

Impact Factor: 4.951

ISSN: 2181-0788

DOI: 10.26739/2181-0788

www.tadqiqot.uz

IJC

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CONSENSUS

KONSENSUS XALQARO JURNALI



VOLUME 2, ISSUE 2

2021

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TWO HEARTLANDS THEORY AND CENTRAL ASIAN CHOICE



<http://dx.doi.org/10.26739/2181-0788-2021-2-1>

ABSTRACT

The article presents the new theoretical approach to modern geopolitics. It argues that nowadays both old and new Heartlands coexist and clash with each other. This is the struggle between imperial and autocratic world – on one side, and free and democratic world – on the other side. Both have geopolitical background and strength. The analysis of the context of development of Central Asian region and geopolitical trends it is exposed to reveals profound challenge of choice between two Heartlands. This analysis also contributes to existing arsenal of the theory of International Relations.

Key words. Heartland, Central Asia, democracy, geopolitics, Uzbekistan.

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ИККИ ХАРТЛЕНД НАЗАРИЯСИ ВА МАРКАЗИЙ ОСИЁ ТАНЛОВИ

АННОТАЦИЯ

Ушбу мақолада замонавий геосиёсатга нисбатан янги назарий ёндашув тақдим этилган. Унда эски ва янги Хартлендлар бир вақтнинг ўзида мавжуд бўлиб ўзаро қураш олиб бориши тўғрисида фикр юритилади. Бу бир томондан империялик ва автократик дунё, иккинчи томондан эса эркин ва демократик дунё орасида қураш демакдир. Иккала дунёнинг геосиёсий келиб чиқиши ва салоҳияти мавжуд. Марказий Осиё минтақаси ривожланиши ва у юз тутган геосиёсий жараёнлар таҳлили икки Хартленд орасида мураккаб танлов муаммосини кўрсатяпти. Мазкур таҳлил шунингдек халқаро муносабатлар назариясига ҳисса қўшади.

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АННОТАЦИЯ

Данная статья представляет новый теоретический подход к современной геополитике. Она утверждает, что в настоящее время старый и новый Хартленды сосуществуют и соперничают друг с другом. Это борьба между имперским и автократическим миром – с одной стороны, и свободным и демократическим миром – с другой. Оба имеют геополитическую основу и потенциал. Анализ контекста развития центральноазиатского региона и геополитических трендов, которым он подвержен, обнаруживает существенный вызов, связанный с выбором между двумя Хартлендами. Данный анализ вносит вклад в имеющийся арсенал теории международных отношений.

Ключевые слова. Хартленд, Центральная Азия, демократия, геополитика, Узбекистан.

INTRODUCTION AND RELEVANCE.

The geopolitical turbulences happening in the geographical area which is used to be called “post-Soviet” since the collapse of the former Soviet Union seems to challenge the classical geopolitical theory of Heartland and Rimpland. For many years, students who studies classical geopolitics referred to works of Halford Mackinder who invented the term “Heartland”, Nicholas Spykman who invented the term “Rimland”, Friedrich Ratzel who invented the term “Lebensraum” and others who in the late 19-th and in 20-th centuries laid the ground for the classical geopolitical thought.

This geopolitical branch of science represented mostly the Realist school of International Relations (IR) theory. Generally, and succinctly speaking, it was all about great powers and empires’ rivalry over certain territories. Central Asian region has long been perceived as a part of the Heartland which constituted the core of the Eurasian space. The significance of this area was eloquently described by Mackinder as follows: “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the world”[1]. He argued that Russia's vast, central territories were outside of the reach of British sea power, that the vast Eurasian territory possessed an invulnerable 'Heartland', and that whoever controlled this Heartland would dominate the world.

After the collapse of the USSR, the theory of Heartland was essentially challenged for, at least, two reasons: a) the single Heartland itself was split into, so to speak, mini-Heartlands due to the collapse of its undeniable “master” – USSR; b) new IR currents such as Constructivism and critical theories challenged the dominating IR school – Realism.

