BJIR
Brazilian Journal of International Relations
ISSN: 2237-7743 | Edição Quadrimestral | volume 3 | edição nº 2 | 2014

The Centrality of Central Asia

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A Brazilian Journal Of International Relations (BJIR) está indexada no International Political Science Abstracts (IPSA), EBSCO Publishing e Latindex

https://doi.org/10.36311/2237-7743.2014.v3n2.p284-323

THE CENTRALITY OF CENTRAL ASIA

Paulo Duarte[1]

Abstract: This article aims to highlight the major historical and geopolitical characteristics of Central Asia. The central argument is that this is a region of major importance in the current economic arena as a result of its strategic position as a link between East and West, a space of competition and reinforcement of the great powers.

Keywords: Central Asia; history; geopolitics; post-Soviet space; Central Asian Republics

A CENTRALIDADE DA ÁSIA CENTRAL

Resumo: O presente artigo tem como objetivo destacar as principais caraterísticas históricas e geopolíticas da Ásia Central. O argumento central é o de que esta é uma região de grande importância na conjuntura económica atual, em resultado da sua posição estratégica enquanto elo de ligação entre o Ocidente e o Oriente, espaço de afirmação e competição das grandes potências.

Palavras-chave: Ásia Central; história; geopolítica; espaço pós-soviético; Repúblicas centro-asiáticas

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https://doi.org/10.36311/2237-7743.2014.v3n2.p284-323

Introduction

This article aims to highlight the major historical and geopolitical features of Central Asia. The central argument is that this is a region of major importance in the current economic sphere as a result of its strategic position as a link between East and West, space of competition and reinforcement of the great powers.

Central Asia is one of the pivot regions of the world. It is located in the nucleus of the Eurasian continental space and is a crucial link between several robust and dynamic economies, such as China, the European Union, India, Japan and Russia (Competitiveness Outlook, 2011). From a geographic perspective, Central Asia includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, while Central Eurasia groups the aforementioned countries plus the three states of the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia). According to Khwaja (2003: 7), "Central Asia owes its importance to the vast economic potential and geostrategic location it has been endowed with, considering it is progressively turning into a world economic center".

Under the new energy atlas, Central Asia is located in a strategic region, with strong ties to neighboring regions. Its development depends, firstly, on the access to the rest of the world. Central Asia is an important part of the political and economic world system, being "surrounded by some of the most dynamic economies in the world, including three of the so-called BRICS countries (Russia, India and China)" (Central Asia Competitiveness Outlook, 2011: 10). This article perceives Central Asia as a space formed exclusively by the five countries that once integrated the Soviet Union: Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. As Armando Marques Guedes stresses (personal interview, 2011), "Central Asia is, somehow, a hinge zone", which has "regained undoubtedly an extraordinary importance both structural and conjunctural". According to this expert (Guedes, personal interview, 2011), "if there were three major milestones of the 21stcentury, conflicts that had an effective impact on the reconstruction and creation of a new international order, these would be Afghanistan, Iraq and the invasion of Georgia by the Russian Federation". Interestingly, according to the author (Guedes, personal interview, 2011), "these three conflicts occurred in Central Asia". Note also that if there is "a conflict that humanity currently fears", this involves Iran, which is no other than "a southern extension of Central Asia". For centuries, Central Asia has been the crossroads of Eurasia, or, as noted by Jack Caravelli (personal interview, 2011), "the intersection between East and West", which makes, according to this author, the region

"interesting". Indeed, it is the point of confluence of four civilizations that have both controlled and been controlled by Central Asian peoples (Asimov and Bosworth, 1998). Moreover, as noted by Xiaojie Xu (1999: 33), "the civilizations that dominate the region have been able to exert their influence in other parts of the world".The article is structured as follows. In a first stage, we will draw the main historical features of Central Asia. Subsequently, we will refer to the geography and geopolitics of the region; and in a third stage, to better illustrate the economic relevance of the region (besides its geographical and geopolitical importance) we will refer to the energy potential (in terms of oil and natural gas) of the republics of the region. Finally, we will highlight the goals and interests of the western powers (for this purpose, we chose the European Union and the United States), as well as of Russia, in this region of the world that authors, such as Mackinder, named 'Heartland'.

The bends of history

Before the arrival of the Russians, Central Asia was an integrated entity at the cultural, linguistic and religious level (Dani and Masson, 1992). The colonization process, initiated by czarist Russia, was the starting point for the fragmentation of the region, and has been specially designed to support the power structure of the colonizer (Bacon, 1966). This logic of fragmentation was continued and strengthened by the Soviets (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013). Fourniau (2006: 22) explains that, from a historical point of view, "the region was either integrated into world-empires, during very short periods, either divided over long periods". The various entities that make up Central Asia, often correspond to "successor states of these world-empires (as the sovereign states today are the successors of the Soviet Republics)" (Fourniau, 2006: 22).

According to Gleason, "the first inhabitants of Central Asia were nomads who traveled from the north and from east to west and south" (1997: 27). The regional names ‘Transoxiana' or 'Ma Wara'un-Nahr’, among other names for Central Asia have resulted from foreign invasions (Dani and Masson, 1992). The Samaniddynasty of Persia succeeded after the Arab governance during the 9th and 10th century (Esengul, 2009). The era of the Great Khan of the Mongols, Chingis Khan, began in the thirteenth century (Esengul, 2009). The empire of Chingis Khan left a legacy of Turkishlanguages which replaced Persian and Arabic (Carrere d' Encausse, 1967). The Mongols destroyed the main Persian

and Arabic centers of learning and trade, which helped Turkish languages become dominant in the region (Dani and Masson, 1992). After the death of the Great Khan in 1227, his descendants divided Central Asia, and the region remained divided until the governance of Timur 'the lame', which united the small Turkish tribes in the middle of the fourteenth century (Dani and Masson, 1992). According to Hye Lee (2012: 5), "the Russians had a first contact with Central Asia in 1715 when Peter the Great sent the first Russian military expedition into the Kazakh steppe, but the real effort to conquer the region took place in the nineteenth century, around 1860". Since then, the valleys of Central Asia were divided into three khanates: Bukhara (the oasis of Zerafshan), Khiva (downstream of the Amur-Darya) and Khokand (Fergana Valley) (Gleason, 1997).

The foreign invasions were not limited to acts of conquest, to the extent that they generated a vast cultural interaction. Offering a fusion of cultures, languages, religions and people, they contributed in making the notion of identity in the region extremely complex (Dani and Masson, 1992). The main Central Asian informal institutions that have proven to stand the test of time were the tribes and clans (Esengul, 2009). It is not surprising, therefore, that more and more experts in Central Asian affairs highlight the importance of clan politics with regard to the control they exert on the economy and politics of the region (Collins, 2006). Among the Central Asians, loyalty to the family or village is the most important at the sub-ethnic level (Dani and Masson, 1992). This loyalty is based on the core of the political organization of society: the family.

From the historical point of view, Central Asia was called Turkestan, whose literal translation from the Persian means 'the land of the Turks' (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013). The dominant linguistic group of Turkestan was formed by the Turkish languages such as Turkmen, Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Kazakh (Bruchis, 1984). Geographically, the territory of Turkistan extended from the east area of the Caspian Sea to the Altay Mountains, and from the borders of Persia and Afghanistan in the south, to the Russian lands in the north (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013). It had been divided into two parts: Western Turkestan and Eastern Turkestan (Dani and Masson, 1992). The Russians occupied the three khanates, having, however, just attached the Khanate of Khokand, and attributed the status of protectorates to the khanates of Khiva and Bukhara (Rywkin, 1963). Thus, the Western Turkestan, which became part of the Russian Empire in 1867 and was known as Russian Turkestan, encompassed the most part of the lands inhabited by Turkic peoples (Turkmen, Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Kazakh), but did not officially comprise the

protectorates of Bukhara and Khiva (Bacon, 1966). In turn, the Eastern Turkestan (also known as Chinese Turkestan) referred to the easternmost part of the region, encompassing lands in northwest China, i.e. the territory of the Autonomous Region of Xinjiang.

