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Geopolitics of Kazakhstan: Theory and Practice

ABSTRACT

Article analyzes geopolitics of Kazakhstan, examines how it should look like in accordance with classic geopolitical theory and how it does look in practice, in particular in case of Kazakhstan membership in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which reflects Kazakh geostrategy in relations with Russia and China as the main factors of stability in Central Asia. Additional value of the article is that it is purely geopolitical while geopolitical method (theory) is usually misunderstood in the discipline of international relations, used rather freely often being confused with realistic paradigm. Also Central Asia as an object of analysis is not in the centre of global academic discourse and any additional study in the field of CA geopolitics broadens understanding of the external and internal political process in the region. The study showed that Kazakh geopolitics is predetermined to be continental, Heartland oriented, because Kazakhstan is located in the closest neighborhood of Russia and is a steppe land with the conservative identity totally different to the one of sea powers. Therefore its geopolitical gravitation towards strategic alliance with Moscow is very strong and even more strengthened by its president Nursultan Nazarbayev as a consistent partisan of the Russian geopolitical theory called Eurasism. Kazakhstan membership in EEU, initially initiated by Nazarbayev, supports the idea that geopolitical union with Russia is the essence of Kazakh geostrategy. At the same time Kazakhstan has good relations with China, but they are of secondary importance for Astana in comparison to cooperation with Russia. SCO is a comfortable platform for Kazakhstan to find its place in geopolitical dialogue of Moscow and Beijing. The problem is that nobody knows how Kazakh foreign policy will look like after Nazarbayev leaves the office, but classic geopolitical theory says that geopolitical orientation of Kazakhstan will hardly change in the long run because its conservative land identity is too strong.

Key words: Heartland, Eurasism, Central Asia, Russia in Central Asia, Geopolitics of Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev, Eurasian Economic Union, China in Central Asia, Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Introduction. Geopolitics of Kazakhstan is a very specific theme, and it is not explored enough yet because of several reasons. First, region of Central Asia (CA) is not in the centre of global academic discourse. In fact as an object of research it appeared on the academic map only after the collapse of the Soviet Union and actually experts did not have much time to explore it deeply. Besides, being authoritarian regimes the Central Asian states are rather closed for deep and objective inquiry. Russian experts are more interested in the problems of CA as a close strategic neighborhood of Russia. Western researchers give the main attention to energy security questions related to CA countries and their potential to become alternative to Russia source of oil and gas for Europe. Also to the role of Central Asia in the context of terroristic threat of Afghanistan, putting aside many other CA topics.

Second problem with the research of geopolitics of many countries (including Kazakhstan) is that geopolitical method (theory)¹ is usually misunderstood in the discipline of international relations. Term of “geopolitics” is used rather freely often being confused with realistic approach (paradigm) adding some geographical element. Therefore analysis of the geopolitics of Kazakhstan used to look like review of its foreign policy without serious theoretical geopolitical background with some exceptions (Khliupin, 1997).

But broad purely geopolitical researches on Central Asia generally and Kazakhstan in particular start to appear. For instance, publications of Lomonosov Moscow State University (in cooperation with famous Russian geopolitician Alexander Dugin) could be mentioned (Geopolitika, 2012; Geopolitika, 2013). Local Kazakh experts also begin to use geopolitical method appropriately (Kasabekov, 2011; Kydyrbekuly, 2011), what helps properly understand objective (geographical) backgrounds of the geopolitics of Kazakhstan, compare its theory to its practice and see if geopolitical gravitation of the country is in accordance with its geopolitical orientation.

The main purpose of this article was to use geopolitical approach strictly in order to define geostrategy for Kazakhstan in the framework of classic geopolitical theory and apply ideal model to analysis of its practical international relations. Inquiry showed that Kazakh geopolitics must be land (Russia) oriented, and actually – for now – it is with huge individual role of the president of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev strengthening its geopolitical course towards Eurasian integration.