Nowadays, geopolitical transformation of the former Soviet space is not yet completed and the deeper analysis of this process leads to essential modification of the Heartland theory. Central Asian region provides very interesting and profound material for testing both the old and new geopolitical schools. The concept of “Two Heartlands” can be considered as a theoretical framework for further elaboration on contemporary global geopolitical processes. One Heartland is a somewhat remnant of the old one; and the other Heartland is “new geographical attraction” – a democratic world. Central Asia today is facing a dilemma that appeared throughout independence period – a choice of modus vivendi between two Heartlands.

RESEARCH METHODS.

In this scientific article, along with the classical scientific and theoretical foundations of geopolitics, new scientific directions of geopolitical processes, sources on the geostrategic prospects of Central Asia are analyzed. The scientific article uses methods of analysis and synthesis, comparative analysis and geopolitical forecasting.

RESEARCH RESULTS.

Central Asia in old Heartland

Geopolitics is a product of imperial rivalry. As a scientific current it arose from geopolitical thinking about importance of certain territories due to their possession of natural resources which are considered as a power base. British geographer Mackinder was perhaps the first to indicate the potential power of the vast region named by him the Heartland of Euro-Asia due to its “population, wheat, cotton, fuel and metals so incalculably great, that it is inevitable that a vast economic world more or less apart will develop there inaccessible to oceanic commerce”. According to Mackinder’s conception, railways should determine the future of the Heartland.

Another approach to geography is reflected in the concept of ‘Living space’ (Lebensraum) which was developed by Ratzel in his organic theory of geopolitics. According to such an approach any power aspires to expand its living space as a natural motive. Modern geopolitical thinkers continued classical tradition when they evaluated the significance of Central Asia.

Zb. Brzezinski’s geopolitical dictum deserves mentioning in this respect: “Access to that resource and sharing in its potential wealth represent objectives that stir national ambitions, motivate corporate interests, rekindle historical claims, revive imperial aspirations and fuel international rivalries... The geostrategic implications for America are clear: America is too distant to be dominant in this part of Eurasia but too powerful not to be engaged... Russia is too weak to regain imperial domination over the region or to exclude others from it, but it is also too close and too strong to be excluded”[2].

In early years of independence Ali Banuazizi and Myron Weiner forestalled that one of the prime reasons for studying Central Asia within a geopolitical framework is, “the way in which each republic defines its own identity – separately from or in common with one or more of its neighbors, or its co-ethnics in the neighboring countries – is likely to have significant ramifications for the geopolitics of the entire region”[3]. And this Realist scenario has really come true.

Modern geopolitical scholars develop what is called Critical Geopolitics which focuses on identities, culture, discourses and perceptions of space and territory. Gearoid O’ Tuathail, for example, criticizing Realist school of geopolitics, wrote: “Rather than being an objective recording of the realities of world power, geopolitics is an interpretative cultural practice. Further, this practice is not a narrow one confined to formal experts but broad one shared by populations (popular geopolitics) and governments (practical geopolitics).[4]

So, the question of feature of geographical space, access to this space and its control is considered from both material and ideational points of view. In Central Asia, the artificial partition of the region in 1920-s and 1930-s into five Soviet republics – now independent states – was in fact the embodiment of the old “divide-and-rule” principle. So, in this context, the dramatic interplay of subjective “interpretative cultural practices” as well as objective material factors causes sophisticated regional and international behavior of the states – on the one hand, and different emotions, reactions, self-identification and demands of the people – on the other. This is the legacy of being the central part of the old Heartland.

Struggle between old and new Heartlands

Parag Khanna reconceptualizes the modern geopolitical competition in a following way: “The nature of geopolitical competition is evolving from war over territory to war over connectivity. Competing over connectivity plays out as a tug-of-war over global supply chains, energy markets, industrial production, and the valuable flows of finance, technology, knowledge, and talent. Tug-of-war represents the shift from a war between systems (capitalism versus communism) to a war within one collective supply chain system. While military warfare is a regular threat, tug-of-war is a perpetual reality – to be won by economic master planning rather than military doctrine. Around the world, thousands of new cities or special economic zones (SEZs) have been constructed to help societies get themselves on the map in the global tug-of-war.

