

# Geopolitical perspectives of the triangle “Kyiv – Minsk – Nur-Sultan”, situated on the Chinese “Silk Road” under the “American umbrella”

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## Abstract

The article examines the growing turbulence at the borderlands of Heartland and Rimland. According to Spaykmen, Rimland – a curve with countries situated between Heartland and EU external fortnight (as he called them Mackinder), this arc, he scored a Western European, Middle East, Southwest Asia, China and the Far East with British and the Japanese islands. Countries of this arc, in comparison with Heartland, possessed big human and industrial resources, both land, and sea capacity.

**Key words:** geopolitical triangle, infrastructure projects, transcontinental axes, “north-south” linkages, the E40 Inland Waterway, American umbrella.

## Introduction

One cannot help but notice growing turbulence at the borderlands of Heartland and Rimland (Rimland, 2015), driven by a number of global trends. Firstly, China was finally asserted as a country of geopolitical dualism spreading its own hegemony around the Eurasian perimeter as well as by land, through the “Silk Road Economic Belt”. Secondly, the “geopolitical duel” between USA and Russia is compounded by struggle for the energy communication networks in the region of Central and Eastern Europe. And thirdly, most of the post-soviet countries tend to strengthen their own subjectivity by “multi-vector” foreign policy. In

particular, such regional countries like Kazakhstan, Belarus and Ukraine are threatened to be absorbed by global states. Although those countries possess the sufficient geo-economic potential for making alliances and therefore strengthening own geopolitical status.

Moreover, Ukraine faces a challenge to take part in geopolitical alliances with countries possessing equal geopolitical status in order to strengthen own subjectivity and to get rid of the “grey zone” status. Therefore, our state could be identified in frames of such geopolitical area, which security would ultimately contribute to enduring geopolitical interests of global actors.

## Material and methods

The purpose of the study is to analyze the possibilities for making geopolitical alliances with regional leading countries aimed to raise own geopolitical status and the energy security level in the region. On the one hand, taking into

account geopolitical interests of global actors. On the other hand, ensuring that no one power or group of powers completely controls the borderlands of Heartland and Rimland.

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## **Results and discussion**

According to geopolitical concepts, Heartland is known to be that “pivot” or “heart” area, around which the world turns. As H. Mackinder asserted, post-soviet countries, partly eastern European states, Mongolia and a part of Iran were included herein. Central Asia, Afghanistan and Ukraine are known to be classical Heartland of H. Mackinder. Heartland smoothly turns into Rimland, coastal zones of Eurasia, whose key value was proved by N. J. Spykman thereafter.

In view of key geopolitical position of the above-mentioned territories, we should assert, that in the modern world the concept of civilizational identity was actualized lately as a factor of state sovereignty. Participation in civilizational alliances and unions as well as access to the sea, level of development of energy networks and transport communicational networks are components of the geopolitical status of any state.

Modern “multi-vector” foreign policy of Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan is a result of external pressure, which precipitated the domestic upheaval therefore. Bolstered by unclear ideology “to which God we pray” and further economic effects of coronavirus pandemic, the “shaky” civilizational identity of both three nations may cause far-reaching consequences, up to the complete absorption by stronger players.

Moreover, suspected infrastructural stability in frames of the given area corresponds to interests of those regional or global actors, whose economic security would be enhanced by such infrastructure (energy networks and transport communicational networks). As well as of actors interested in “cutting” geopolitical axes, created by Moscow.

Therefore, the purpose of construction of the triangle “Kyiv – Minsk – Nur-sultan” should be to hold the “balance of power” at the regional level of the global system in order to ensure that no one power or group of powers absorbs any of the three states.

First of all, let’s observe interests of the global actors concerning Kazakhstan, Belarus and Ukraine.

As it is well known, China strengthens its “continental power” overland through the “Silk Road Economic Belt”. It is defined as “a network of highways and railways, oil and gas pipelines, as well as other infrastructure projects, passing from Xi’an (central China) through Central Asia till Rotterdam and Venice” (Kiktenko V.O., 2017).