1. Geopolitical Approach for Kazakhstan

Looking at world politics (especially at political and military moves of “big players”, such as America, Russia, European Union etc.), it is

¹ There is still a dispute on the status of geopolitics – is it only method of analysis or the full right theory. Geopoliticians of course say geopolitics is a theory, but it must be recognized that despite its clear fundamental principles, formulated by its founders, academic borders of geopolitics are too floating. It is precious characteristic looking from the position of interdisciplinary studies, but it is not good for geopolitics as defined academic research tool.

possible to say that classic geopolitics still rules it.

It is attractive as an art of power because it is simple in explaining how global system functions and what different states should (could) do seeking to find appropriate place in it. Of course World changed dramatically since 1904 when Halford Mackinder presented his famous article “The Geographical Pivot of History” (Mackinder, 1904) and postmodern geopolitics appeared. But actually it only complicates the same picture of classic geopolitical rivalry without changing its essence (for more in this context see: Adhikari, 2013).

In other words, only ways and tools of the traditional geopolitical fight change (sometimes its participants), but not its background. And this fight (its main participants) projects its “rules of the game” on the objects of this game. In case of Central Asia the concept of a “New Great Game” is even used (for example see: Kurečić, 2010). Therefore it is adequate to use classic geopolitical approach for Kazakhstan case analysis.

1.1 From Atlantism to Eurasism

There is no need to present here details of classic geopolitical theory and Mackinder’s concept of the World-Island. They are broadly known. Thus it will be enough to provide the main principles.

In the world history there are two opposite and constantly competing approaches to the assimilation of land and room — the “overland” approach and the “maritime” approach. Depending on what attitude (“overland” or “maritime”) the diverse states, peoples, nations, their historical consciousness adhere to, their foreign and domestic policy, their psychology, their world-view are shaped according to completely definite rules. Given such feature, it is quite possible to speak about an “overland”, “continental” or even “steppe” (“steppe” is “land” in its pure, ideal kind) world-view and about a “maritime”, “insular”, “oceanic” or “aquatic” world-view (Alexander Dugin, 2013).

Further Mackinder and other Western geopoliticians explained how sea power can overcome (control) land power: “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island controls the world” (Mackinder, 1942). Geographical borders of the so called Heartland are very similar to Russian borders. Therefore Russia is usually seen by geopoliticians as a more or less synonym of Pivot Area.

Nicholas Spykman actually complemented Mackinder’s theory proposing concept of Rimland. He accepted idea of Heartland, but key region of world politics according to him was rather the coastal region bordering Heartland that Mackinder called the “inner or marginal crescent” and that Spykman renamed the “Rimland”. He described Rimland as a vast buffer zone of conflict between sea power and land power and proposed his own law of domination: “Who controls the rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world” (Sempa, 2006).

All this is a Western geopolitical tradition, so called Atlantism. But Russian geopoliticians proposed their own view of the World which is known as Eurasism. In a geopolitical sense it began to indicate the continental configuration of a strategic (existing or potential) bloc, created around Russia or its enlarged base, and as an antagonist (either actively or passively) to the strategic initiatives of the opposed geopolitical pole — Atlantism, at the head of which at the mid-20th century the US came to replace England (Dugin, 2010).

To complete theoretical framework for analysis of Kazakh geopolitics terms of geopolitical gravitation and geopolitical orientation need to be defined. Geopolitical poles with determined continental and maritime identity seek to “absorb” as many territories as possible. Geography (location in regard to Heartland) and political (democracy v/s authoritarian rule), economic (market economy v/s state capitalism) and cultural (Liberalism v/s Conservatism; Catholicism v/s Orthodoxy / Islam) characteristics (again influenced by geography) of undecided Rimland countries push them towards one of the poles with similar features as an objective reality. But geopolitical orientation (formed by political-economic elite and/or part of people of the country) can change the nature determined trend dramatically. Civil war in Ukraine perhaps is the severest reflection of how geopolitical orientation can confront geopolitical gravitation.