Another way this competitive connectivity takes place is through infrastructure alliances: connecting physically across borders and oceans through tight supply chain partnerships. China’s relentless pursuit of this strategy has elevated infrastructure to the status of a global good on par with America’s provision of security. Geopolitics in a connected world plays out less on the Risk board of territorial conquest and more in the matrix of physical and digital infrastructure”[5].

Former Soviet space has presented a number of cases and transformation trends which exposed two opposite geopolitical perspectives. Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, 5 Central Asian countries – states located along the Russia's geographical perimeter all have since 1991 experienced profound geopolitical turbulence related to their political choice – domestic and international. Being attached to Russia's periphery has always meant being exposed to her neo-imperial power projection attempts. Being independent, in turn, has meant escaping geopolitical pressure from any side and freedom of choice.

From this perspective, it is important to determine how to evaluate political transformations of the former Soviet republics by consideration at least what was called “color revolutions”. There are two different approaches to “color revolutions” – democratic and autocratic. Democratic explanations point out to domestic factors and triggers of those revolutions that took place in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2004). Autocratic explanation exploits the conspiracy theory and argues that those revolutions were instigated by the West which allegedly interfered into domestic affairs of independent states.

It has to be noted that recent political turbulence in Belarus or earlier in Ukraine and Georgia as well as peaceful transformation in Moldova cannot but be in the focus of world community which cannot be indifferent and will be interested in political “fan”. In this sense, “interference into domestic affairs” cannot be fully escaped if the country is not fully isolated from the international system. Interesting case was demonstrated by Moldova recently. For the first time in its new independent history Republic of Moldova demonstrated the political victory of pro-European party during parliamentary elections. This victory was possible to a large extent due to anti-corruption program and strong package of reforms including the reforms of judicial system. People voted for vital and urgent changes in the society leaving aside geopolitical factor and pseudo-agenda dividing erstwhile electorate into pro-European and pro-Russian parts.

Meanwhile, democracy which has always been a normative issue per se, nowadays and especially in the former-Soviet space, began to be treated as a geopolitical phenomenon. Should western democracies express moral-political support to forces struggling with autocratic regimes, immediately, counter-forces appear who say that this is western plot and a geopolitical project. Today we can assume that modern geopolitics is not only about rivalry of world powers for control of certain territories and access to their natural resources but rather a struggle between democracy and autocracy for embracing larger space in the world.

From this point of view, I call democratic world, especially its central representatives such as the USA and the EU, the “New Heartland”. International authority and activity of this democratic core created such an international political climate and environment that today it became impossible to turn away from normative ground of IR: democratic principles, international law, human dignity, rights and freedoms, and so on. We can assert with some degree of conditionality that in the world there exist two Heartlands: the old imperial one and the new democratic one. If in and around the old Heartland the resource (material) struggle was conducted, the new Heartland itself is conducting a normative and value-driven (ideational) struggle.

In this regard, it is important to clarify the question which, since recently, has been debated in political and scientific circles, namely: the essence of the concept of democracy promotion. This concept which was articulated and actualized by western developed democracies in fact emanates from their missionary positioning in the international system. Such a missionary work should be conceived not in a sense of conspiracy theory and Realpolitik but in normative and humanitarian sense.

Nowadays countries of the world are more and more evaluated not only on the basis of their resource characteristics but also through the prism of universal normative principles and ideals. It has to be noted that since the European Union committed to its values of democracy and human rights never sacrifices them for the sake of material interests and is always ready to defend and promote these values throughout the world, then in this context the EU turns into the New Heartland. The EU blamed Russia for annexation of Crimea and Russia's pressure on Ukraine, for repressions of Belarus regime against peaceful demonstrators and leaders of opposition. Some years ago, EU imposed sanctions on Uzbekistan for indiscriminate use of force during the counter-terrorist operation in the

city of Andijan in 2005; also, EU condemned China for its repressive treatment of hundreds of thousands of Uighurs living in the Chinese province Xinjiang, etc. Dependence of Europe, for instance, on supplies of Russian gas, its interests in Chinese projects didn't stop Europe from principled criticism addressed toward Moscow, Beijing, Minsk and so on. Europe is looking for alternative supply corridors just due to imperative of following its normative principles.

