From Observer to Stabilizer: China’s New Role in Central Asia

By Georgiy Voloshin

In the context of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan by the end of 2014, the security situation in Central Asia is on the verge of rapid deterioration as the Taliban and other radical forces operating on the Afghan-Pakistani border retake ground.

While Russia remains embroiled in its many controversies with the West — the situation in Syria, the missile defense shield in Eastern Europe or the future of Russian democracy itself — China seems to be the only regional power capable of bringing the ever more unstable pattern of Central Asian security under control, argues Kazakhstani analyst, researcher and consultant, Georgiy Voloshin.

IN A SPEECH TO THE NATION on June 22, 2011, US President Barack Obama outlined his administration’s plan to withdraw troops from Afghanistan, a country where an international coalition comprising mainly the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and their allies from the Northern Alliance launched a military operation against the Taliban back in October 2001. Building on America’s success in considerably weakening Al-Qaeda, especially after the assassination of Osama bin Laden more than a month earlier on May 2, Obama announced the forthcoming departure of 10,000 combat troops planned for the end of 2011, as well as additional drawdowns amounting to almost 33,000 US soldiers by the summer of 2012. These measures combined, as Obama explained in his televised address, would fully compensate for the 30,000-troop surge announced at the US Military Academy at West Point in December 2009. Moreover, he promised that “[U]S troops will continue coming home at a steady pace as Afghan security forces move into the lead.” Thus, in Obama’s words, “[by] 2014, this process of transition will be complete, and the Afghan people will be responsible for their own security.”

The NATO Chicago Summit held in May 2012 endorsed an exit strategy in which the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) would hand over command of all combat missions to Afghan security forces by the middle of 2013, with ISAF assuming training and advisory functions instead. In the context of severe economic problems in the Eurozone and continuing turmoil on US domestic markets, the decision to leave Afghan-istan had already been extensively discussed in most of the capitals concerned, while some countries had unilaterally divulged their national withdrawal strategies. Belgium, Spain, Norway and Australia previously made public their plans to reduce the number of combat troops in Afghanistan. However, the biggest surprise came from France, whose new president François Hollande eagerly promised to accelerate the return of French soldiers, following the death of four of his compatriots in a suicide bomb attack.

At a time when ISAF members are seriously mulling various possibilities of transit across Central Asia, including via Pakistan’s recently reopened supply route or the Northern Distribution Network, the situation on the ground remains difficult. Growing instability in Pakistan, rising tensions in the Middle East, civil war in Syria as well as chronic security problems in post-Soviet Central Asia are all factors contributing to worrisome predictions regarding the region’s future.

THE RISKS OF FURTHER DESTABILIZATION

Throughout modern history, Central Asia has been a particularly unstable region, while Afghanistan gradually came to be known as the “graveyard of empires” (a phrase commonly attributed to Mahmud Tarzi, one of Afghanistan’s greatest intellectuals and the father of modern Afghan poetry and journalism). The situation in post-Soviet republics, which gained independence after the USSR’s collapse in 1991, was already alarming in the 1990s, when Tajikistan’s central government waged a war on Islamist rebels, Uzbekistan cracked down on extremist groups operating in its southern regions and Kyrgyzstan suffered from acute inter-ethnic tensions. The proximity of Afghanistan and Pakistan also remains a source of concern, because both countries seem to have provided safe havens for multiple radical groups preaching the most extreme forms of social strife. Additionally, Iran’s presence is regarded by many as a potential source of instability, given this country’s long-time attachment to Islamic fundamentalism.

Since October 2011, Pakistan has become a major subject of concern for Western powers. At that time, the US Joint Chiefs of Staff received a secret memo purportedly drafted by Pakistan’s ambassador to Washington at the behest of the country’s president, Asif Ali Zardari. In this brief note, unidentified Pakistani sources close to the civilian government asked for Washington’s urgent support to prevent a military coup, after relations between Pakistan’s civilian leaders and army generals became particularly tense following the killing of Osama bin Laden. Clashes between Zardari and his associates, on one hand, and the judiciary, on the other, were also revealed to the public when the Supreme Court overturned President Zardari’s amnesty in its 2009 ruling, doing so in order to press corruption charges against him. Pakistan’s military and intelligence circles have long been suspected of aiding and abetting Taliban and Al-Qaeda-linked groups, despite the existence of a special anti-terrorism co-operation scheme between Washington and Islamabad. This is especially alarming given the fact that Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) are virtually free from any control by the central government. As a result, previous decisions by ISAF forces about successive troop reinforcements were mostly ineffective, because radicals could easily find refuge in the poorly controlled borderlands. The possibility of a coup d’état against civilian authorities, already weakened by incessant disputes with the hard-power-wielding security forces, is all the more dangerous because of Pakistan’s possession of nuclear weapons. Given the continued weakness of the central governments in both Afghanistan and Pakistan and the ongoing strengthening of radical movements such as the
Plagued by economic problems and unfavorable demographic trends, Russia is no longer in a position to bear the historic burden of responsibility for Central Asia’s stability and security.

Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, now widely scattered across the Tribal Areas, this situation could prove detrimental to Central Asia’s overall stability. Secondly, the crisis in Syria, which has already transformed into a fully-fledged civil war, raises the dreadful possibility of a military conflict with Iran, which has been one of Syrian President Bachar al-Assad’s most active supporters. Iranian-Israeli animosity is well known, but the escalation of tensions over Syria as well as deadlocked negotiations concerning Iran’s nuclear program have heavily impacted by a massive inflow of refugees, while turmoil in the western parts of Iran, densely populated by ethnic Azeris, could lead to renewed tensions in the Caucasus. Moreover, it should not be excluded that radical groups operating in Central Asia would try to benefit from regional instability to further strengthen their local rule. Finally, the situation in Central Asian republics, once part of the Soviet Union, continues to be very fragile. After the April 2010 revolution in Kyrgyzstan, followed by bloody clashes between Tibetan separatists and the Chinese government, Central Asia’s stability and security pose most vitally interested in the stability of their territories and to eradicate extremist movements sapping their political futures. Therefore, it is not surprising that it was China who first proposed to sign and ratify the Shanghai Convention on combating terrorism, extremism and separatism within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Given this situation, China will increasingly become the region’s only safeguard against radical ideologies, whether it wants to step into Russia’s shoes or not.

Back in the 1990s, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were Central Asia’s most dangerous places, with deadly attacks against police forces and innocent civilians occasionally occurring in spite of ever-tougher controls by the security apparatus. While Uzbekistan continued to be ruled by Islam Karimov, a local strongman with dictatorial habits, Tajikistan was engulfed by a cruel civil war lasting more than five years (1992-1997). The triumph of pro-government forces led by President Emomali Rahmon (previously Rahmonov) seemed to signal the country’s final return to relative stability. However, recent events in Tajikistan’s poorest region, the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province, have all the ingredients to undermine such hopes. In July 2012, the Tajik President ordered a special operation aimed against local rebel leaders. Despite its rapid success, the death toll included more than 20 civilians killed in air strikes, while external experts, including the Russian General Vladimir Chirkin, believe that the country may still split into two opposed halves.

THE CASE FOR CHINESE LEADERSHIP IN CENTRAL ASIA
China and Russia remain the two regional powers most vitally interested in the stability of their Central Asian neighbors. Both countries have previously experienced problems with homegrown terrorism and separatism, in the North Caucasus region, which is now home to almost 22 million people (for the purpose of comparison, post-Soviet Central Asia’s most populous country, Uzbekistan, has a population of 30 million), very much depends on the ability of neighboring governments to ensure safety and stability in their territories and to eradicate extremist movements sapping their political futures. Therefore, it is not surprising that it was China who first proposed to sign and ratify the Shanghai Convention on combating terrorism, extremism and separatism within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

operation Organization, a regional bloc formed by Moscow and Beijing in 2001. China has been actively supporting various economic programs designed to help its neighbors in Central Asia to resolve pressing social issues, which are widely believed to be at the heart of extremism. While Russia has also attempted to prevent the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in its North Caucasus region (Chechnya, Dagestan, North Ossetia, Ingushetia), China’s proximity to Central Asia makes preventive measures especially crucial. In fact, Beijing would be hard pressed to defend its eastern neighbor, in their fight against radicalism.