From 1860 until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Central Asia was under Russian rule for little more than a century (Rywkin, 1963). Mark Dickens (1989: 2) suggests some factors that contributed to the conquest of Central Asia. Let's emphasize "an instinctive impulse aiming to fill the geopolitical gap created by the collapse of the Great Tatar Horde..."; "a historical spirit of re-conquest with regard to the territories conquered by the Horde..."; "a traditional anti-Turkish stance which easily turned into anti-Islamic attitudes"; and "the perception that the few people who inhabited the Asian areas of eastern and southwestern Russia... were an easy target forcontrol and exploitation as the region was conquered".

Under the Russian leadership which was essentially colonial, locals experienced important transformations (Bacon, 1966). Over time, the term 'Turkistan' had been replaced by the term 'Srednaya Azia' (from the Russian Inner Asia or Central Asia) (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013). Daniel Pipes (1983: 6) believes that "like other colonial masters, the czarist government believed in the overwhelming superiority of its culture", in fact "the Russians insisted on using their own language, despised local habits and culture, in particular Islam, and revealed attitudes characteristic of all European settlers in the Third World".

The period of Russian dominance was not only marked by the political and economic transition, but, above all, by the dominance of Russian culture and language. In practice, the language of the 'colonial occupier' has become the lingua franca for the Central Asian people (Rywkin, 1963). The 'imposed' popularization of the Russian language was a key element in the grand scheme of social engineering designed by Moscow, which had been carried out at different levels, on the Soviet republics (the so-called *Russification* or *Russifikatsia*) (Bacon, 1966). It should be noted that later, the Soviets would develop a theory according to whichas long as the socialist society moved forward toward true communism, nations would tend to get closer,at the same time a new Soviet culture would emerge (Dickens, 1989). In this respect Bennigsen and Broxup (1983: 3) explain that:

> A new human being 'the Soviet Man (Sovetskiychelovek) will tend to emerge, released from the past, free and happy. There will be no spiritual, intellectual, or even physical differences between Uzbeks

> and Russians, Estonians and Kyrgyz; they will share the same culture, believe in the same Marxism- Leninism, eat the same food and worship the same leaders. The culture of the Soviet Man consists of an harmonious blend of the best elements of all other cultures.

Among the reasons that explain the end of czarist domain, let us stress the adverse socioeconomic conditions experienced throughout the empire, compounded by the realities and demands of the First World War (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013). The insensitivity of the Russians to the needs of local people, their reluctance to adapt to the local culture, and their concern with personal gains gave rise to an atmosphere of constant hostility between indigenous peoples and the Russian colonizers (Bacon, 1966).

The Soviet Union was built on the remains of the Russian empire, and continued the same colonial way of his predecessor (Mandel, 1942). Therefore, the Soviet Union would strengthen and complete the processes started by Tsarist Russia, introducing at the same time, some new concepts and projects, characteristic of the communist doctrine (Silver, 1974). At the moment when Bolsheviks had won the Civil War, all the old Russian Empire, its protectorates and colonies were in an extremely difficult socioeconomic situation (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013). The famine that followed the war caused the death of thousands of people. Such conditions were even more severe in Turkestan, which had been colonized by the Russian Empire (Wheeler, 1977). Given such circumstances, according to Chinara Esengul (2009: 47), "the strategy - more friendly and inclusive –of the Soviet authorities who sought to implement a process of *korenizatsia* ('assimilation') appeared to be promising". According to the author, "the main objective of the *korenizatsia* policy was to incorporate local cadres along with the Russians, in the management process, as well as in other areas of production and industry" (Esengul, 2009: 47). This process was limited by the low level of literacy, even among the regional elites. The creation of the Republics, in 1924, was an attempt by Moscow to 'kill two birds with one stone' (Rywkin, 1963). In other words, this meant pacifying the masses and nationalist elites in Central Asia, giving them formal autonomy and independence, retaining at the same time, control overthe politics and economics of the region (Rywkin, 1963). This delimitation was an extension of the principle 'divide to rule', previously adopted by Tsarist Russia regarding Turkestan (Mandel, 1942). The process of building new Republics was intended to prevent the Central Asians to unite into a single pan-Turkic or pan-Islamic entity (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013).

The Soviet period was characterized by an intensive process of 'state-building' ... the Soviet state (Anderson, 1997). At the same time, the nation-building[2] was well planned by the center that assigned to the new states "formal languages and culture, and administrative structures" (Anderson, 1997: 47). However, the process of creating an 'ethno- national' identity was limited by and subject to development-oriented policies of supranational identity: the 'Soviet people' (Mandel, 1942). The Soviet nationalities' policy advocates an eventual fusion with the Soviet culture (Carrere d'Encausse, 1978). According to Mark Dickens (1989: 5), "although the Sovietization and Russianization were, in theory, two different processes, in practice they often seemed to coincide". The Russians perceived themselves as civilizing agents in Central Asia during the Tsarist era, and this self-perception would change little during the Soviet era (Wheeler, 1966). However, Dickens (1989: 5) warns of "the importance of recognizing that the Soviets made quite remarkable achievements [in Central Asia]: they reduced illiteracy, higher education has become accessible to a larger percentage of the population, medical services have improved significantly, and agricultural and industrial production raised the standard of living compared to anywhere else in the Islamic world".

From the outset, Islam had proved more sensitive regarding Moscow relations with locals, being perceived by the Soviets as incompatible with the Marxist doctrine (Thrower, 1987). Considerable efforts have been made to eradicate the cult of Islam (Mandel, 1942). After all, this was considered a potential unifying political force against the Russian governance, and seen, from then on, as a threat to the Soviet domination and to the communist doctrine (Rywkin, 1963). However, the destruction of mosques and the total ban of the cult in the late 20s did not produce the expected results (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013). On the contrary, it forced people "to live a double life during the Soviet

[2]According to Carolyn Stephenson (2005: 1)**, "**nation-building is a normative concept that means different things to different people". However, "the latest conceptualization is essentially that nation-building programs are those in which dysfunctional or unstable or "failed states" or economies are given assistance in the development of governmental infrastructure, civil society, dispute resolution mechanisms, as well as economic assistance, in order to increase stability. Nation-building generally assumes that someone or something is doing the building intentionally" (Stephenson, 2005: 1). According to von Bogdandy et al (2005: 580), "The difference between state building and nation building is not always appreciated. Simon Chesterman uses only the term state-building, because, he claims, nation-building is specific to post-colonial situations. James Dobbins and his co-authors at RAND solve the problem in an equally sweeping, but opposite fashion by declaring all US involvements in post-conflict reconstruction, from Germany to Iraq, to have been exercises in nation building. Francis Fukuyama acknowledges that there is a distinction between state-building and nation-building but his usage of both terms would suggest that he regards nation-building as a term employed in the language of politics describing what he – in academic discourse – calls state building".

era; publicly pretending to revere their Communist leaders, while in private, nurturing their pre-communist culture" (Olcott, 2002: 7).

From an economic standpoint, the region, which had been transformed into a source of raw materials under the Tsarist leadership, remained as such in the Soviet era. The "white gold" (cotton) continued to capture the interest of the Soviets in terms of regional economy (Mandel, 1942). These were not particularly active in what concerns the development of industry in the region, as a matter of fact the Central Asian economies were totally dependent on donations from the center, as well as from other Republics regarding staple foods (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013). Such an economic policy "seriously affected the environment of the region" (Anderson, 1997: 116). Indeed, the excessive use of fertilizers and water resources to improve the crops of cotton would result in an environmental disaster, as evidenced by the degradation of the Aral Sea (Regional report of the Central Asian States, 2000).

The last decades of Soviet rule were important for two reasons: a) the liberalization initiatives (1985-1991) of Mikhail Gorbachev, the *perestroika* and the *glasnost* established "the immediate political context and a catalyst for the early stages of regime transition in Asia Central [and other Soviet republics]" (Collins, 2006: 103), b) this period is characterized by "negotiating pacts between the main political forces in each Central Asian state" (Collins, 2006: 50). This had been a time of change in the power configuration.