Vice-President of the EU Commission Josep Borel High Representative of the European Union for foreign and security policy stated that EU would support comprehensive national dialogue in Belarus regarding rights of the Belarusian people to free and fair elections. He noted that this shouldn't be considered an interference in domestic affairs, since democracy and human rights are at the core of the European Union identity[6]

In the new era New Heartland will not keep a blind eye on power abuses of autocracies; as long as democracy, freedoms and human rights are suppressed in authoritarian countries and dictatorships, the New Heartland will not leave them alone. It is not by accident that such international organizations as Freedom House, Human Rights Watch, Bertelsman Foundation, V-Dem (Varieties of democracy), ODIHR/OSCE, Amnesty International and others conduct constant monitoring of state of democracy and human rights across the world. Yet in 1991, in the Copenhagen conference on human dimension the following ideas were already proposed that: human rights and human dignity do not recognize state borders and are above state sovereignty; states have a right to express opinion on domestic behavior of other states. This means that there is a necessity of revising the traditional concept of sovereignty for the sake of common good.

When we speak about new Heartland, we do not mean only the EU; it is also the US and other democratic countries together. This, in turn, means, that the **physical geographical location is not crucial determinant of being the part of the new Heartland, which is, in fact, expanding by embracing larger spaces of the world.** Such an expansion of the world of democracy gives the new Heartland more power, but also because the idea of democracy itself is powerful, its expansion becomes a strong reality. "Power without belief is purposeless, and belief without power is rhetorical"[7].

Central Asia between two Heartlands

So, Belarusian, Georgian, Ukrainian, Moldovan events reveal a clash of two opposite Heartlands. This struggle provides important lessons for countries of Central Asia: all above mentioned republics of the former Soviet Union located in the Eastern part of Europe faced two options in the international system – Euro-Asia or European Union, that is, old Heartland or new Heartland. But Central Asians do not have similar options because they cannot enter the remoter EU. Their surrounding area is covered either by old Heartland (Russia) or China or countries of South Asia. None of these surroundings is a zone of democracy; on the contrary: they all are the zone of autocracies. Moreover, democratic prospect in Central Asia can have long-term geopolitical implications. The matter is, neither neo-imperial Russia nor authoritarian China can be happy with the rise of new democracies in their neighborhood; that's why they are not interested in supporting democracy in Central Asia as are the US and EU. It is quite illustrative that both Russia and China are always concerned about the Western democracy promotion policy in Central Asia every time suspecting anti-Russian and anti-Chinese plot in such a policy. The absence of true democracy in these two powers prompt them to hinder democratization in the weaker "near abroad" in order to keep them in an inferior condition.

Stephen Blank rightly argued that "democratic deficits in Russia relate strongly to Central Asia. They lead Russia's elites to support Central Asian dictators for classic reasons of state, not least the idea that this will somehow strengthen hopes of return to hegemony if not empire... Russia's democratization and renunciation of a neo-colonial policies is an international precondition for the successful liberalization and democratization of Central Asian and Transcaucasian governments"[8].

On the other hand, many scholars and ordinary people strongly believe that democracy will not take the root in Eastern countries including Central Asians; it looks like a rare exception, they

may say, that such countries in the East as India and Japan demonstrate democratic success though even there, remnants of the past authoritarian rule still can manifest themselves.

Such stereotypical judgements about dubious perspective of democracy in Central Asia (just because they are Eastern/Asian) obviously contradict their official proclamation of the democratic choice; in particular, their Constitutions and political rhetoric unequivocally declare that they are democratic countries. So, the question is what the gap is between de-jure and de-facto democracy. It is a twofold question: it's about struggle between autocratic and democratic forces inside the country and it's about barriers that geopolitical forces create from outside the country.