In accordance with N. Spykman’s theory, prevailing possibilities of access to the key Eurasian land and sea areas are located in the Caspian region. And the ancient Great Silk Road (the prototype of the modern one) passed through the Kazakhstan territory and the Caspian coastline.

“Multi-vector” foreign policy of modern Kazakhstan consists of range of partnership agreements, especially in energy sector, with EU, PRC and USA, as well as well of past attempts to reanimate the concept of “Eurasian Union”. Kazakh oil fields are in priority for American energy corporations such as Chevron and Exxon, which operate under production sharing contracts. Having abandoned nuclear weapons project and having changed “Cyrillic vocabulary to Latin one” Nur-Sultan represented by K. J. Tokaev introduces liberal economy principles under the auspices of USA more actively than other post-soviet republics.

But Chinese (as well as Russian) leaders continue to credit Kazakhs with creating a failed state, absence of statehood and needs of external help (Narratives war, 28.04.2020). Although Kazakhstan is that “classical Heartland”, the most convenient route of Chinese investments for oil fields and communicational networks” in comparison with other un convenient and far routes like Malacca Strait etc.

Moreover, mutual commitments within the SCO and Kazakh non-radical Muslim geo-culture are excellent instruments for ensuring security in unstable Xinjiang, Tibet and Inner Mongolia (Clarke M., 10.09.2015). Through which the “One Road – One Belt” would pass. Logistic through land routes is up to 2-4 times shorter than sea routes.

Meanwhile the common infrastructure is quite extensive. These are the “Kazakhstan-China” oil pipeline, the longest section of the “Central Asia –

China” gas pipeline, the “Western China-Western Europe” highway and the Trans-Asian Railway from the Yellow Sea through China, Russia and Europe with annual increases of logistics. Thus, the majority of common projects are realized within Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), Ukraine has recently joined hereto.

In order to strengthen its “western flank” (in particular, to get access to the ports of the Baltic and the Black Sea as well as of the Adriatic coast), China will foster investments to any projects connected with cooperation between the Three Seas. Since 2012 16 central and eastern European countries were engaged under the 16+1 cooperation format by way of forming link of transport and energy communication networks, clusters and industrial zones.

Taking into account launch of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) (Contessi N.P., 03.03.2020), any initiatives, which slow down or outstrip logistics along the Eurasian meridians (through India, Iran, Russia to Europe) would be pedaled by Beijing in the nearest future.

The next trend is “geopolitical duel” between the USA (a thalassocracy) and the Russian Federation (a tellurocracy) at the Rimland’ and Heartland’ borderlands. It is mostly represented by imposing of energy sources and appropriate communications at the CEE region.

Although a “thalassocracy” has been weakened at the global level because of withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Germany etc., role of other instruments of influence grows up. In particular, such as forming web of allies in order to save resources for local U.S. needs. Which must be concentrated on strengthening of the US state in frames of protectionist policy and realistic model called “Make America great again”, proclaimed by D. Trump.

As to a “tellurocracy”, the ideological range like the “orthodoxy – autocracy – nationality” is still an additional manipulation instrument in the region. Nevertheless, Moscow still seeks the reinvigoration of integration in the “post-Soviet space” and Kazakhstan, Belarus and Ukraine seem to be “keys” to that door. Different “locks” will probably be matched to these “keys”. By combining military strength with energy alliances

taking into account the damaging economic effects of the pandemic coronavirus.

After all, the amendments to the Constitution of the Russian Federation presuppose “preserving the all-Russian cultural identity” by “defending ethnic Russians and financing pro-Russian public organizations” abroad (The full text, 14.03.2020).