1.2 Geostrategy for Kazakhstan

Central Asia in fact is a part of Heartland. Therefore theoretically there could be no question what kind of geostrategy Kazakhstan should have — only continental and Russia (basis of Heartland) oriented by its nature.

To say more, Kazakhstan is a steppe country what only strengthens its land identity because steppe as mentioned before is pure (ideal) land. Not accidentally Eurasian continent sometimes is called a “Great Steppe” (Mazhitov, 2009).

Finally, historically Kazakhstan is strongly connected to Russia being a part of Russian Empire and Soviet Russia. Besides Russian language still dominates in big cities of the country (not to speak about big Russian ethnic minority living in the northern part of Kazakhstan)

China in accordance with classic geopolitical logic should be located in the second place in Kazakh list of the main strategic partners. Theoretically Chinese geopolitical identity is dualistic with evident sea element, but its conservative cultural tradition determines the domination of continental geopolitical orientation of the country.

Conflict in Ukraine (in particular no Chinese support for western sanctions against Russia) demonstrated that Beijing made his choice and it is in favor of Eurasia, not Atlantism (possibly related to Hong Kong events). The best scenario for Kazakhstan in this context would be to find its place in constructive dialogue between Russia and China.

To be short, classic geopolitical theory sees Astana as a part of the Eurasian continental block somewhere in the middle of Moscow and Beijing. It does not mean that Kazakhstan must stand in tough opposition to the United States and/or Europe, but it does mean that relations with them must be for Astana of secondary importance in comparison to strategic geopolitical partnership with Russia (main priority) and China (high priority).

Foreign Policy Concept for 2014 — 2020 of the Republic of Kazakhstan (see references) supports presented vision of Kazakh geopolitics, but analysis of Astana position in case of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and some other directions of the Kazakh foreign policy is still needed to see how it is being implemented in practice.

2. Eurasism as a Priority of the Foreign Policy of Kazakhstan

Due to the polarization of the international system, the multi-vector policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan is subject to revision. The country will have to decide with whom to be. Perhaps even the issue is how to become a satellite of someone, given the proximity to the two giants of world politics — Russia and China, in their role as centers of gravity forces in the new world order (Medeubaeva, 2009).

There is a controversy in the political discourse of Kazakhstan about the historical choice of the priority foreign partner. On the one hand, there are calls to continue the systematic process of Eurasian integration, on the other — to ensure the independence of economy and policy from the influence of external forces.

2.1 Eurasian Economic Union — Attractive not Dangerous

Opponents of the Eurasian course are talking about the threat to national sovereignty. In addition, critics of the EEU fear rising prices for various products, weakening of the national currency, and interference in the internal affairs of Kazakhstan. Supporters of integration processes in the post-Soviet space argue that it will lead to the boosted national economy growth rates, the development of entrepreneurship, as well as the positive political experience of cooperation with Russia in various areas.

The statement of Vladimir Putin at Seliger contributed to the severity in disputes between Kazakhstan Patriots and Eurasians. In particular, he noted that Kazakh President Nazarbayev “made a unique thing — created a state on the territory, where it has never been before” and “in this sense, he is a unique person for the post-Soviet statehood.” In addition, the head of Russia described his colleague as “a very wise and experienced leader” who “always thinks about the future of his country” (Kazakhstan nikogda ne byl gosudarstvom — Putin, 2014).

However, critics were quick to say about the looming conflict in Russian-Kazakh relations and suggested that Kazakhstan could expect the fate of Ukraine (especially given the Russian-speaking north of the country). Moreover, they recalled the statement of Nazarbayev that, “if the rules, enshrined in the agreement, are not met, Kazakhstan has the right to withdraw from the Eurasian Economic Union,” and that “in the first place, we will never surrender our independence and, secondly, we will do our best to protect it” (Kazakhstan mozhet vyiti iz Evraziiskogo ekonomicheskogo soiuza — Nazarbaev, 2014).