When we talk about Central Asia we imagine not only five young independent states, former Soviet republics, separately or independently from each other, but also the single region that these countries constitute. Since 1991, after gaining their independence, five countries of this region were engaged in accomplishment of two parallel tasks: national state-building and regional integration.

In this process, regional integration and democratic development have proved to be inter-related and mutually stipulating each other. The European successful experience of integration confirms the thesis that democratic political systems are best predisposed for such a unification of countries. But the other approach can also be confirmed in the Central Asian context, namely: regional integration can help speed up democratic growth of the countries concerned. Indeed, integration can be caused by different reasons and historical circumstances. The need for consolidated and synchronized democratic reforms are one of such triggers. Geopolitical environment can be the other one. Actually, democratic development itself, as was said above, has a geopolitical and strategic connotation.

Zb. Brzezinski's concept of 'geopolitical pluralism' can be mentioned in this respect. By this term he meant that the era of a single master of the Heartland went into oblivion and different world powers have direct access to this part of the world. This concept reflects, on the one hand, a profound geopolitical transformation of the Euro-Asian space which since 1991 has been exposed to influence and presence of different great and mid-ranking powers and, on the other hand, confirms the fact that independent states emerged out of wreckages of the old Heartland themselves became subjects of international system and geopolitical players.

Being such a subject, Central Asian states now find themselves somewhat between old and new Heartlands in all spheres – economic diversification, democratic reforms, geopolitics and security[9]. Some years ago, Ariel Cohen wrote that the “countries of Caucasus and Central Asia were facing important policy decisions as the war in Iraq was approaching. Would they side with the UN, Moscow, Paris and Berlin, or stick with Washington? Should they keep neutrality or make strong statements supporting the war against Saddam? These choices are influenced by countries' relationships with Russia, the EU and the US, and in some cases, by ties to the Middle East and the Muslim world. Countries are lining up with the United States – or with Russia and 'old' Europe – and the repercussions of these fateful decisions will reverberate in the region for years, if not decades, to come”[10]. Indeed, the right choice is really a profound challenge.

It is interesting in this respect to compare two documents: agreements on strategic partnership that Uzbekistan signed with the United States – on the one hand, and Russia – on the other[11]. The US-Uzbekistan Strategic Partnership (USUSP) document mentions the words 'democracy' and 'democratic' 11 times. Uzbekistan-Russia Strategic Partnership (RFUSP) document doesn't mention these words at all. In addition, the USUSP emphasizes the regional dimension of strategic partnership, whereas the RFUSP only mentions the region once in very general terms. As for Uzbekistan's commitment to the letter and spirit of the USUSP, strategic partnership will in any case require it to grasp the normative dimension. As for its commitment to the RFUSP, this document emphasizes the military dimension, leaving other dimensions in more modest formulations[12]. As one can see, two different great powers have two opposite stances on democracy in Central Asia. That's why democracy in this part of the world has a geopolitical connotation.

Central Asian countries' success or failure in democratic efforts depend on different correlation and combination of external and internal political forces. Both external and internal forces can be pro-democratic or anti-democratic.

Destructive geopolitics versus creative democracy

Every time when Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan or other Central Asian countries become intentionally or unintentionally involved in geopolitical games of great powers their young and fragile democracy experiences drawbacks. In other words, when geopolitics prevails democracy surrenders and vice versa.

For example, the overall debates unfolded in Uzbekistan since 2019 about would-be joining the Euro-Asian Economic Union (EAEU) revealed obvious geopolitical nature of this organization which is only in the interests of Moscow, but when Uzbekistan became an observer in the EAEU it was undemocratic decision. This decision also revealed, among other things, that Oliy Majlis (parliament) of Uzbekistan needs serious reforming. Moreover, reforming existing formal institutes of democracy is not sufficient; it is necessary to improve what is called 'social contract'.