It is interesting to note how the vision of Russian domination affected the writing of history during the Soviet era (Dani and Masson, 1992). Prior to 1930, "the official line was that the Russian conquest of the non-Russian areas had been 'an absolute evil' (*absoliutnoezlo*)" (Dickens, 1989: 6). Thus, those who resisted Tsarist forces were considered patriotic heroes. During the 30s and 40s, "Russian expansion turned to be seen as a 'lesser evil' (*naimen'sheiezlo*), compared to what could have happened to the people if the Turks, the Persians, or the British had conquered them" (Dickens, 1989: 6). By 1950, "the official view was that the Russian conquest had been an 'absolute good' ", and those who had fought against it would now be condemned (Dickens, 1989: 6).

The post-Soviet era would show that the policy in Central Asia had nothing to do with ideology but with the control of economic resources by the major clans. One of the reasons for the discontent of most Central Asians is economic, in that "the Central Asian Republics were heavily subsidized by Moscow" (Esengul, 2009: 52). On the other hand, "there was not a strong nationalist sentiment (civic or ethnic)", which "conditioned the

society's passivity in terms of political participation and social mobilization during the years 1990-1991" (Esengul, 2009: 52). Loyalty concerned the subnational identities linked to the clans and family (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013). As for Islam, after the efforts of the Soviets in eradicating it, this would no longer be a political force susceptible to mobilize people (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013). Let us now draw some brief considerations on the geography and geopolitics of the region.

Geography and geopolitics

According to Olivier Roy (2000: 1), "Central Asia is an area of variable geometry, which can refer simply to the Transoxiana or to the cultural space defined by the Turkish-Persian civilizations, stretching from Istanbul to the Xinjiang". Central Asia is bounded by the Caspian Sea, Siberia, Mongolia, Tibet and the Hindu Kush. It is, as Rafael Kandiyotti (2008: 76) explains, "an interior region surrounded by a huge land mass that covers a vast territory of steppes, deserts and mountains, occupying more than the space of Western Europe and about half the area of the United States".

In the opinion of Doris Bradbury (personal interview, 2011), Central Asia is "a more stable region than Afghanistan, Iran and the Middle East in general", although, as the author states, a large portion of people demonstrate "unawareness towards this region" that lies "between some of the major political powers". Among the several common features to the Central Asian republics, it must be said the fact that "they're all 'inner' states" (Fourniau, 2006: 17). Moreover, as Vincent Fourniau (2006: 18) stresses, "it is nonetheless interesting to note that Central Asia is the region of the world with more inner/isolated states (or landlocked, if we prefer), when added to the five states of post-Soviet Central Asia, Afghanistan and Mongolia". Uzbekistan, for example, is "a double- isolated country" since "it is surrounded by states that are themselves isolated" (Fourniau, 2006: 18). The fact that the Central Asian Republics do not benefit from direct access to the ocean exerts a major influence on their economic development, this being therefore a topic of great interest. This does not mean that Central Asia is a 'dead end' in a globalized world. The region, which includes the "Great Silk Road", is, as Levent Hekimoglu (2005: 76) regards, "an intersection of global routes, coming essentially from all corners of the planet".

Returning to Fourniau (2006: 22), this author stresses that "unlike the Indian, Chinese, Ottoman or Russian peoples, Central Asia is not the result of a major political

construction, previous or current". Indeed, Fourniau (2006: 22) points out that "history has no record of a single Central Asian state" and, moreover, "the unification of the region was due to forces of conquest, mainly exogenous". According to Abdul Hafeez Khan (2011: 62), "Central Asia has been, at various times, divided, fragmented and conquered, but rarely has served as a seat of power to any empire or influential state". Therefore, Hafeez Khan (2011: 62) believes that "the region has proved, above all, a battleground for outside powers, than actually a power in its own right".

Among the scholars who have devoted a special attention to the geopolitical and geostrategic importance of the Eurasian space, Halford Mackinder, Zbigniew Brzezinski and Nicholas Spykman deserve special mention. They all contributed to an original approach to understand the principles of the regional structures of the geopolitical and geo-economic space of the Eurasian continent. In the early twentieth century, the British geographer Sir Halford Mackinder was the first to highlight the importance of Central Asia, calling the region the 'geographical pivot of history', or 'Heartland'. In Mackinder's view (1904), the world is divided into isolated areas, each of these with a special function. For the author, it is the "Heartland" (where the land masses of Eurasia are concentrated) that serves as the pivot to all geopolitical transformations of historic dimensions within the 'World Island'. Mackinder (1904) emphasizes that in the context of global geopolitical processes, the Eurasian continent is at the heart of the world, with the Heartland occupying the center of the Eurasian continent. Current interpretations of "Heartland" provide different assessments about the role and importance of Central Asia. For example, trying to balance the contemporary Russian Eurasianists, who argue that the pivot area and Russia are geographically the same reality, some Central Asian experts, with special highlight to Sayragul Matikeeva (2005: 25) attach to Central Asia the status of "pivot area", referring that "Kyrgyzstan is the Heartland" (i.e., the heart) of this territory.

The influence of the postulates of Mackinder continued to be felt after the fall of the geopolitical pivot, the Soviet Union. Mackinder's ideas influenced the theories developed by the prominent American political scientist Zbigniew Brzezinski (1997), who re-emphasized the significance of the centrality of the Eurasian region in his analysis, in 1997, of the geo-strategy of the post-Cold War. Like Mackinder, Brzezinski (1997: 21) also supports the postulate that "who dominates the Heartland, will be able to control the World Island and the planet". Brzezinski (1997: 21) highlights the strategic importance of the Eurasian space, which although inaccessible to shipping, was an easy target for the

nomads of antiquity. Moreover, this author also defends that the region offers conditions for the development of military and industrial powers. Brzezinski's thesis, who suggested a postmodern version of Mackinder/Haushofer geopolitical doctrine, served as the "cornerstone" to the "policies of the Clinton and Bush administrations towards the 'new' independent states of Central Eurasia" (Torbakov, 2004). Referring to Central Asia ("the Eurasian Balkans") as geopolitically important for reasons of energy, socio-political instability and potential domain of power area, Brzezinski (1997: 76) says that "the main U.S. interest should be to ensure that no power will appropriate the control of this geopolitical space". In this respect, as Emre Iseri (2009: 36) warns, "the United States needs to ensure a hegemonic position in the Eurasian balance of power".

When defining the geopolitical space in the form of a system of concentric circles, Mackinder (1943) placed the pivot in the heart of the planet, including the basins of the rivers Volga, Yenisey, Amu Darya, Syr Darya, the Caspian Sea and the Aral Sea. For historical and geopolitical reasons, the Pivot became the center where the historical processes were concentrated. According to Mackinder (1962: 150), "who dominates the east of Europe controls the Heartland, who dominates the Heartland controls the World Island; who dominates the World Island rules the world". So, the theory of 'Heartland' is probably the best geopolitical model that emphasizes the primacy of land power over sea power. While developing this postulate, Mackinder's main concern was to warn his compatriots to the decline of the naval power of the United Kingdom (which had been the dominant naval power since the era of revolutionary maritime discoveries of the fifteenth century) (Kennedy, 1983). According to Eduardo Mendieta (2006: 219), "at the precise moment when the praise of Mahan to the British naval supremacy were the subject of much attention by British, German and Japanese, a British geographer warned that such naval power would only be useful if the Heartland was controlled by a single power, which at the time seemed to be Russia". Mackinder (1904, 1943) argued, therefore, the consolidation of an earthly power able to allow one state to control the Eurasian landmass between Germany and Central Siberia. In this sense, following the hypothesis of Mackinder, Emre Iseri (2009: 33) argues that "if well served and supported by industry and modern means of communication, a consolidated terrestrial power that controls the Heartland, can exploit the energy riches of the region and eventually ascend to the global hegemony".

The doctrine developed by Mackinder inspired other strategists, like, for example, Nicholas Spykman, an influential American political scientist in the forties. However, unlike the emphasis that Mackinder attributed to the Eurasian Heartland, Spykman (1944) stressed essentially the importance of the Eurasian border, i.e. Western Europe, the Pacific Basin and the Middle East. According to Spykman, whoever controlled these regions, would be able to contain any emerging power in the Heartland. The author relied on what Mackinder had written before him, so as to draw his own version of the geopolitical base model, which differs significantly from its predecessor. According to Spykman (1942, 1944), Mackinder had overvalued the geopolitical importance of the Heartland. To Spykman, the dynamics of the geopolitical history of the "crescent interior" - the *Rimland*, the coastal areas - was a product of its internal momentum of development, rather than the result of external pressures, as Mackinder (1904) had argued. Moreover, Spykman argued that the Heartland was just a geographic space open to cultural and civilizational impulses from the Rimland. For the author, while Mackinder's Pivot had no independent historical role to play, the Rimland was the key to world domination. Therefore, his premise was: "Who controls the Rimland governs Eurasia, and who governs Eurasia controls the world" (Spykman, 1944: 43).