Taking into account discourse of the American politicians about the expected withdrawal from NATO (Dörner A., Meiritz A., 03.08.2020), the US authorities will be interested in geo-economic but not yet military instruments, which could prevent formation of trans-continental axes like the EU-Russia-Kazakhstan-China. As well as weakening logistics by vectors: “Moscow – Baku – Ankara”, “Beijing – Moscow – Berlin – Paris”, “Moscow – Tehran”. Which exist mostly by means of “tightening” the so-called transport communication “belts” (as well as unified electric grids), military-strategic cooperation and lobbying (Mankoff J., 2020).

In geopolitical dimension infrastructural projects “along the Eurasian parallels” “strengthen” the “continental power” of the Russian Federation and the PRC. But the hegemons seek access to the coastal zones and energy-rich regions of the Caspian and the Middle East through meridian axes. Thus, range of projects within the framework of the “Three Seas” Initiative break the above mentioned “Eurasian continental” axes. The Intermarium Initiative seems to be among the most actual in view of involvement a number of countries (Ukraine as well) to the infrastructure projects developing “north-south” linkages. Furthermore, the US’ strategic vision does not include Kazakhstan being a “connecting link” for regional “partners” Russia, China and Iran. Accordingly, the geopolitical alliance “Kyiv – Minsk – Nur-Sultan” has additional potential to hamper any logistics along the Eurasian meridians, respectively. The similar task was for “the Greater Middle East”, “the Greater Central Asia”, GUAM and other Eurasian projects.

By the way, taking into account a threat to energy security and European dependency on Russian energy imports, American administration plans to support Central and Eastern European energy infrastructure with \$1 billion. The given money is to be transferred within the framework

of the “Three Seas” Initiative (The energy sector, 19.02.2020). Ukraine and Poland will be involved herein.

But geopolitical “dividends” of cooperation under this Initiative are not limited to energy supplies...

The above-mentioned launch of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) will foster increasing of traffic from the Caspian region, the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, the South-West Asia to Russia and Europe through the Volga-Don-Danube water corridor. It will be launched after the final resolution of the disputed issues on the status of the Caspian Sea between the coastal states. So partly this traffic could be covered by the Inland Waterway E40 (IWW E40), which would pass in parallel.

“The E40 Inland Waterway (E40 IWW) is a transnational project aimed at establishing a 2,000 km Black-to-Baltic-Sea inland waterway through Poland, Belarus and Ukraine” (E 40 Inland Waterway).

This project was firstly initiated by Turkey in order to implement a more convenient route for the supply of Belarusian petroleum products than through Klaipeda, bypassing all of Europe.

The given project is realized under the aegis of the EBRD and the EIB according to the Cross-Border Cooperation Program (Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, Turkey), “connecting the seaports of Gdansk and Kherson. It consists of the following rivers and canals: Vistula, Bug (new canal to be built), Mukhavets, Pina, Pripyat and Dnieper” (E 40 Inland Waterway).

The Deputy Minister of Transport and Communications of Belarus Natalya Aleksandrovich declared, that “the given waterway is the shortest route to many traditional markets [...] Being a landlocked country, Belarus exports goods mainly through Baltic ports, but the country is interested in gaining access to the sea” (Beestriskaya O., 23.10.2019).

Notwithstanding some ecological obstacles, which should be overcome (E 40 Inland Waterway), the given project provides great perspectives for Poland, Belarus and Ukraine due to cheapness of logistics of raw materials and goods to the new markets.

And since India is interested in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) (Mumbai is the last point), it turns to be a competitive project for the Chinese “Belt and Road” Initiative. Therefore, in frames of Cooperation of the “Three Seas” the E40 IWW is geopolitically advantageous both for USA and China.

Going back to energy projects, Ukraine and Belarus were lately focused on procurement of energy resources from Azerbaijan due to available energy communication networks, in particular, “Odessa-Brody”. Nur-Sultan is known to be mostly focused on China and Russia, the reasons I’ve explained above. But in its turn, Baku is known to be geo-culturally and geo-economically focused on Turkey, which has almost completely redirected to and Qatari gas “in spite” of Russia (Huseynov V., 22.09.2020). More over the issue of security of energy supplies in the region is compounded by escalation of the Armenia-Azerbaijani conflict. That also blocks any opportunities within the framework of the Eastern Partnership.