Even moderate in judgments Arkadii Dubnov, a renowned Central Asia expert, wrote in this regard: “If to assume that the power in Astana is taken by a generation of Kazakh leaders, which threaten to Russian-speaking citizens and their rights and seem not loyal to Moscow, they will remember the history of the Kazakh SSR complement in the Soviet times by acceding some areas of southern Siberia and the Urals. In a word, they will remember Solzhenitsyn... And then a new story about little green men, polite or not, does not matter” (Dubnov, 2014).

However, when you come right down to it, this conflict is artificially fomented. Critics noticed the words of Putin, that they wanted to notice (the problems of Kazakhstan statehood), and ignored the words, they wished to ignore (namely praise to Nazarbayev). In fact, there are no real preconditions for tension in Russian-Kazakh relations. Russia does not need it absolutely whether from bilateral (it has too few faithful allies to lose them), or regional prospective (there is already a huge potential for conflict in the region).

It should be emphasized that Kazakhstan is the main initiator of the Eurasian project because the idea belongs to President Nazarbayev, who first announced it back in 1994.

As Elena Omel’chenko sums up: “Concept of Neoeurasism is very popular in the intellectual circles of Kazakhstan. Also it many times was officially proclaimed as a background of Kazakh identity” (Omel’chenko, 2011).

In other words, geopolitical orientation in case of Kazakhstan corresponds to its geopolitical gravitation, and the role of Nursultan Nazarbayev as a president of Kazakhstan is great in uniting them into integral geopolitical course. As Dugin writes: “Nazarbayev shows the place of Kazakhstan in global system: Kazakhstan thinks on behalf of the whole Eurasia (...)” (Geopolitika, 2012). After signing the EEU agreement on May 29, 2014 (which symbolically took place in Astana) Kazakhstan practically renounced the multi-vector course in foreign policy at the strategic level.

In addition, it must be understood that the historical choice of Kazakhstan in favor of integration with traditional partners in the CIS is based on the accurate economic calculation. “When totalizing the expectations of the 2008 — 2009s sample, they can be reduced to four main points. First of all, the Kazakh authorities wanted to get access to the huge Russian and Belarusian markets, creating the level playing field for Kazakh companies. Secondly, great hopes were placed on competition within the jurisdiction of the Customs Union — taxes in Kazakhstan are lesser and the investment climate is much better than in Russia. The third hope was due to the fact that in terms of the Customs Union Kazakhstan will gain access to the main oil and gas pipelines to Europe, which run through the territory of Russia, and therefore be able to enter into direct contracts with the EU buyers of hydrocarbons. Finally, integration with Russia in the future reduces the risk to remain alone with gaining strength China” (Gabuev, 2013).

In other words, except of geopolitical logic the goal of Kazakhstan integration into EEU is to increase the economy’s competitiveness in the world market. Do it alone is extremely difficult. Performance on the world stage as a single economic unit is conducive to strengthening of the EEU member states’ economies.

2.2 Altyn — not now

Almaty, being the southern capital of Kazakhstan, has all chances to become the financial center of the new union. “The supranational authority will be located in Almaty in 2025 to regulate financial markets of the union. I propose not to wait for the creation of the financial regulator and to position Almaty as the financial center of the Eurasian Economic Union,” — Nazarbayev said at a meeting of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council at the level of Heads of State (Almaty stanet fintsentrom EAES, 2014).

In this context, it is necessary to say a few words about the prospects for the introduction of a single currency within the EEU. It logically fits into the idea of creating an alternative (Eurasian) financial pole, as opposed to the system of dollar, euro and yuan. As stated by First Deputy Prime Minister of Russia Igor’ Shuvalov: “In a couple of years — 5-10 years, the issue of the single currency will be exactly: there will be a single emission center, a single currency” (Shavlokhova, 2014). However, Mikhail Deliagin, a director of the Institute of Globalization, is skeptical of this claim and called it populist. “The fact that Mr. Shuvalov puts such terms — 5-10 years — this is absolutely unacceptable. This is an empty propaganda conversation, albeit on the right topic,” — said the expert (Shavlokhova, 2014).