In Mackinder and Spykman' geopolitical conceptions, "the spacial and functional" structure of the world consist of three main levels. For Mackinder, the Heartland, Eurasia, and the Planet; and for Spykman, the Rimland, Eurasia, and the Planet (Ismailov and Papava, 2010: 89). If, as Ismailov and Papava underlined, "the first model reinforced the decisive role of the Heartland in the geopolitical space of the World Island", the second model, in turn, "advocated the same role for the Rimland".

Central Asia is a region that, strict sensu, only began to be analyzed, from the geopolitical point of view, in terms of field research by Western scholars, since 1991, following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Banuaziziand Weiner, 1994; Ferdinand, 1994; Fuller, 1990; Mesbahi, 1994). The term *Central Asia* characterizes a vast historical set, built around several subunits, as well as an amalgamation of economic, political, cultural situations, of identity processes and ethnic communities. The fact of constituting an important meeting point for economic, geopolitical, religious and ethno-linguistic interests, makes Central Asia an area endowed with an extraordinary historical depth, in the heart of the major global challenges nowadays.

The territorial division and the administrative status of the units that compose the region, showcertain heterogeneity. The current definition of Central Asia - in which the present article is based - which views it as being formed by the Republics that once made up the USSR (i.e., Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan), was developed in the mid-twentieth century, in order to distinguish these five Central Asian Republics. Shortly after independence, specifically in 1993, "this definition has been officially recognized by the Central Asian Republics, as well as by the international community" (Malik, 1994: 4).

In turn, for UNESCO, the Central Asian groups "the five former Soviet Republics (Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan)", but also "Afghanistan, Mongolia, western China and several parts of Pakistan, Iran and India" (Asimov, 2001: 2). It should be noted, like Michael W. Cotter (2008), that despite the economic and political heterogeneity of the region, Central Asia is, for all purposes, considered a 'geopolitical entity'. Several post-Soviet studies continue to interpret Central Asia as being limited to five former Soviet Republics: Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (Menon, 2007). This design leaves thus outside the above areas, even if these are deeply intertwined geographically and historically (Naby, 1994). In the Soviet era, the region was called "*SredniaiaAzia*" (which, when translated, means Middle Asia), comprising "Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan", and leaving out Kazakhstan (Lewis and Wigen, 1997: 179).

It is interesting to note that while Western experts use the term 'Central Asia', the Russian authors, in turn, did not (yet) abandon the old expression 'Middle Asia', although, unlike the past, this includes today Kazakhstan (Ismailov and Papava, 2010). The fact that there are multiple interpretations of the concept of Central Asia, thus attests to the lack of consensus about this.

The boundaries of the region were defined and delimited by the Soviets in 1924, at a time when the Central Asian nations were mentioned in Soviet documents as "a Muslim/Turkish issue" (Koichiev, 2003: 48). Such references were relatively frequent. In fact, according to Petra Steinberger (2003: 235), Islam was perceived as "a differentiating factor between the local population and the newly arrived foreigners, like the Russians, Ukrainians and other settlers during the tsarist and Soviet domination". So with the arrival of the Russiansinto Central Asia, Islam became an ethno-religious category, because they considered all the peoples of Central Asia as Muslims. Before the arrival of the Russians,

various ethnic groups of the region, such as the Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Uighurs, the Dungan, had coexisted in "khanates and multiethnic empires" (Lowe, 2003: 108). Such coexistence under these premodern supraethnic entities was only possible due to the loyalty shown by many people regarding the supraethnic identity, Islam.

According to Chinara Esengul (2009: 3), "for almost seven decades of Soviet rule, the Central Asian peoples were economically, politically and socially united as citizens of a single state (the *homo sovieticus*)". However, in 1924, before the unification under the Soviet regime, they were divided by Moscow, into five Soviet Republics. On the one hand, as Chinara Esengul (2009: 3) mentions, "this strategy - ambiguous - had created artificially, political units based on ethnicity"; on the other hand, "loyalty should belong to the supranational unity: the Soviet state". Therefore, "none of these elements had been well developed; the existence of the Soviet supra-state suspended, for several decades, the process of nation building"; moreover, this policy of national delimitation had serious consequences, since "these states were 'artificially' created, rather than develop organically" (Esengul, 2009: 3).

On top of that, let us mention the fact that the region's infrastructure operates, from the economic point of view, under the strict control of Moscow, for the benefit of the centralized economy. There was little trade between Central Asian Republics themselves, and their economies were considerably subsidized by the central budget. In the early 90s, subsidies from the metropole, constituted "a fifth of gross domestic product (GDP) of Uzbekistan", and "one-seventh of the GDP of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan" (Sarygulov, 1999: 240).

That said, the collapse of the Soviet Union brought to the Central Asian nations not only independence and freedom that they had never experienced, but above all, the end of subsidies, as well as "a widespread negative economic impact on the lives of most people in this vast region of the world" (Linn, 2004: 1). This was the moment when a series of political rifts emerged between the Central Asian states. Besides the democratization of the state structure (Tolipov, 2007), of the ethnic minorities and borders, and the collapse of the common security system, "one of the most pressing issues in the region is the issue of religious extremism and terrorism", analyzed among others, by Mariya Omelicheva (2010). The problem of drug trafficking is also urgent in the region, and well-illustrated, among others, by the study of Timothy Krambs (2013). Erika Marat (2006: 45-46) stresses in this regard that "as is the case in other spheres of organized crime, the Central Asian Republics

were not prepared to deal with the increase in drug trafficking, and with the problems associated with this". In turn, the issue of water management ranks first among the economic and environmental problems of the region, since, as mentioned, for example, by Mañé Road and CampinsEritja (2012: 2), "Central Asia is a transnational region with a use of shared water, but with an asymmetric distribution of resources".

Since the collapse of the USSR, the Central Asian Republics have been undermined by instability. With a history based, in large part, on the life of clans, a relatively new and inexperienced leadership, and an incalculable potential of energy resources, Central Asia has experienced, as Philip Shishkin (2012: 4) notes, "significant problems of corruption, abuse of human rights, civil unrest and conflict". Afraid of the historical divisions within each country, as the result of belonging to clans, and of the growth of Islamic fundamentalist movements in neighboring countries such as Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan, the Central Asian leaders have become dictators under the pretext of maintaining stability at all costs (Diuk and Karatnycky, 1993). However, as already stated by the New York Times in a 1999 article (1999: 1), but very timely, "such artificial and temporary stability ends, often, in explosive action". Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have been particularly affected by internal conflicts, although as noted by Philip Shishkin (2012: 14), "of all the Central Asian republics, Tajikistan is the one that probably faces the most troubling set of threats regarding stability".

Political regimes established in the Central Asian Republics are all authoritarian, even though levels of authoritarianism vary according to the countries in question. Following a more precise fashion and as Alexander Warkotsch (2008: 62) regards, "Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are semi-authoritarian states, while Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are run by authoritarian - if not dictatorial - regimes". Central Asia is indeed one of the most authoritarian and corrupt regions of the world, as evidenced by evaluations carried out, for example, by *Freedom House* and *Transparency International*. Indeed, *Freedom House* (2012) ranks Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as "non free" in what regards political rights and civil liberties. Moreover, these three countries occupy the last positions of the *Corruption Perception Index* of *Transparency International* (2012). The central and unifying feature of these states lies, in practice, on the patrimonial aspects of their regimes. In fact, the main political dynamic (albeit informal) is represented by the relation between the Heads of State and certain interest groups rather than by the rule of law, or the relationship between the government and its

people. In other words, "the power of government results from the patronage of powerful networks, tycoons of the world business and regional groups" (Azarch, 2009: 65-66). Therefore, "maintaining the *status quo* in the region is in the fundamental interests of the Central Asian Governments", since "the transformation of political and social structures may inevitably lead to the loss of power of the current regimes" (Azarch, 2009: 66).