As for the present fluctuations in oil prices, Nur-Sultan is more interested in diversification of its potential buyers in order to secure its geo-economic stability and to be more geopolitically independent. Furthermore, Kazakhstan’s oil reserves significantly exceed those of Azerbaijan.

In its turn, the Belarusian economics is overly reliant on oil the way the Ukrainian is overly reliant on gas. Taking into account Belarusian inner political situation, its prospects for replenishing the ranks of the “World Nuclear club” are being postponed. And regular supplies of the American crude oil seem to be too expensive for Minsk in such upheaval.

As we know, Kazakh oil appears in the world markets due to functioning of the Caspian Pipeline Consortium. The company delivers crude oil from Kazakh fields to Russian ports on the Black Sea. Ports of Anaklia (Georgia) and Dubendi (Azerbaijan) will be soon put into operation as an alternative to Russian ones.

Thus, most of Kazakhstan’s oilfields (like the Tengiz, Kashagan, Karachaganak) – and partly the stocks of networks of the Caspian Pipeline Consortium belong mostly to American as well as

to European and Kazakh companies such as Chevron i Exxon, British Gas, Eni etc (Tyshkevich I., 30.10.2019).

Igar Tyshkevich, a well-known Ukrainian expert on Ukrainian-Belarusian relations, notices: "International participants act at all oilfields under production sharing contracts. Thus, partly oil and gas are bought by Kazakhstan, the rest becomes property of developers. [...] Therefore, at the basis of the Intergovernmental agreement, Belarus can in fact contract with American companies. [...] If crude oil is being extracted by American companies, their production distribution at the market is up to 1 billion \$... That is a business interest of those American oilmen, who possess powerful lobby in the US Congress and, in particular, in the Republican Party..."

As I.Tyshkevich concludes, "by pumping oil through "Odessa-Brody" to Mozyr as well as to eastern European countries, there is a chance to achieve significant volumes of oil (10-12 mln.t.) during the first year of cooperation".

The expert adds, that according to the EU agreement Association, Ukraine is obliged to form its own oil products fund up to 2 million tons oil

## Conclusions

Currently, all the necessary prerequisites for the formation of a geopolitical triangle "Kazakhstan-Belarus-Ukraine" have been formed. Since the bipolar system of international relations disappeared, the process of forming new alliances still goes on. Creation of the sphere of common geopolitical influence of the three countries at the regional level would increase the geopolitical status of each as well

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equivalent. Therefore I.Tyshkevich supposes, Ukraine should initiate creation of a Consortium of countries for joint purchase and transportation of oil from Kazakhstan (and from other countries prospectly) (Tyshkevich I., 30.10.2019).

Nevertheless, such collaboration in frames of Consortium will probably turn to be one more geopolitical instrument of strengthening our triangle as well as secured by American "umbrella". In some sense China would be interested in drawing Nur-Sultans attention from east to west in order to deprive Uighur and Tibetan separatists of any chance of support. Besides influence of Moscow to Nur-Sultan would weaken no doubts.

It is important to add, that there are free tanks of the Kremenchug petroleum refinery and other Ukrainian factories, which may be used as oil storage tanks. In frames of the Consortium there will be a possibility to store additional reserves of Kazakh oil in Ukraine due to absence of the appropriate infrastructure in Kazakhstan. Indeed, due to the collapse of oil prices at the global market, the OPEC+ forces to reduce oil extraction.

as improve energy security in the region taking into account the interests of global actors in order to restrain any imperial ambitions at the border of Heartland and Rimland. Infrastructure sustainability, provided by key Eurasian communications, will contribute to the geoeconomic development of this strategic union and to the exit of the "gray zone" status.

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