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Vol. 6 nr. 03 | 2013

Changing the name of the game: From Chess to GO

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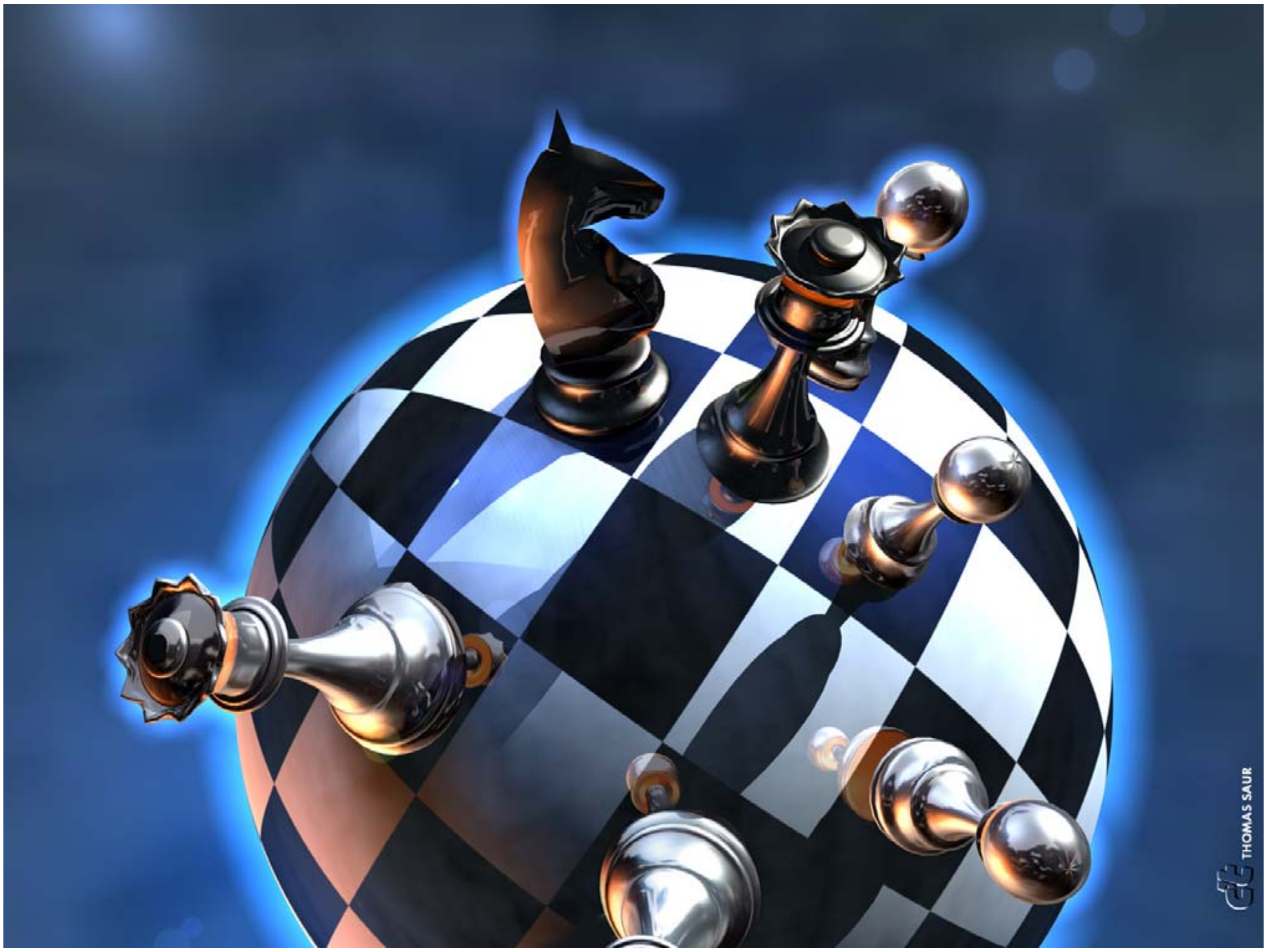

The Big Global Game, the Eurasian Suppliers Belt and „The three geo's"

The transformation in the geopolitics of the past years succeeded in changing the Global Big Game. The retreat from the Central Asian wars, the lack of will and desire to use military action in international politics, the economic subprime crisis in the US and the deficit crisis in Europe, all these are shaping the transition and changing the Big Game. But more important is the shale oil and gas revolution that has transformed the US from a consumer of energy products into a future exporter.