The energy potential of Central Asia

The region has been, in recent years, attracting the attention of foreign investors due to the existence of large reserves of oil and gas in three states: Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (Babak, 2006; Kenisarin, 2004).

Despite the high cost of exploration and transportation of oil, and legal and environmental problems associated with it, we have been witnessing a "competition between oil companies", in the Caspian and Central Asia, with regard to the deals and contracts for commercial transactions leading to the exploration of oil and gas (Nuttal, 2012).

In 1998, "[one] initial optimistic forecast", guessed that "the proven or recoverable amount of existing oil reserves in the Caspian region and Central Asia" was "200 billion barrels", although "most geologists accept the estimation of 40 to 60 billion barrels in the reserve base of the region" (U.S. Congressional Record 1998). About 15 years after the above prediction, a special report, prepared for the Caspian region and Central Asia, maintains virtually the same figures, i.e., "it is estimated that the total oil reserves of the region is more than 60 billion barrels, and some forecasts bring this number up to 200 billion barrels" (Global Business Reports, 2012: 1). Experts like Anuradha M. Chenoy (2007: 114) believe that "the first estimates of the energy potential of the region, was purposely overvalued, essentially to serve political purposes and were suitable to U.S. penetration in Transcaucasia and Central Asia". However, despite the 'instrumentalisation' of figures, according to Elaheh Koolaee and Masoud Imani-Kalesar (2010: 86), "there is consensus on the existence of abundant oil and gas in the Caspian region". According to Koolaee and Imani-Kalesar (2010: 86), "it is estimated that the Caspian contains two to four percent of the world's hydrocarbon reserves", which is not comparable to the reserves of the Persian Gulf, but "to the energy potential of the North Sea".

Energy resources are unevenly concentrated in the region, being Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan the states with the largest reserves of recoverable oil. According to the BP Statistical Review of World Energy (2012), in late 2010, Azerbaijan had 7 billion barrels of proven reserves, representing 0.5% of global reserves. In turn, Kazakhstan held at the end of 2010, about 30 billion barrels of proven reserves (BP Statistical Review of World Energy, 2012). Based on an article in The Business Year (2013: 4), "Kazakhstan has the world's 11 largest oil reserves, and the second largest after Russia, the Commonwealth of Independent States"; the country produced "1.6 million barrels of oil per day in 2011", making it "the 17th largest oil producer in the world".

In 2010, the oil production in the region was around 3 million bpd[3], of which about 2.5 million were exported (BP, 2011). Weiss *et al* (2012: 9) report that these exports represent "an important part in the world's oil trade", equivalent to "about 10% of the total exports of liquid fuel" by the member states of OPEC. Oil production and exports from the Caspian tend to grow substantially, i.e. to more than double over the next 25 years, as stated by the International Energy Agency (2011). This will be possible with the expected increasing, in the coming years, of the oil production from the Kashagan field (located in the northern Caspian Sea), which is believed to be one of the most important [in terms of energy] discoveries of the world, in the last 30 years (The Astana Times, 2011; ENI, 2012). According to Robert M. Cutler (2011: 2), "the offshore Kashagan oil field is generally rated as the 5th or 6th largest in the world, and has the largest reserves of any oil field outside the Middle East". Its reserves are estimated at "38 billion barrels", of which an estimated 11 to 13 billion are recoverable". Initially scheduled to go into production in 2005, this date has been continually extended due to "technical difficulties related to on-site exploration issues", and because of "quarrels about the nature of KazMunaiGaz's participation" (Cutler, 2011: 2).

Apart from onshore fields, Kazakhstan has also a developed offshore oil industry in the Caspian Sea. According to Arkhipov *et al* (2010: 16-17), "about 70% of the Kazakh oil and gas reserves are concentrated in the western region of the country, around the city of Atyrau (aprox. 154 000 inhabitants)". Some oil reserves are also located in southern Kazakhstan, although the prospects for new discoveries are not very promising. A seismic test in the Caspian Sea, in 1996, revealed that there are about 73 billion barrels of oil in Kazakhstan's Caspian Sea area (Luong, 2000). But Waco Worley (2006: 21) explains that

[3]Bpd (from the English "barrels per day", also bbl/d).

"this amount is highly controversial" since "various estimates point to much lower values, in the order of 10 billion barrels of oil".

In 2011, Kazakhstan produced 80.1 million tons of oil, and its oil exports increased by 3.3% compared to 2010 (Xinhua, 2012). In fact, because the country has great infrastructures to extract, refine and transport oil, it has been doing it at a very high pace when compared to any other regional state and has become thus an important player in the world´s energy supply (The World Factbook, 2013). Indeed, Christopher E. Smith (2012: 2) states that "Kazakhstan has the second largest oil reserves and production among the former Soviet Republics, after Russia, having achieved a production of 1.6 million barrels per day in 2012". The Kazakh state company, KazMunaiGaz, is "the second largest oil producer in Kazakhstan, after the consortium called "Tengizchevroil" which was "the first joint venture that the Kazakh government established in 1993 with Chevron to extract and refine the oil in Tengiz" (Kazakhstan Fact Sheet, 2012: 3). According to Pauline Luong (2000: 89), "with the success of this joint venture, the Kazakh government has since then been involved in a number of consortia around the world, such as: Vito Munay, Hurricane Hydrocarbons, Tractebel, Triton-Vuko Energy Group, Medco Energy Corporation, and Chinese National Petroleum Company". Such initiatives have made it easier for the Kazakh Government to build new oil infrastructure, and have led to a faster economic growth since 1997 (Country Commercial Guide for U.S. Companies, 2010).

According to Kimberly Marten (2007: 23-24), "a significant part of the Kazakh and Russian oil is relatively expensive and technically difficult to extract". Its reserves are primarily concentrated on a large onshore depth (unlike, for example, to the oil fields of Saudi Arabia, located on the surface), which requires special equipment for the operations. Offshore reserves in the Caspian Sea are faced with a set of specific problems, as the most promising fields are located in shallow and fragile environmental waters that sometimes freeze. Moreover, "many of the Kazakh oil fields, and pipelines linking them to markets are buffeted by a frequent seismic activity, as well as extreme weather conditions" (Marten, 2007: 24). The most important deposits are significantly distant from population and logistics centers, which requires the construction of "long pipelines", and even generates "a variety of difficulties, not only in terms of the delivery of equipment and maintenance, but also in terms of supply of the basic workforce in the oilfield" (Marten, 2007: 24).

Neither Kyrgyzstan nor Tajikistan have substantial oil reserves. While Tajikistan has shown reserves of "12 million oil barrels", and most of which are located "in the north, in the region of LeninobodSoghd", Kyrgyzstan, in turn, may have, currently, according to the Global Security (2013: 5), "40 million barrels of proven oil reserves". Moreover, the energy infrastructure of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is extremely limited (Pantucci and Patersen, 2012). There are few refineries to process the oil, and there are several difficulties associated with its transportation to the Tajik market, fruit of the Civil War 1992-1997 (Trilling, 2012). Moreover, we must point out that the mountainous landscape of Tajikistan hinders the extraction of oil (this also applies to the case of Kyrgyzstan).

Therefore, due to these difficulties, both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are potential oil importers, which explains, in large part, that both countries are relatively uninteresting from the point of view of foreign investment to China, as well as to other external powers (BBC News Asia, 2012). In the case of Tajikistan, for example, Raffaello Pantucci and Alexandros Petersen (2012: 1) stress that "the few natural resources and the mountain chains that hinder the transit [of people and goods]" are some of the reasons why the country is "the least attractive of the Central Asian Republics" for Chinese investors. In both countries (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), the oil industry is state-owned. However, despite the relative insignificance of its oil and gas resources, they are still "important for energy infrastructure" - understood in a "general perspective" - of the region (Feld, 2002: 11).