Secondly, Russia’s ability to ensure regional security in Central Asia has already become too heavy a burden for the country’s economy and is further undermined by Moscow’s global ambitions. Following Vladimir Putin’s election to the presidency in March 2012, Russia’s relationship with the West, in particular with the United States, has been extraordinarily strained. Apart from Washington’s criticism concerning Russian parliamentary elections in December 2011, regarded by most Western observers as fraudulent, both capitals later engaged in a vehement disagreement over the issue of a missile defense shield in Eastern Europe. This controversy developed against a backdrop of belligerent rhetoric from Putin himself, who promised to increase Russian defense spending, despite a freefall in the price of energy, which is the bedrock of the country’s economy. Although Russia’s economy grew by 4.3 percent in 2011, the outlook for future growth is clouded by its heavy dependence on oil and gas revenues, the slow pace of economic diversification and widespread apprehensions among Western investors. Therefore, it remains to be seen whether Russia will be capable of boosting its defense budget, should the situation in Central Asia spin out of control.

Moreover, Russia’s relations with regional partners have somewhat soured in recent years. In June 2012, Uzbekistan decided to suspend its membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a regional military bloc created at Russia’s initiative 10 years ago. Tajikistan, in turn, has recently been engaged in contentious negotiations with Russia over a new lease agreement for Moscow’s military base on its territory (the previous lease was due to expire in 2014, but has been extended to 2042). If Tajik authorities ever decided unilaterally to re-examine the terms of Moscow’s lease agreement, Russia could lose this strategic facility and be essentially deprived of any military means to protect Central Asia in case of external aggression. Russia’s reticence to provide security to this region has already been demonstrated on two occasions: in June 2010, during ethnic clashes in Kyrgyzstan, and in July 2012, when Tajikistan’s army fought Islamist rebels in the south. It is possible that Russia may be tempted to decline future pleas for help in such circumstances. Aside from security issues, the departure of US troops from Afghanistan will also have far-reaching geopolitical implications. Although Washington is currently trying to establish new partnerships with Central Asian republics — as in the case of Tajikistan, which recently received a promise of increased US military aid — America’s military presence in the region will most likely be very limited after 2014. This is especially so if neighboring Kyrgyzstan maintains its decision to close down the Manas Transit Center

The original Great Game: a cartoon published in British political and satirical magazine Punch in November 1878 depicts the Afghan Emir, Sher Ali Khan, squeezed between a bear and a lion — his “friends” Russia and Great Britain.
near Bishkek. As the US gradually withdraws from Central Asia and Russia’s current economic and political problems prevent it from bearing the costs of regional security, China looks to be the only plausible partner of Central Asian republics to fill this geopolitical void.

**CHINA AS AN EMERGING REGIONAL POWERHOUSE**

China’s emergence as Central Asia’s only regional powerhouse is likely to be perceived locally and throughout Asia as a sign of growing Chinese regional domination. Central Asia has long been considered as the “heartland” of the Eurasian continent, and control of it enables the dominant power to extend its influence to all four parts of this huge landmass. Therefore, China’s more active involvement in regional affairs, coinciding with the forced or voluntary retreat of other great powers, risks reviving the specter of the “Great Game,” a geopolitical competition between the Russian and British Empires in the 19th century, which now serves as a figurative representation of large-scale power struggles. Furthermore, if China ever decides to assume such a role, it will no longer be able to shun the status of a truly global power, controlling major land routes and sea-lanes as well as being responsible for the military balance on the continent. If China took on this role, it would certainly lead to apprehension in Moscow, Washington and European capitals, and would also open China to ever growing Sinophobic sentiments in Central Asia proper. These could make China’s rise to dominance increasingly complicated and would require Beijing to practice smart diplomacy in order to assuage anxious neighbors.

Still, it is plausible to ask whether China’s increased role in Central Asian affairs should be regarded as a positive or negative development. As mentioned earlier, China is strategically interested in keeping Central Asia stable and safe from radical ideologies, including extremist versions of political Islam. This line of reasoning would encourage China to play the role of a regional stabilizer, practicing preventive diplomacy, engaging its multiple partners in regional frameworks, preferring negotiations and compromise to conflict and hard power. Thus, China could become a truly responsible actor whose respect for others’ strategic interests and concerns would be gradually enhanced. This could further have positive consequences for China’s relations with its Asian neighbors, including over the issue of the South China Sea, which has recently become a source of anxiety in the eyes of Washington’s allies. Additionally, China’s interest in sustaining the same high level of energy supplies for its own economic growth would encourage Beijing to carry out security functions for the Eurasian energy hubs, notably via its increased proximity to the Middle East. However fearful Western countries, Russia or Central Asian republics may be of China’s eventual emergence as a regional policeman, this new role should be welcomed, because it will ensure Central Asian security and stability and will engage the Chinese in more co-operative forms of dialogue, making them an increasingly reliable partner.

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