The consequences for the Global Big Game are becoming dramatic: the Middle East ceases to be as important for energy supply, thus the only thing at stake for the US remains its strategic partnership with Israel. The relinquishing of oil and gas from the region allowed other consumers to step in and try to fill their own energy deficit. The lack of interest on the part of the US and the rise of China as a competitor, as well as the economic crisis have all determined Washington to prioritize its investments on the global scene and to choose to pivot towards Asia-Pacific as well as to retreat from other regions, thus cutting the costs.

Basically the new Big Global Game shifted in the manner in which the big the consumers of the world are being supplied – Europe and South East Asia. There were two options: using the Eurasian[1] Suppliers Belt running from the Gulf Countries and Middle East via Central Asia to Russia, in a continental approach, or using suppliers from other parts of the world – Africa or Latin America. Answering this question was tremendously important for the Big Game, in order to decide whether China is moving towards being more continental than it was traditionally during its evolution, or becoming more maritime and global, thus challenging the US as a global power.

No doubt China is already a global power, even though it does not recognize this status and claims that its only interest is market-oriented. Its activities in Africa, South America and the Pacific are designed only to grant supplies for its growing economy and no military interests are linked to this behavior. On the other hand, it is true that the G2 format for engaging China and the US and sharing the burden at an international level proved unsuccessful, since China does not want to assume any responsibilities[2] at a global level.

So the main problem in this respect is not to decide between continental and maritime China, between black and white, but more between shades of grey, but the extent to which China aspires to become a maritime and global capability. Once this step is made, the way of addressing China's level of ambition and its strategic posture will be far easier.

The second part of the Global Big Game is, should China remain a rather continental power, what the regional game of the big continental Eurasian continuum will look like. Europe (mostly the EU countries), which has a combined economy that thrives to be the first in the world, needs energy mostly from the Eurasian Suppliers Belt, as did South East Asia with countries such as China, Japan, India, South Korea. Is this going to lead to competition, a confrontation of the Big Bargaining type between the two blocks? Or is it going to be an opportunity for some supplier countries to play the game and raise the price of oil and gas, or create artificial disputes between consumer countries?

The most important problem is that the Eurasian Suppliers belt is subject to instability and wars, to the Arab Spring and regime changes, to sectarian wars, to radicalization and civil wars, all able to reshape the borders of the region and the Middle East. If these major shifts spread North to Central Asia and Russia, this would directly affect supplier routes, contracts and sustainability, shaking the whole global economy. That's why Central Asia is central to Eurasian Security and stability.

Central Asia is not exactly the most stable and secure region of the world. On the contrary: the retreat of troops from Afghanistan in 2014 and the return of local fighters involved in sectarian wars in the Middle East are threatening the stability of the region. And since the borders are

[1] Here "Eurasia" is a reference strictly to the great continental continuum of Europe and Asia, and not a geopolitical concept or reference to Russia's approach to integrative policies or to the Medvedev plan conceived by the Valdai Club for common security in Eurasia by ousting the US, dismissing NATO and offering Russia a veto right in the continent security.

[2] Ian Bremmer,"Every Nation for Itself. Winners and Loosers in a G-Zero World", Portfolio/Penguin, New York, 2012

drawn according to Stalin's maximum ethnical complication theory, a type of post-colonial cold and silent war is taking place in the region, a war that can break out as that of Nagorno Karabakh in the enclaves of the region. Unemployment and radical Islam are also threats that the region is facing, as is the problem of elite formation and management of succession, since two of the five leaders in Central Asia are still those put in place some 20 years ago.

Instability and revolution in Central Asia can deeply influence the sustainability of supplies, while peaceful management of the transformation from authoritarian regimes to more flexible electoral democracies is a very difficult task for the international community. And if instability becomes a norm in Central Asia, it will most probably spread in all four directions, affecting the world chain of energy supply.

Having covered geo-economics and geopolitics, we are now back to considering the mid to long term evolution of the world affected by another factor: geophysics. We are used to thinking that at least the physics of the world is stable, but global warming and the opening of the North Arctic corridor is dramatically changing the maritime routes of transportation. In the same way, should the polar ice cap melt, thus changing the shape of the straights, it could change the situation of compulsory crossing points and move to a larger water way open to traffic with less capacity of control. Those changes, especially in the Indian and Pacific Ocean, could dramatically affect the strategies of countries in the region and transportation routes to this region.