We should, however, introduce here a brief note concerning Tajikistan. Indeed, according to Christian Melis (personal interview, 2012), OSCE expert on water and energy issues, "there are strong indications of the possible existence of vast reserves of oil and gas in southern Tajikistan, near the border with Afghanistan". As Fozil Mashrab (2012: 3) notes, in an article in the Asia Times, "in mid-July [2012], the Tethys Petroleum, that has been prospecting oil and gas in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, has updated its estimates for oil and gas reserves under the production sharing contract in the area of Bokhtar, Tajikistan, to 27.5 billion barrels of oil equivalent[4], of recoverable resources, consisting of approximately 3 trillion cubic meters of gas and 8.5 billion barrels of oil". If this estimate becomes real, it is, as Christian Melis (personal interview, 2012) explains, one of the largest reserves in the world, as shown by the seismic analyzes conducted by

[4] The Barrel of oil equivalent (BOE) is a unit of measurement of energy consumption equivalent to 6,383 x 109 J, 1,45 x 109 cal., 1,68 x 103 kWh or 0,14 TOE.

Tethys Petroleum". According to Aygul Hanova (2012), the discovery of more oil, which goes beyond the oil reserves of Norway, helps to put Tajikistan in front of Kazakhstan, which has, to date, been the leading country in Central Asia, in terms of oil reserves.

Although for Christian Melis (personal interview, 2012), the discovery of oil is a fact "99% sure", it is important to verify" if [its] exploration is technically and economically viable", since to date "experts are not sure about the depth at which these reserves are". Moreover, as Aygul Hanova (2012) mentions, the climate of insecurity in which the country lives offers no certainty over the development of the Tajik oil sector. Besides, we should note that the location of Bokhtar in the Amudarya basin, shared by Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, is another factor likely to exacerbate the difficulties of extracting oil and gas which, presumably, reside over there.

If the exploitation of the Bokhtar reserves is feasible, Christian Melis (personal interview, 2012) believes that Tajikistan - "Republic with scarce oil reserves" - can become one of the "major world countries in the production of oil and gas per capita". On the other hand, that fact "is likely to postpone further the discussion on the construction of Rogun", because, if one shows that the extraction of Bokhtar's oil and gas is feasible, Christian Melis (2012) predicts that "the construction of the Rogun hydropower plant may become less of a priority for Tajikistan", and, it is the "only hope" for the area. To date, "the Tajik government has not yet confirmed the discovery", since it is waiting for the Canadian company "to conclude whether it is possible to extract this oil and gas" (Melis, 2012). If it becomes practicable, the concession agreement signed between Tethys Petroleum (2008) and Tajikistan establishes that the Tajik Government will receive 30% profit, allocating the remaining 70% to the Canadian private company.

Oil production in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan is relatively insignificant, with a tendency to continue to meet the domestic needs of these countries. According to estimates by the U.S. Energy Information Administration (2012: 1), in 2012 "Uzbekistan had 594 million barrels of proven oil reserves, 171 oil and gas fields defined, of which 51 produce oil, and 17 gas". In turn, in regards to Turkmenistan, the U.S. Energy Information Administration (2012: 1) reports that this remains "a small oil exporter". In January 2012, the country had "proven oil reserves of 600 million barrels". Most Turkmen oil deposits are located in the south of the Caspian Basin and in the onshore area of Garashyzlyk, in the west part of the country (The Encyclopedia of Earth, 2008). In Turkmenistan, the oil industry faces two major obstacles. First, similarly to what occurs in the gas supply, oil

supplies need foreign investment due to the isolation of the country, over the last decade, and the consequent weakness of infrastructure. In fact, according to Jim Nichol (2012: 6), "the physical infrastructure has been the subject of corrosion (...), and the sectors of electricity and transport have a level of service increasingly weakened". Secondly, as Morgan Davis (2011: 438) mentions, "most of the Turkmen oil is concentrated both in the margins and at the bottom of the well disputed waters of the Caspian Sea". Thus, "the ongoing debate about whether this is in terms of international law, a sea or a lake, makes that, in practice , it is difficult for Turkmenistan, and for any foreign investor, to explore the existing oil in the Caspian" (Davis, 2011: 438).

In October 2011, Kazakhstan had accounted for more than 40 deposits of oil and gas as being of strategic importance, among which are Kashagan, Tengiz and Karachaganak (TengriNews 2012). Indeed, these three fields are the main target of investments (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2012). As LubaAzarch (2009: 57) underlines, "since 2006 the Kazakh oil has flowed in all directions - north, through the Atyrau-Samara pipeline into the Russian distribution network (about 480 000 bpd); to the West, through the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (about 620 000 barrels per day) to the Russian port of Novorossiysk; to south, through a swap deal with Iran; and to China, through the pipeline Atasu-Alashankou (about 85,000 barrels per day)". However, with respect to the China-Kazakhstan pipeline, for example, Andrew S. Erickson and Gabriel B. Collins (2010: 94) note that "Kazakh oil production is still not enough to completely fill the pipeline". On the other hand, the largest and oldest pipelines operate virtually at the limit of their capacity. In the case of the Caspian Pipeline Consortium, Jake Rudnitsky (2013) estimates that this will reach its full capacity by 2015.

With regard to the external involvement in Kazakh oil industry, it is characterized by the interaction of various actors. North American and Western European companies are leaders in the upstream sector of Kazakhstan, Chevron, for example, owns, individually, a 50% stake in Tengiz, which is the world's largest oil field with deeper location - about 3657 meters (Chevron, 2012). However, the role of Russia and China should not be underestimated. Indeed, according to Josh Peterson , "it is likely that China National Petroleum Company (CNPC) and, to a lesser extent, other state-owned Chinese energy companies, tend to boost their investments and operations in the Kazakh oil market over the next five to 10 years" (Statoil, 2013: 5). Finally, "the international oil companies Shell

and Lukoil are likely to increase their upstream operations in Kazakhstan, although to a much lesser extent than Kazmunaigaz and CNPC" (Statoil, 2013:1).

Due to its dominant role in the regional network of oil and gas pipelines, Moscow has an advantaged position to exert influence in the region. According to Ruoxi Du (2011: 7) "it is widely recognized that the economic resurgence of Russia under President Vladimir Putin (2000-2008), was largely stimulated by the increase in oil prices". In this case, "the control of exports of Kazakh oil is likely to preserve Russia's monopoly in the regional oil market" (Ruoxi Du, 2011: 7). One such area is equally or more important as the Kazakh oil presents a higher quality when compared to the Siberian oil, which makes it even more profitable. In addition, mentioning Du Ruoxi (2011: 7), "the monopoly over the export routes of Central Asian gas is likely to strengthen the negotiating position of Russia, allowing it to reach lower import prices and higher prices to export again". On the other hand, "the oil and gas from Central Asia may contribute to meeting the growing demand on domestic energy in Russia", allowing Moscow reasons to regulate the prices of domestic energy" (Du Ruoxi, 2011: 7).

The Russian Transneft owns a majority stake in the Caspian Pipeline Consortium "(24%)" - responsible for over half of the exports of Kazakhstan - operating, moreover, the Atyrau-Samara pipeline, through which a quarter of exports of Kazakhstan is drained (Marketos, 2009: 5). Therefore, as John Lough (2009: 7-8) mentions, "as a result of its pre-eminent position as 'guardian' [of the energy infrastructure logistics], Russia controls about 80% of Kazakh oil exports", something that is not necessarily beneficial to Astana. According to Luba Azarch (2009: 58), "Transneft, for example, refuses to reinforce the volume of oil transported by the Caspian Pipeline Consortium, unless the transit tariffs are increased and the debt of the consortium restructured". Russia seeks therefore to consolidate its dominant position with regard to inter-regional transport as well as in the field of production and oil exports from Kazakhstan (Rousseau, 2011). We must, however, recall that "if in the Soviet era all pipelines were destined for the North (i.e. Russia), in turn, in the post-Soviet era new pipelines have been built, and new routes have been planned" (Coburn, 2010: 19). Coburn (2010: 19) affirms that, with European support, "the United States has promoted such diversification, likely to break the Russian monopoly".

China, in turn, has been a dynamic player in the Kazakh oil sector since 1997, investing in oil fields and pipelines. As Yevgeniya Korniyenko and Toshiaki Sakatsume (2009: 12) note, "Chinese multinationals have been active in the region over the past few

years, in a certain number of countries, including Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Romania and Russia". According to Luba Azarch (2009: 58), "having appeared late in Kazakh oil market, at a time when the doors to the large consortia had closed, China was confronted with the need to invest in oilfields of lower capacity and more distant". Nevertheless, for now, Chinese companies control "about a quarter of Kazakh oil production" (Reuters, 2011). As Azarch (2009: 58-59) indicates, "the idea of a Sino-Kazakh pipeline, under discussion since 1997", was, however, achieved "only after the discovery of the giant Kashagan in 2002", since "Astana needed, urgently, more consumers" and, moreover, "China wanted to make sure that Kazakhstan had sufficient quantities of oil to justify the construction of the designed pipeline".