It is clear that the single currency is more beneficial for Moscow, than for others, given its economic weight in the EEU. Therefore, Russia’s alliance partners treat the initiative with caution. Of course, a serious geo-economic center (EEU, apparently, embarks on this path) is unthinkable without its own currency, and, in principle, Belarus and Kazakhstan are not against its introduction. However, the question is how it will look like and what kind of socio-economic impacts will occur.

Generally, Nazarbayev is the first who made a relevant initiative back in 2003, when the future currency was even named Altyn. The idea was supported by Moscow and Minsk, but its introduction was slow and eventually stalled. Now, given the Western sanctions against Russia (the need to strengthen the Eurasian economic independence), it again comes to the fore, but today the Eurasian tuned Kazakhstan is not ready to force events.

This is due primarily to the fact that the Eurasian integration created some difficulties for the Kazakh economy (inflation, unstable currency, etc.). It happened because the policy (Eurasian enthusiasm of the Heads of States) in this case is ahead of the economy (the real readiness of the country to compete within the EEU). Accordingly, today the population of Kazakhstan and the expert community fear that

the single currency will aggravate the situation even more, and the president — much as one would like to increase the pace of the Eurasian integration — simply cannot take into account the current situation. Also by no means idle the issues of creating the single central bank, the emission center location and financial (and, in fact, political) sovereignty.

Thus, Almaty can surely claim to be the EEU financial center, but the single currency introduction seems to have to be put on hold. It is noted that the single currency is “the next step after the economic union creation”. However, as Anna Sysoeva, a representative of the Ministry of Economic Development of Russia, states that, to date, this subject is not on the agenda in negotiations between Belarus, Russia and Kazakhstan. It is only being discussed, and the transition to the single currency on the basis of the EEU will not take place earlier than in 2025 (Moskva: Edinaia valiuta v Evraziiskom soiuzhe poiavitsia ne ran'she 2025 goda, 2014)

In general, the Eurasian integration within the EEU strengthens the structural economic and political power of Kazakhstan, as well as its status on the world stage.

2.3 CSTO as a Military Pillar of Eurasism and Interest of Kazakhstan

If creation of EEU is a political and economic element of the Russian Eurasian geopolitics in the post-soviet area, Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) can be called its military pillar (similar to NATO in case of the Western geopolitical camp). It must become guarantor of hard security for its members, especially for CA countries.

As the developments of recent years in the countries of the so-called “Arab Spring”, the internal political stability faced with great difficulties in the face of threats from the radicals, financially and informationally supported from abroad within the framework of great geopolitical game. Having left alone with such a threat, the government runs the risk to become a failed state.

Kazakhstan became a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization on a number of reasons:

- Due to its geographical stance, Kazakhstan stands a good chance to face the challenges of regional security. It is not only terror, but also the attempts to destabilize the political situation in the country. The states, professing the doctrine of Atlantism, may try to destabilize the situation along the borders of Russia and China. In this case, Kazakhstan risks to be at the forefront of the struggle between the geopolitical centers of power (in this regard, there is even an opinion that the events in Kazakh Zhanaozen in December 2011, as well as, for example, the events in Andijan, Uzbekistan, in May 2005, were instigated by the United States to make it clear how the country is susceptible to “color revolution”);

- There is a real possibility of the armed conflict scenario between the Central Asian countries because of the controversy around the use of water and earth resources (remember the famous geopolitical concept of “living space”). As Vitalii Khliupin wrote: “The primordial, age-old woes of the entire Central Asian region are water and earth, or rather their obvious lack for the majority of natural resources users. (...) But while Kazakhstan can safely place on its territory even millions of people, Uzbekistan has no space to develop in breadth and, perhaps, it is high time to think seriously about the population control. (...) This analysis of relationships between the newly-sovereign Central Asian republics — Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan — suggests the presence of a hidden latent conflict” (Khliupin, 1997). And that’s not to mention the potentially conflictive oil and gas factor, complex inter-ethnic relations in Central Asia and struggle for regional leadership. The CSTO and Russia as a geopolitical controlling entity are the effective deterrents in this context;