For example, contemporary representative (delegated) democracy more often than not is understood as a highest form of evolution of classical, direct democracy. However, such an understanding just distorts genuine essence of this form of government and state formation. We should not think that direct democracy disappeared and was replaced by the representative one, once and forever. The very notion of representation means that ultimately, people remain the main source of power (as written in the Constitution) and because the people elects the MPs it should be considered as implicitly present in power, that is, direct democracy still in force.

However, overly formalized organs of state power, including the parliament (despite the existence of checks-and-balance system, albeit also formalized) inevitably stipulate independent life of those organs which more and more distance themselves from the people. Such a situation is beneficial for conservative elements who can sabotage the democratic reforms. It is important to establish the regime when the demos gives state organs only conditional power, not unconditional. The demos doesn't become passive spectator of political process but remains active participant. This kind of discussions should be more alive than now; otherwise, democracy will remain too formal and artificial.

Let's take another example. In the wake of US forces withdrawal from Afghanistan and imminent exacerbation of the situation in that country Washington raised the question of possible deployment of small contingents in the territory of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, in case some military assistance to Afghanistan is demanded from the nearby territories. Rumors about such deployment caused swift negative reaction of the Russian official and analytical circles which warned against such decision. However, neither Tashkent nor Dushanbe was in a position to respond to such warnings. Parliaments couldn't even democratically discuss this issue measuring all pluses and minuses. This case illustrates that these political bodies are not fully self-confident. Moscow's paranoia about US bases in Central Asia is nothing but the persistence of old geopolitical vision. To escape being trapped in such destructive geopolitics the countries of the region must synchronize their creative democratic strength.

CONCLUSION.

In most cases, geopolitical thinking in the former Soviet space, especially in Central Asian countries, has been evolving around the stereotypical classical perception of Heartland. Despite the collapse of the former master of the Heartland, the geopolitical scholarship more often than not experiences inertia of old thinking; self-perception of Central Asians as an attractive "geopolitical lighthouse" is persistent and so strong that it often hinders different, modern and more adequate vision of the region and its future.

Talking about the modern geopolitically important areas, Canadian professor Ashok Kapur wrote that following the end of the Cold War, several centers of gravity of international and regional conflicts have emerged or grown in importance. He enumerated multiple conflict zones such as - India-Pakistan, Israel and its Arab neighbors, North Korea-USA, China-Taiwan, USA-Taliban and many others[13]. I would add that following the end of the Cold War, two major global Heartlands emerged as the centers of gravity – old Heartland as a world of autocracy and new Heartland as a world of democracy.

Central Asia today is in the forefront of the clash between old and new Heartlands. Democracy in Central Asia will symbolize three achievements: a) obvious truth that it is a better political formation in the world corresponding people's needs and will; b) openness of Central Asians to each other and real major step towards regional integration; c) containment of hegemonistic power projection on them. By and large, there is resistance to such development not only from the side of old Heartland power but also from conservative forces inside the countries.

Above mentioned S. Blank's remark can be mentioned here; he argued that the Western governments, NGOs, media and other institutions can and should encourage democratization in Central Asia and the broader post-Soviet world by increasing pressure upon Russia. "Despite its relative weakness Russia will always be a point of reference in Central Asia. To the extent that we can successfully bring pressure to bear upon Russia to reform that will have a positive impact or gravitational pull upon Central Asian reformers and elites. It will also create strong incentives for local regimes to reform as they will be unable to hide behind Moscow and will have to reckon with the positive rise in Russian economic power and stability that reform should stimulate"[14]. I can agree with this thesis with one caveat: regardless of Moscow's backing or resistance, Central Asian governments and peoples should learn to behave independently and overcome the complex of a small and vulnerable country exposed to great power influence. Only then, Central Asians will be able to find the right way between old and new Heartlands.

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ISSN 2181-0796

Doi Journal 10.26739/2181-0796

KONSENSUS XALQARO JURNALI

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CONSENSUS

№2 (2021)

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