According to the Global Business Reports (2012: 1), the Caspian region has "proven gas reserves of more than 6 trillion cubic feet", most of which held by Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. On the other hand, Russia is a key player with regard to the Central Asian gas industry, as "while importing this resource of the region, Moscow can delay its own (and more expensive) gas production in Yamal and in the Seas of Barents and Kara, without suffering loss in exports and consumption" (Azarch, 2009: 61).

According to the Energy Information Administration, "Turkmenistan is currently positioned between the six countries holding the largest reserves of natural gas in the world, and among the 20 largest producers of gas in the world states", possessing "reserves of approximately 7 trillion cubic meters in 2012, a considerable increase from about 2 trillion cubic meters in 2009" (Country Analysis Briefs – Turkmenistan, 2012: 4). According to Vladimir Socor (2012), Turkmenistan produced 59.5 billion cubic meters (bcm) of gas in 2011 - a small fraction of a vast untapped potential – and the exporting numbers of Turkmen gas, in that year, were 10 bmc to Russia, another 10 bcm to Iran and 14 bcm to China.

Turkmenistan has become increasingly the focus of international investors, especially "since the confirmation by the energy consultant Gaffney, Cline & Associates, that the Turkmen gas reserves may actually be ranked among the five most important in the world" (Downs, 2011: 76). The giant South Yolotan-Osman, located in southeastern Turkmenistan, holds, by itself, (i.e. without taking here into account the other deposits in the country), between 4-14 trillion cubic meters of gas (Chazan, 2008). In addition, there are several deposits in the basins of the Amu Darya, the Murgab and southern Caspian

(Pannier, 2008). The two main gas fields are Dauletabad and Shatlyk (CIA World Factbook, 2013).

The existing energy transportation infrastructure in the country is primarily directed to Russia, due to the legacy of over a century of links, first to Tsarist Russia and later to the Soviet Union. The death of Niyazov, in December 2006, fueled some hope that Turkmenistan opened its energy sector to the international market (Daly, 2008). Of course, the big players, i.e. "the United States, the European Union and Russia want to come forward as there seems to be signs of a certain openness" (Chivers, 2007: 6). The three largest investors, who have signed several energy deals with Turkmenistan, since its independence, are the Russian Gazprom, the Argentine Bridas, and the American Unocal (WorldPress.org, 2010).

As for Uzbekistan, the country is one of the largest gas producers in the Commonwealth of Independent States, "with about 1.8 trillion cubic meters of proven gas reserves in 2012", making it "the third largest producer of gas in the Commonwealth of Independent States and one of the 10 largest in the world" (Energy Information Administration, 2012: 4). Although its oil reserves are not significant - The Oil and Gas Journal (2013) estimates that Uzbekistan had 594 million barrels of proven oil reserves in 2012 - the country is, however, rich in gas and equipped with a geographical position conducive to energy transit to China or southeast Asia. Moreover, according to Michael Denison (2009: 8), "there are promising energy reserves in the Aral Sea basin and the Ustyurt plateau in western Uzbekistan, which can be easily connected to the broader infrastructure of regional transit". According to the Energy Information Administration (2012: 2), "Uzbekistan produces gas from 52 deposits", and 12 of them are responsible for "more than 95 % of gas production in the country". These deposits are concentrated in the Uzbek border of the river Amu Darya basin in southeastern and central highlands of Ustyurt, near the Aral Sea, in the west of the country.

As for Kazakhstan, where, as the The Business Year (2013) mentions, there are about 2 trillion cubic meters of gas reserves (the 14 largest in the world), is the 27th world largest producer of gas, having produced 1.3 bcm in 2010. According to AzerNews (2013), the production of gas, in 2012, in Kazakhstan increased 1.5% compared to 2011, the equivalent to 40.1 billion cubic meters. According to GlObserver (2011: 7), "Kazakhstan is an important transit country with regard to the exports of gas from Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan to Russia and China". Most Kazakh gas reserves are located in the western

region of the country, especially in the field of Karachaganak, which is estimated to have "proven reserves of about 1 trillion cubic meters" (GlObserver, 2011: 1).

According to Global Security (2013: 3), "Kyrgyzstan has about 5.6 trillion cubic meters of gas reserves, although these are technically difficult to explore". Currently, "Kyrgyzstan has neither infrastructure nor financial capital to increase the exploitation of its gas reserves, and the country imports most of its gas from Uzbekistan" (Global Security, 2013: 4). This business relationship has been difficult for both countries, taking into account that "Kyrgyzstan often delays payments" and, therefore "Uzbekistan stops supplying gas to the Kyrgyz", causing "serious problems in winter", since "gas is used either both for heating and for electricity production" (Global Security, 2013: 4).

Finally, it is estimated that Tajikistan has, like Kyrgyzstan, "also 5.6 trillion cubic meters of gas reserves" (Global Security, 2013: 6). In 2000, "Tajikistan began operations in the field of KhojaSartez in the region of Khatlon, and intensified the exploitation of the QizilTumshuq deposit, in the district of Kolkhozobod" (Global Security, 2013: 6). However, since its domestic gas production is scarce, "Kyrgyzstan imports approximately 95% of the gas it consumes" (Global Security, 2013: 9).

European Union, United States and Russia's goals in Central Asia

In the early years of its involvement in Central Asia, the European Union did not have a realist interpretation about the region. On the contrary, its senior officials were mostly idealist and had an insufficient understanding of the nature of the Central Asian societies and their leaders. The Member States of the European Union intended to safeguard the independence of the new Republics, eliminate all nuclear weapons from Kazakhstan, maintain stability, hold the development of fundamentalist regimes and ensure that the newly independent Republics develop pro-Western policies, and, therefore, in accordance with the Western democratic model (Nichol, 2001). In the early 90s, European politicians questioned themselves about the "real importance of Central Asia", being that, effectively, "since 1991 until the mid-90s, it was of marginal importance for the European Union, a tendency that would continue until 1995/1996, when Brussels would finally recognize the energy potential in the region and develop a policy focused on energy issues in what concerns the Central Asian Republics" (Hunter 1996: 155).

Experts like Raquel Freire (personal interview, 2012), share the opinion that "the European Union is a late player in Central Asia". Nevertheless, Brussels has been intensifying, substantially, its involvement in the Central Asian Republics, since it formalized its regional strategy, in 2007, for "enhanced aid and relations for 2007-2013" (Nichol, Congressional Research Service, 2012: 7). However, we must stress that, "Central Asia is not a priority area to Brussels as, on the one hand, it does not belong to either its southern or eastern neighborhoods, on the other hand, nor it is part of any European powers' historical colonial interests" (Peyrouse, Boonstra and Laruelle, 2012: 5). Armando Marques Guedes (personal interview, 2011) considers that "Europe is very little present, collectively, in Central Asia", because, according to the author, "in fact, the European Union is not an international political actor as strong as we would like it to be, not even within the European territory, and it is even less outside it".

Memoranda of Understanding have been signed with several Central Asian Republics, with the goal of providing a more diversified access to energy resources to the European oil companies (Ashton, 2012). Nevertheless, the results still remain modest with regard to the implementation of Energy projects with the States of the region. In this regard, as Boonstra *et al*. (2009: 1) emphasize, "the European Union has few concrete projects to present, both with regard to dialogue with the Central Asian Republics rich in energy - Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan[5] - with the aim of increasing the exploitation of energy resources [of those countries], and to the energy imports themselves". In the understanding of a Kazakh expert, Assel Rustemova (personal interview, 2011), the European Union "may even be interested in Central Asia", but the truth is that "it does not have any influence on the region".