So we are no longer talking about two geo's, but more and more about the „three geo's"[3], as Cleo Pascal[4] calls them. If the third geo – geophysics – is changing during a year's time and from one year to another (depending on the temperature and the extent to which the Arctic ice cap melts), the whole strategy of global and regional big players is to be redrawn.

The economic crisis and market-oriented choices in Western foreign policy

The economic crisis hit the Western world hard and it has impacted its strategic posture and its level of ambition – as it has a great deal of influence in reshaping the strategies of the countries involved. The US was first in the line of fire with the subprime crisis and the level of international debt. The Government shutdown at the beginning of October and the perspective of bankruptcy of the American state once the ceiling of the international debt is not moved up by Congress are just the last effects of the economic crisis, which changed the strategy of the US.

The retreat from Central Asia and Europe, at a large respect, and the perspective of retreat from the Middle East become possible. A first argument could be the way that the US managed the crossing of the red line in Syria, with the use of chemical weapons and the threat to intervene. The whole credible threat of use of military power turned from an expected executive order of President Obama to move to action to a Congressional negotiation and a diplomatic bargaining game with Russia, for saving face.
After the economic crisis, America moved its level of ambition from the two plus two wars – two simultaneous wars to win and two to block the enemy from achieving its goals – into a one plus one format – one war to win and another one to prevent the enemy from winning. This led to a reshape of the military and of the defense industry, an important move in the economy of the US. The pivot to Asia-Pacific was the solution in order to prioritize actions in the US foreign and security policies in times of scarce resources and the rise of China as a global power.

Prioritization in international politics also has another side effect: the so called market-oriented choices took over in American foreign affairs and become more important than mid to long term strategies of positioning. So the US retreated from Central Asia and the Caucasus as it is preparing to do in the Middle East, thus passing the burden of security to existing regional actors or trying to find such actors, and keeping just minor strategic capabilities in these regions.

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[3] "The "Three Geo's" (Geopolitical, Geo-economic and Geophysical Changes) in the Indo-Pacific", presentation and the Global Future Forum Conference, "**Natural Resources, Economics and Geopolitics:** Eurasian Interdependencies with Global Security Implications", 17-18 September, 2013, Stokholm.

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The rationale behind these gestures was also pushing China to invest more in continental routes and posture, because of the easy way of getting resources through continental pipelines, and chasing it away from the maritime needs and from the perspective of challenging America as a global power. Retreating from Central Asia was an invitation for China to step in and use those resources, while the shift from Afghanistan was also an invitation to use Pakistan as a transit route and get energy from the Middle East via land lines.

At the same time, European countries were more inclined to completely give up their military capabilities or at least maintaining them at a minimum level, and instead investing in their soft power, economic capacity and prestige. The result was ineffective, as the rise of Russia and its assertiveness blocked the EU's ability and power of attraction in the Eastern Partnership countries. It was the same with its military hard power when in Libya just the US military presence and capabilities led to a victory in a war with a minor army.

Leading from behind allowed the US to stay out of North Africa and still grant its European allies unique capabilities that helped win the war and maintain the level of prestige. But the reality was there and some European states realized that there is no such thing as soft power without some military hard power capabilities. And the reflection period allowed the possibility to launch a Global European Strategy as a modernized European Security Strategy – the Solana Papers adopted in 2003, some 10 years ago – and to think of a reshaped European Defense Strategy to be discussed in December at the European Council. But there are a few solutions in perspective.

China's positioning in regard to global foreign policy. The Tonga Paradigm

The global and maritime China is not a dilemma, but a fact, especially because China took all the advantages left by the retreat of the US and the open space in Central Asia. Basically, in 2009-2010, China offered to the states in Central Asia the alternative export routes via Russia in the North, and broke Russia's monopoly of gas exports through the Kazakhstan-China and Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-China gas pipelines and the Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline. Moreover, the last oil investment contracts in Kazakhstan truly set the stage for China becoming the most important consumer of Central Asian hydrocarbon energy products.

Despite this opportunity, China is not considering Central Asia an alternative, but more of a source for extending its development needs. Russia is currently still the most important supplier, and Saudi Arabia and the Middle East will become so in the future. But this does not exclude China's globally relevant maritime transportation capabilities and ambitions. In this respect, China is the owner of the most capable ice breaker and became an observer in the Arctic Council, at the same time as the US addressed the issue through its new Arctic Strategy, but without owning ice breaking capabilities.

