US is Concerned about the Steps China is about to Take in Central Asia

Recently, a new stage in the confrontation between China and the United States has unfolded in the vast expanses across Central Asia (CA), Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan.

As Washington and Delhi draw closer to each other, Beijing is developing closer ties with the countries in Central Asia, Iran, and Pakistan. Afghanistan is also in China’s line of sight, but the US influence in the Islamic republic is still quite strong, and so the Sino-American confrontation there is still only picking up momentum.

In this confrontation, Washington is using every tool available at its disposal through the activities done by, and publications from, pro-Western nongovernmental organizations and the Central Asian press, which are now working with support given by Western funds. Even the situation surrounding COVID-19 turned into an active component in this standoff a long time ago. Phil Caruso, a fellow at the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, who previously worked in the American intelligence services, believes that today a situation has emerged in Central Asia where the rivalry between the United States and China over it will only worsen in the near future.

Growing US interest in the Central Asian region, and establishing the C5+1 dialogue format, prompted Beijing to create its own new format for interacting with Central Asian countries - C+C5 - whose first meeting was held on July 16 this year in the form of a video conference with foreign ministers from China and CA countries. Commenting on the first meeting in the C+C5 format, China emphasized that the emergence of this new format is due to a global economic center that is shifting towards Asia, and the increasing importance the Central Asian region plays in world politics, and under these conditions the appearance of C+C5 demonstrates Beijing’s readiness to begin the struggle for influence in the region.
Over the past decade, Beijing has already built up extensive infrastructure in Central Asia, such as the Central Asia-China gas pipeline, which is more than 2,200 miles long and stretches through Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan before reaching its destination in China’s Xinjiang Province. Turkmenistan ranks fourth in the world in terms of natural gas reserves, and is the largest supplier of this resource to China. And that is why nowadays Beijing has become the largest investor in Turkmenistan: last year, almost 90% of the latter’s exports went to China.

The fact that Central Asia, South Asia, and Afghanistan have become a new, very active battleground between the United States and China for world leadership is not surprising, since billions of dollars are in the picture due to the fact that countries in the region stand along the path of major commerce and energy corridors that connect South Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. And both Washington and Beijing are extremely well aware of the fact that Central Asia, an area rich in mineral resources, is one of the most strategically important regions on the planet, and control over it will enable accessing raw materials like oil and gas. At the same time, for Beijing it is Central Asia that can become an “outpost” against US hegemony in the Persian Gulf located further south.

Even back in February 2002, Colin Powell, who was then the US Secretary of State, announced: “America will have a continuing interest and presence in Central Asia, of a kind that we could not have dreamed of before.” Being primarily a US Army general in terms of his thinking, it was the US military positions in Central Asia that caused him particular concern. In the wake of the war on terror that the US declared after the tragic events of September 9, 2001, in December 2001 the US military seized the Manas Air Base in northern Kyrgyzstan near the country’s capital, Bishkek, to assist in the illegal war in Afghanistan, provide a platform for controlling the area’s oil or gas reserves, and curb Chinese and Russian projects in Central Asia. By February 2002, Washington had established military bases in all Central Asian countries, and at that stage controlled the region. The United States was already seeking to undermine and destabilize China by encouraging separatist movements that want areas like Xinjiang to secede from the rest of China, and had hatched plans to fragment the PRC. Along with that, it should not be forgotten that Xinjiang is China’s largest province, and holds key significance for Beijing since it is also China’s second-largest oil producing province, lagging behind only Heilongjiang Province. In addition, Xinjiang is the main entry point from China to Central Asia.

However, the Central Asian dream mentioned by Colin Powell ended six years ago: in July 2014, the Pentagon was forced to abandon its last remaining Central Asian base in Kyrgyzstan, which US forces had used for more than 12 years, after the parliament in Bishkek voted to “evict” US troops.

Under these conditions, Washington is zealously monitoring China’s activity in Central Asia, and this topic is of increasing interest for American analysts, as evidenced by the shift in the focus of interest for the US information resources that are designed to cover the situation in the region. Recently, the American military department has begun to show particular concern about this, and it even devoted a new annual report to Congress (on September 1) that covers the PRC’s military power. At the same time, Pentagon analysts admit that Chinese troops have already surpassed American forces in areas like shipbuilding, its program for conventional ground-based ballistic missiles and cruise missiles, and integrated air defense systems, which include, besides Chinese-produced systems, the S-400 and S-300 produced in Russia.

It follows from this document put out by the Pentagon that the US agency believes that the Chinese command intends to set up the full-scale base infrastructure and logistics systems abroad so that the PLA has the resources to “project and sustain military power at greater distances.” The US believes that China is examining the possibility of building new military facilities abroad, including in Central Asia. In addition, Tajikistan is mentioned as one of 12 countries that the PLA “is very likely already considering” as a possible option.

At the same time, it needs to be remembered that at the beginning of last year The Washington Post published its suspicions about the Chinese military reinforcing its presence in a deserted area at the intersection of the borders where Tajikistan, China, and Afghanistan all meet. There, one reporter at the marketplace spotted PLA soldiers wearing military unit insignia from Xinjiang, a Chinese area that borders Tajikistan, on their collars.

The Pentagon’s excitement over the “Chinese military presence in Central Asia” intensified last year, when Tajikistan held joint military exercises with Chinese armed forces in the same area for a second time, and even American military analysts suspected that “Dushanbe is increasingly outsourcing its security needs to Beijing”.

Sure, in recent years, the scope of Chinese security assistance to Tajikistan has increased dramatically, and Beijing has promised to repair several dozen sentry outposts along the border with Afghanistan. Tajikistan is one of the important areas for stepping up military and political cooperation between the two countries. China fears that if serious destabilization occurs in Afghanistan this could spill over to neighboring Tajikistan, and further on
throughout other Central Asian countries, and especially into China’s Xinjiang Province. Under these conditions, it is only natural that China is making every effort to prevent this from happening. However, the Tajik Ministry of Foreign Affairs denied information contained in the Pentagon report that a Chinese military base may appear in the country.

*Vladimir Odintsov, a political observer, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.*