- In early nineties of the last century due to various reasons Kazakhstan renounced the nuclear status and does not yet have powerful non-nuclear armed forces. Privileged military cooperation with Russia within the frameworks of the CSTO allows Astana to feel safe under the Russian “nuclear umbrella” and to strengthen its conventional armed forces.

It is worth mentioning individually the issue of Afghanistan, which is a potential source of direct military aggression for the Central Asian states, because the Afghan government is not able to provide the necessary level of security within the country. Besides, some groups of people from different countries of the former Soviet Union, being among Afghan militants, are the carriers of radical ideas to combat the secular regimes, and over recent years the extremists’ intrusion on the territory of Kazakhstan is increasingly realistic. With the advent of the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant, the risk is even higher. The CSTO format allows to coordinate the work of security services in the fight against terrorism and extremism, which largely contributes to the stable political situation in Kazakhstan.

3. SCO as a “Geopolitical Brace” for Kazakhstan in Relations With Russia and China

Central Asia is a unique in its kind region, wedged on different sides by interests of the great powers: the American military presence in Afghanistan on the one hand and the geographic proximity of Russia and China on the other will inevitably lead to a clash of their geopolitical interests. In many ways it foregrounds the need to create a format for dialogue, firstly, between the countries of the region, secondly, with China, thirdly, with the Russian Federation. Interests of Moscow and Beijing in geo-strategy matters are very similar (for example, China does not claim to military-political leadership in Central Asia, reserving the right of it for Russia), which allows to combine efforts on a wide range of issues, among which the cross-border cooperation, trade and ensuring regional security are of high priority.

Since the late 90s Russian-Chinese relations brought about the strategic partnership, which has found its practical expression in the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a new continental center of attraction. At the initial stage of development, its main task was to create an institutional negotiating and geo-economic platform in the Central Asian region.

In this context, it should be emphasized that “among the many topics, that are in demand, at the September SCO summit in Dushanbe, the revival of the legendary Silk Road overshadowed the subject of Ukrainian crisis or civilized conflict in the world. It is interesting to observe that four of the six leaders of the countries — members of the SCO — highlighted the opportunity of the world trade route revival and the preparedness of their countries and their infrastructures for the achievement of these purposes” (Mamadzimov, 2014).

The Chinese leader Xi Jinping even offered 5 billion dollars soft loan to other member-states of the SCO, which will mainly be focused on the implementation of projects related to the initiative to create the “Economic Belt of the Silk Road”. Russian President Putin is also interested in the implementation of this idea, suggesting to these needs the Russian railway infrastructure on the Trans-Siberian Railway, Baikal-Amur Mainline Railway and other sites. Although the leaders of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan did not deliver their speech on the Silk Road revival at the summit in Dushanbe, it does not mean that they are indifferent to this initiative. For example, Astana for several years is successfully implementing the large-scale project “Western China — Western Europe”, which, in essence, is a revival of the northern route of

the historical Silk Road, turning Kazakhstan into a convenient transit territory.

Probable joining the SCO by such new members as India and Pakistan (and in prospect Iran) will only increase economic and political weight of the organization in the regional and global scale. In case of further development of integration processes on this continental platform (especially if they gain military features in addition to the political and economic trends, for example, with a view to combating terrorism and Islamic extremism), one may talk of the appearance of a full-fledged Eurasian geopolitical bloc as an alternative to the transatlantic alliance in Europe and the United States, united by Free Trade Agreement.