Nevertheless, perhaps the most illustrative example is what I call the *Tonga paradigm*. Tonga is a small island country in the Pacific that is part of the British overseas dominium. The retreat of the British governor and the transfer of authority to Australia and New Zeeland transformed the responsibilities in the region. An unfortunate management of a scandal linking Australian politics to the Tonga monarch made the island fall into the hands of China. China took over Tonga, invested heavily in this state of 100.000 inhabitants, and turned it into a proxy, if not a dependent client state.

Tonga is not a singular case. On the contrary, the *Tonga Syndrome* expanded to the Fiji Islands in its proximity. The idea of taking advantage and investing into other insular Pacific states expanded to Kiribati, Vanuatu and lately, The Maldives. Basically, China chooses to invest into its position all around the world in places of meaningless importance for the others, where it is quite easy to move in with relatively modest investments, and where such an involvement is very much welcomed.

There are multiple targets: the geopolitical position, the place on the routes of transportation, resources in places that have their Economic Exclusive zones of the size of India's, the fact that the votes of these minuscule international actors are equal in the UN General Assembly with those of major players in the global economy, such as Germany or Japan. Hence China invested in places where it could obtain some advantages with a minor effort and where competition was low, if any.

Another side effect is the one linked to the „third geo" of Cleo Paskal: Geophysics that are no longer immutable, but rather variable during the seasons, but also from year to year, depending on the level of heat that the Northern Pole (or the Southern one, for that matter) is receiving. The climate change and the raise of the global Ocean's water level could bring about changes in geography, but also in geopolitics. Hence the island states in the Pacific or Indian Ocean, but also other places in the world could disappear under water, and the population of those states could be moved to alternative places. Tonga plans on moving in such a case to Fiji Islands, The Maldives to India and similar arrangements are being made for other islands.

But, as the study[5] begins to show, there is great complexity linked to the problem of a state's recognition, once under water, and hence to keeping its vote in the United Nations General Assembly. There is no precedent of denying a UN member state its status of belonging to the organization and, as long as the water could retreat from the islands, the idea of a country's disappearance due to the vanquishing of its territory is not suitable. At this stage it becomes a speculation to establish a time frame for taking act of a country's loss of its entire territory. This represents a new range of analysis and perspective studies for experts, but also for lawyers and experts in international relations.

The Tonga paradigm proves that China, with the ambitions of a global player, is playing the national Go game of positioning and controlling areas all over the world, at a moment when the US and the West are still playing Chess. Taking new areas under control or setting the place for military capabilities, access to resources or votes in the UN General Assembly is a strategy which proves that China is an actor with global ambitions and a global strategy. So that's the reason why I think that the Global Big Game changed dramatically from Chess to Go.

Russia's adaptative policies: „because I can" strategy and the Transnistrian case

Russia is contemplating the world through its own perspective of the threats and risks that are affecting its own strategic posture. Putin's Russia is still on the rise and with an assertiveness far beyond the capacities it has at hand. Russia also has considerable problems regarding the management of its internal policies. With a falling demography, huge problems in population health, an important raise of the drug consumption and a push of radical Islam in its South, Russia tries to compensate by flexing its military muscles in Georgia 2008 and in huge military exercises, as well as in the reform of its Army.

The level of ambition is to become once again a global power and to have a saying in global affairs all over the world, so a kind of Cold War redivivus. In order to counter-balance an America under economic pressure, Dughin's Geopolitics theory has been put back on the table, transforming America, NATO and the West into the enemy. This represents the source of considering China a strategic partner, a partner still considered junior due to its low military capacity, according to Moscow's perception. Russia is still in a desperate need for a European transfer of technology in order to improve its economic activity, which is still based on the oil and gas export that move Russia closer to the Saudi Arabian model than to the model of a modern European State.

The last month turned Russia into a global player due to a bluff game, as George Friedman[6] put it. Its resources, both economic and military, are far bellow a capacity of assuming global responsibilities. Russia is still a regional power in the position of being put aside by Turkey in the Wider Black Sea Area, for instance. That's why Russia feels the need to combine its demographic and economic capacities with other post-Soviet states, especially with Ukraine, in order to maintain its posture as at least a regional power and a rival of the EU in the Eastern Partnership countries.

Russia adapted to the new game despite the fact that it maintains the spirit and the reflexes of

[5] Cleo Paskal, "Global Warring. Environmental, Economic and Political crisis will redraw the World Map", Key Porter Books, 2010. See also the study reference 2.

