhstan’s big test will come sometime during this decade when Nazarbayev retires. The latter is a gas-rich country ruled by the region’s harshest regime. It survived the death of President for Life Saparmurat Niyazov in 2006, but still has few political institutions other than the presidency. If Turkmenistan or Kazakhstan are rocked by an upheaval, the entire Central Asian region would be shattered, just as in the case of an implosion in Uzbekistan.

Mongolia is a different, and happier example. It has managed both to move from a communist to a pluralist democratic system of government with parties alternating in office, and to find a new balance in its relations with its only two
neighbors, China and Russia. For even better balance, Mongolian foreign policy reached out to the US and Japan. For the first time in modern history, Mongolia has become a truly independent international player. Nepal has seen an upheaval recently, which terminated its monarchy and brought Maoists to power. Internal developments in that country are less consequential than the competition for influence between Beijing and Delhi.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT ISSUES
Another source of trouble lies in the bigger countries’ regional policies. Beijing’s attempts at integrating Tibet and Xinjiang with the rest of China have met with resistance that was spontaneous and weak, yet real. The Chinese leadership has evidently drawn lessons from both cases, and can be expected to pursue better-informed and more effective policies. At some point, Beijing may decide that national-territorial autonomy is a particularly dangerous borrowing from the Soviet model, and suppress it altogether — which may have an unsettling effect.

Russia’s current problem, however, is not that, say, Tuva, which used to be an independent state between the two world wars, or Buryatia, which is both ethnically and culturally close to neighboring Mongolia, want out of the federation. Rather, Russia’s problem stems from Moscow’s failure to develop the vast territories in Siberia and along the Pacific coast. An under-developed, de-industrialized and under-populated region endowed with rich natural resources invites trouble.

Some Russians are worried that even though the Sino-Russian border treaty of 2001 and the 2004 demarcation agreement seemingly closed the territorial issue, China’s historical claims to 1.5 million square kilometers across the Amur and Ussuri rivers may not have been finally put to rest. They fear that when China succeeds in recovering Taiwan, then Beijing, in its quest to consolidate lost territories, will look north.

MULTILATERAL MECHANISMS
Over the past decade and a half, Continental Asia has witnessed the emergence of several multilateral mechanisms. The most important of them is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which grew out of the border talks between China and its four former Soviet neighbors: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan. The SCO is, above all, an arrangement between Beijing and Moscow over the terms of China’s presence in Central Asia. By showing outward deference to Moscow and going steady rather than pushing fast, Beijing has won Moscow’s acquiescence with its enhanced role in the post-Soviet territory. The SCO, however, has been a win-win for all. Russia, for its part, besides gaining China’s “respect,” has received an instrument for monitoring, though not controlling, China’s moves in its former backyard. The Central Asians have benefited from
dealing with both great powers simultaneously, rather than having to face them one-on-one.

Besides managing covert Sino-Russian rivalry, and reassuring the Central Asians, the SCO has evolved into a continent-wide platform for political consultations and exchanges. In addition to its membership of six (the original five: China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, plus Uzbekistan), it has attracted India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and Mongolia as observers and regular participants. The SCO has also provided a useful chapeau for military exercises, ostensibly for combating terrorists, with the People’s Liberation Army and Russian forces participating. These exercises are meant to send a message to the US, whose military presence in Central Asia Moscow and Beijing regard as an unwelcome intrusion into their spheres of strategic interest.

Russia, of course, is still jealous of its positions in Central Asia. In parallel to the SCO, it has been building a security alliance and an economic community, both of which include the same Central Asian states, but exclude China. The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) has been focusing on preventing and repelling attacks by radicals and extremists. It has decided to create a rapid reaction force for that purpose. A small Russian army and air force presence already exists in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Yet, it is not clear what kind of joint force it will be, and under what circumstances it might be used.

Whereas the SCO was created at Beijing’s initiative, Moscow is proud to have initiated regular trilateral exchanges among Russia, India and China (RIC). There is no question that forming a habit of consultations among three such vociferously pro-sovereignty states is a good thing in itself. A trilateral format is also a step forward in comparison to traditional bilateral diplomacy. Yet, there is no doubt that collaboration among RIC powers, especially between India and China, is a challenging task. Moscow, which currently enjoys better relations with Beijing and Delhi than these two do between themselves, could act as a moderator, but only occasionally and to a certain extent.

OUTLOOK
It may well be that the more important strategic developments in Asia will continue to happen in the coastal states. The Korean Peninsula and Taiwan, the many “islands of discord” from Senkaku to the Spratleys, the challenge of the Chinese navy and the US naval response, the stability and security of Indonesia and the Philippines and the sea lanes from the Middle East to East Asia are all among the principal security issues of the early 21st century. Yet, the developments along Asia’s Pacific coast are not all that belongs to strategic Asia. Processes in the continent’s interior will have a major contributing factor or, in some cases, can actually initiate major changes. For the near term, it is what will happen in Afghanistan, Pakistan and neighboring Iran that will shape Asia’s strategic environment. For the longer term, the important match is between China and India, as they testily rub shoulders along the Himalaya.

Dmitri Trenin is Director of the Carnegie Moscow Center. He retired from the Russian Army in 1993, and from then until 1997, he served as a Senior Research Fellow at the NATO Defense College in Rome and a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Europe in Moscow.