This is only a trend now. However, as shown by the individual conflicts and crisis situations (Syria, Ukraine, Hong Kong), the separation of the positions and interests on the basis of classical geopolitical confrontation theory is becoming increasingly evident. The polarization of the world, uniting major players of large spaces, increases and each country (as in the days of the Cold War) have to choose one or another paradigm for future development.

The role and place of Kazakhstan in this process has already been determined to a large extent, however, associated with certain nuances. As mentioned above, practically Astana is already acting in the geopolitical conjunction with Moscow and would like to take an advantageous position in their relations, as well as in relations to Beijing. Fortunately, China and Russia appear to be more and more close, and the SCO in this case is the convenient field for Kazakhstan's games (maneuver) in the framework, outlined by the Eurasian geostrategy. In this regard, attention should be paid to several points.

Firstly, the expansion of the SCO definitely reduces the role of Astana in the organization, given the higher in every sense statuses of newly-joined powers. Therefore, in order not to get lost in the new reality, it is expedient for Kazakhstan (or even it will have) to work more closely with Russia, which is likely to head the Central Asian bloc in the SCO. Thus, both members of the alliance will strengthen their position that is conducive to successfully promotion of common interests in their relations with other major players.

Secondly, the SCO is an excellent mechanism for the implementation of the economic potential of Kazakhstan, with its energy and transit opportunities. At the same time, it is important for Astana not to admit conflicts between Russia and China because of their oil and gas resources. Astana should try to make the projects in this area beneficial to all stakeholders. Now it copes with this task, acting on the principle — if not Russia, than China and Russia or China, if Moscow is not interested in a particular project at all. In this case, Moscow's desire to engage in constructive dialogue and compromise with Beijing largely helps to avoid tensions.

As for the idea of the "New Silk Road", here it is important for Kazakhstan to become a key transit node. From the foregoing, it is clear that the project discussed may have several routes (in particular, the north and the south). Of course, Russia will try to promote its (northern) direction, and it is important for Kazakhstan to fit in, at the same time not giving up participation in the possible alternative routes, since the potential of the "New Silk Road" is so huge that all possible means of delivery could be in demand. Here the SCO is to help harmonize various nuances, associated with the issue.

Summarizing, one can say that Kazakhstan's participation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as in the case of the Eurasian Economic Union contributes to the further development of its economic and foreign policy potential, strengthening the country's position in the international arena as a whole and in the continental geopolitical process in particular.

It stands to reason, the choice in favor of the continental Eurasian states bloc conjugates with certain risks. In fact, the EEU and the SCO are being gradually transforming into a club of the West rivals and, therefore, theoretically Kazakhstan may be a hostage in increasing global geopolitical confrontation (eg, becoming a victim of sanctions as an ally of China and Russia). However, the reality is that (a) the choice should be made in any way, (b) the geography and history do not leave many options for Kazakhstan to choose from, (c) the benefits from the membership in the EEU and the SCO, as well as general Eurasian geopolitical orientation certainly outweigh all possible risks.

Conclusion. Geopolitics of Kazakhstan is a hot topic both from academic and practical point of view, as its study contributes to the development of the misunderstood in many cases geopolitical theory and allows better understanding of the Central Asian political process specificity. The study showed that, based on the tenets of classical geopolitics, which largely continue to dominate world politics, the geostrategy of Kazakhstan should be continental (Eurasian) in nature. Membership in the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization, headed by Russia, shows that the geopolitical orientation of Astana is perfectly correlated with its geopolitical gravity, and in many respects, it is a merit of the Kazakh President Nazarbayev. At the same time, it is important the country to take its rightful economic and political place in the geopolitical dialogue between Russia and China, and the SCO, being a «geopolitical brace» in the Central Asian region, that is an ideal platform for this. The problem is that nobody knows how Kazakh foreign policy will look like after Nazarbayev leaves the office, but classic geopolitical theory says that geopolitical orientation of Kazakhstan will hardly change in the long run because its conservative land identity is too strong.

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