[6] George Friedman is the senior analyst on geopolitics at Stratfor and author of the idea of a bluff of Russia in Syria.

the Cold War, The Grand Chessboard[7], as Zbigniew Brzezinski called the world. The level of ambition and financial resources, as well as a very high assertiveness, in a context of a lack of will of European countries to play a role due to their own economic sovereign debt crisis, made Russia move from chess to a different type of game, moving closer to the Chinese Go.

Russia succeeded in maintaining strong pillars of its strategy that are falling under the „because I can" Strategy. It maintained its military presence in Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, even though it was costly in the context of the economic crisis and it didn't fit into any strategy or objectives worth of this investment. On the contrary: Russia's strategy was implemented only because it could, and because nobody else – US, the EU, The West as a whole – could prevent it from doing so – from maintaining its military presence in the region.

The rationale of such a position came from the fact that „sometime, in the future, I could find a role and a purpose, maybe an objective to achieve", and to use those assets in Russia's approach. Even if it didn't fit into any plan, it doesn't have a purpose and it no way helps any policy, some capabilities were maintained because Russia could afford doing so.

The most obvious case is that of Transnistria, a strip o land in the Republic of Moldova transformed by a separatist frozen conflict into a Russian military stronghold that prevents both the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine to move closer to the EU or NATO. Even during the Communist times in Chisinau, when everything was on the table and the control was total in the Republic of Moldova, Russia didn't give up its position and refused to retreat its troops, in spite of a commitment undertook by Boris Yeltsin in 1999 at the OSCE Istanbul Summit.

Nobody was able to remove Russia from this territory, neither from Abkhazia or South Ossetia, and in the latter case this led to the Russian-Georgian War from August 2008. In the case of Transnistria, since there was nothing to gain from the retreat, the position is good; Russia could afford paying the money for maintaining the 70% deficit and dependence of the separatist region. Its troops are still there in several capacities – so-called peacekeepers, guardians of the Cobasna weapons storages, or under the clauses of the local independent separatist paramilitary police, intelligence and army. All this „because we can", „because you cannot make us leave", or „because nobody could prevent us from staying there".

This type of non-pragmatic policy is the opposite of the US and the West „market-oriented" rationale of spending related to foreign policy – a very strict rationale based on arguments, strategy, objectives to be reached and resources allocated. Even the Messenberg agreements[8] that transformed the Transnistria conflict resolution into proof of Russia's good will in order to move to a broader security arrangement in Europe were not able to make Russia retreat from the separatist region and allow the Republic of Moldova to come back to its unity and full control of its territory. Because Russia could do it.

The needed changes in American Foreign Policy

The lessons learned from the evolution of international politics, the perspectives of the current world and the Big Global Game on the make have to be analyzed. There is no time to play the global strategy of pragmatism and to maintain the „market type" approach to the prioritization of international policies, since the other major players are using a completely different approach.

Moving from Chess to Go is a tremendous change and a redesign that needs to be considered in the making of the US global strategy. It is far more difficult to plan and achieve major global changes in the behavior of China - once its global ambitions are already obvious – than to take advantage of the friends and partners nearby, easy to be maintained with minor investments and more attention. The US has to come back to the places from which it has traditionally controlled the regions and has stable friendships

[7] Zbigniew Brzezinski, The Grand Chessboard. American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives, Basic books, New York, 1997.

[8] An agreement between the German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Russian President Dmitri Medvedev establishing that EU and Russia could move to closer security talks in a bilateral format if Russia succeeds in helping to the resolution of the Transnistria separatist conflict, considered to be the easiest frozen conflict to be solved by the EU and Russia.

and partnerships, as in the Pacific, in Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East.

The Big Global Game is demanding a new effort of creativity in foreign policy, and the first steps towards the Transaltantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). TTIP is a step in the right direction. The EU and the transatlantic link are a natural development of a combined block of some 900 millions to one billion people, a block that is able to compete in the future with big players such as China and India. The integration of the economies, markets and military capabilities is not easy, it requires long term efforts, negotiations and military acquisitions in Europe, but would pay back and deliver in mid term. On the long run, advantages are obvious.

In this narrative and logic, the involvement of the US in the Eurasian Suppliers Belt is of first importance for the transatlantic block, since it grants an alternative of resources to Europe. It is the same with maintaining the interest for the Middle East resources or for those in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. Indeed this requires efforts and a distribution of forces in the State Department, at the Pentagon or in the National Security Council, but it would contribute to the US as participating in a combined transatlantic shared burden and to the global responsibility for the peaceful development of the world, on the road to globalization.

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