It should be noted that the European Union is a non-competitor when compared to China and Russia, which are more involved in the region. In fact, according to Vladimir Paramonov (2011), compared with Beijing and Moscow, the European Union does not have significant historical experience in terms of direct and/or indirect interaction with Central Asia, and the European Union's interests in the region are currently much less striking and stable when compared to those of Russia and China. It is not surprising, therefore, that experts like Armando M. Guedes (personal interview, 2011) emphasize, in practice, that "Europe has more strength in the former colonies, in Africa, than in Central Asia".

[5]With the exception of Kazakhstan.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, "the United States recognized the independence of all Central Asian Republics and established diplomatic relations with each of them, in mid-March 1992" (Nichol, 2003: 3). According to Zehra Akbar (2012: 9), the collapse of the Soviet Union led to "a power vacuum in the region", which could be to the strategic interests of Washington. Among the experts who warned of this fact, let us emphasize H. Kissinger (1994: 813), for whom "the control by a single power of any of the two major Eurasian spheres - Europe or Asia - represents a strategic threat to the United States ... Given that such a structure would have the ability to surpass the United States economically, and in the end, militarily. Such a threat must be fought, even if the dominant power is apparently benevolent ...".

With the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States would have, henceforth, an opportunity to strengthen their energy security and business interests, being that during the Soviet era, the Central Asian Republics had remained closed to foreign investment (Chi-Lin Yang, 2008). In a context where the Central Asian leaders themselves encouraged foreign companies to invest in their countries, in order to obtain profits and strengthen their recent independence with regard to Russia, the United States realized that they could not waste the opportunity, and that the oil emerging markets in Central Asia (Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, for example), could help them to reduce their energy dependence [in relation to the Middle East]" (Shah, 2009: 37).

According to Stephen Blank (personal interview, 2011), "there are three main reasons for the interest of the Washington in Central Asia". Firstly, "the struggle against terrorism following the attacks of September 11" (Blank, personal interview, 2011). Moreover, the fact that the United States wants to "prevent the emergence of any Eurasian 'empire' (be it Chinese, Russian, or possibly Iranian) in the region" (Blank, personal interview, 2011). Finally, the issue of energy. Here, the author, being American, admits without subterfuge: "We want to have free access to energy sources" (Blank, personal interview, 2011). In the opinion of Stephen Blank, "the core of the energy policy of the United States has been focused on promoting the development of multiple pipelines, linking external consumers and producers of energy" (2008: 76).

Russia has a long tradition of good relations with the States of the region, at least because these were part of the former Soviet Union during "more than seven decades" (Collins, 2002: 141). On the other hand, as Richard Rousseau (2011: 1) underlines, "since the end of the 19th century, until the mid-90s, Central Asia was almost an exclusive

domain of the Czarist, Soviet and post-Soviet Russia". This way, we understand why the demographic, cultural and economic ties have resisted to the political independence in the early 90s. Effectively, the weight of the Russian culture is still dominant in the region (Buckler, 2009). In this "space of the post-Soviet space", Russia uses the "economic and human bonds, the influence of language, military bases, and multilateral institutional mechanisms, in order to maintain a prominent presence in Central Asia" (Tomé, 2007: 1). Many members of the Central Asian economic and political elites finance the studies of their children in Russian universities. On the other hand, many Russians live in the States of the region, particularly in Kazakhstan, where they represent more than 30% of the population (World Fact Book, 2012). Furthermore, about two decades after independence, the economies of these countries are still considerably dependent on Russia, especially in what concerns the energy sector (Aris, 2013). As Gal Luft and Anne Korin (2009) refer, many, in Moscow, still conceive the region as a sphere of influence – of the past and of the future - of Russia, although the Russian experts and policy-makers clearly recognize the Islamic roots of Central Asia, the Chinese aspirations and the Western influence over the region.

The fact that Russia was the colonizing power in Central Asia presents positive and negative aspects. On the one hand, the long period of coexistence between colonizer and colonies bequeathed a language, history, culture and feelings of belonging common to Central Asian Republics (Beissinger, 2008). Regarding the negative aspects of this relationship, they manifest themselves at the level of "political sensitivities" and of the "cultural interpretations of the ties with the ancient colonizing power" (Laruelle, 2009: 4). In this sense, "the ties between Russia and the Central Asian Republics are complex, since both actors have highly emotional perception of their relation to the other" (Laruelle, 2009: 4).

Moscow's strategy towards Central Asia aims at, firstly, ensuring Russia’s leading role in the exploration, development and transportation of Central Asian energy resources (Antonenko, 2003). According to Isabel Gorst (2006: 12), "it should be noted that Russian natural gas production has been relatively weak in the latest years", so that "Russia has sought to increase its gas imports from the Caspian/ Central Asia region, where it acquires it at a very low price, and then sells it on European markets at a considerably higher price".

For Stephen Blank (personal interview, 2011), "Russia wants to secure its Muslim peripheries, in order to combat terrorism and Islamic revolutions, which constitute serious

threats to its safety". Blank (personal interview, 2011) considers, however, that "the Russian political and economic system is not able to survive in its current state, unless it can dominate the economy of the oil and natural gas in Central Asia, and compete with other players in the field". According to Edward Chow (personal interview, 2011), "Russia sees itself as the traditional power in the region, considers Central Asia as its sphere of influence, on which it would like to preserve a dominant role". This is also the point of view shared by Nargis Kassenova (personal interview, 2011), according to whom Central Asia is important to Moscow, because without it "Russia couldn't be a great power". Contrary to a policy "in general, incoherent, and improvisational" as Yeltsin policy towards Central Asia, there has been, however, in recent years, "a constant 'course correction' of Russian engagement in the region," guided by "desire to reassert Russian power and influence within the former Soviet space" (Giragosian, 2006: 138).

Final remarks

We revisited Mackinder, Spykman and Brzezinski, to better justify and understand the importance of Central Asia, from the strategic, political, economic point of view (including, among others, its vast energy potential), but also at the level of security and defense, for the great powers. The fact that it is devoid of maritime access does not prevent, as explained, that Central Asia is the region of the world where the effects of geopolitics and the competition between the great powers have stood out over the last few years. In a context where energy production from the North Sea has been declining, and where generic ambition since the big oil shocks, has consisted of depending less on oil and natural gas from the Middle East (highly unstable region), several major powers, such as Russia, China or the United States, have shown a growing interest in Central Asia. Although it is very difficult and/or unlikely to discover a region with an energy potential equal to or greater than the Persian Gulf, in the coming years, it should be noted, however, that the energy resources of the Caspian and Central Asia contribute to enhancing global energy security.

Although located in the same regional space, the various units, in this case, the states that compose it, are far from forming a homogeneous whole susceptible, from the start, to facilitate the understanding of the processes and political, economic and cultural realities to any curious person throughout the region. Instead, they tend to confuse an

unprepared and naive spirit that might want to envision similar realities and worldviews in states that followed different paths, after the end of the aggregator factor, i.e., the Soviet Union. On the other hand, and according to this order of ideas, it is stressed that "any general consideration on policy about Central Asia must take into account the nature of the regimes in power, as well as the specific interests of each of them" (Esengul, 2012). If, on the one hand, it is too obvious that the role of leadership is important, on the other, the personal relationship between each of the leaders is, also, fundamental.

In a space where nothing is defined and everything is played, there is still a certain general nostalgia, more or less evident, in the *Homo Sovieticus* (the result of a same culture and endowed with a singular personality) vis-à-vis the golden times when he didn't have to worry about anything, because the 'system' was in charge of everything. Contrary to the past, the 'emancipated' central Asians are, today, by themselves, children of Central Asia, a subregion devoid of ocean access, thanks to the 'goodwill' of cooperation of neighbouring states, including Russia and China, to access the rest of the world. And, it is interesting to notice as they are aware of their position of dependence regarding this 'goodwill' from the others, as evidenced by the rant of Meruert Makhmatova (2011), Kazakh investigator: "we are not major players, but part of the game". However, an important *part*, also capable, paradoxically, to frustrate the ambitions of foreign powers, as a result of their functional power.

In short, the Central Asian Republics are today, marked by different types of political, economic and social transformations, different paces and different concessions about the meaning of becoming history. They converge on the willingness to maximise the benefits of both great and small regional games, but demonstrate a lot of inability to establish common strategies and cooperate for the resolution of great and small regional problems.

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Recebido em: Fevereiro 2014;
Aprovado em: Abril 2014.