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By Richard Weitz (01/14/2009 issue of the CACI Analyst)

## A CENTRAL ASIA WITHOUT THE WEST?

The U.S. National Intelligence Council (NIC) recently released its fourth comprehensive assessment of the most important factors projected to shape world politics during the next two decades. *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World* deliberately aims to force policy makers, such as those in the next U.S. administration, and other readers to expand their perceptions about alternative future environments. The study explores where international conflicts might occur, how different parties might be challenged, and the strategies actors might pursue under these novel conditions. Possible developments in Eurasia occupy an important place in the NIC study.

**BACKGROUND:** One of the scenarios, “A World Without the West,” posits a situation in which the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) becomes the dominant institution in Central Asia. A Sino-Russian condominium over Central Asia emerges due to the failure of NATO to sustain its regional commitments. The United States and its European allies lose the will to maintain a military presence in Afghanistan and other Central Asian countries. Russia and China move to fill the resulting power vacuum—as well as to ensure their control over the region’s energy riches—while India, Iran, and other countries bandwagon with them.

“The Afghan situation threatened to destabilize the whole region, and we could not stand idly by,” the head of the SCO writes in his fictional 15 June 2015 letter to the NATO Secretary-General. “Besides Afghanistan, we had disturbing intelligence that some ‘friendly’ Central Asian governments were coming under pressure from radical Islamic movements and we continue to depend on Central Asian energy.” According to the posited SCO head, who is identified as a Russian national, “The Central Asians thought they could use the SCO for their own purpose of playing the neighboring big powers off against one another,” but the failure of the Western countries to sustain their regional role undermined this strategy by leaving them at the mercy of Eurasia’s authoritarian great powers.

The NIC analysts consider this Eurasian scenario possible, though unlikely, if—as the report projects—the relative power and influence of China, India, and Russia continue to rise relative to that of the United States and Europe. Whereas the 2004 NIC study projected continued American global dominance with the acquiescence of most of the other great powers, the 2008 report stresses the constraints on U.S. influence due to ongoing globalization, the diffusion of military technologies, “an historic shift of relative wealth and economic power from West to East,” and other factors. A reinforcing trend is that

demographic, economic, and other problems will decrease the relative influence of key U.S. allies in Europe and Asia. Slow economic growth, aging populations, and a lack of an effective unified foreign policy apparatus make it impossible for the EU to sustain its even currently low levels of defense spending, contributing to NATO's inability to sustain its Afghan mission.

*Global Trends 2025* echoes the assessment of other analysts that, for Russia, “Controlling key energy nodes and links in the Caucasus and Central Asia—vital to its ambitions as an energy superpower—will be a driving force in reestablishing a sphere of influence in its Near Abroad.” In this scenario, the Chinese government adopts an increasingly anti-Western foreign policy due to rising protectionism in Europe and the United States, a factor that alienates India as well. Sensing Western weakness, China, India, and Russia then adopt a zero-sum approach to the energy resources of Central Asia – “a repeat of the nineteenth century’s ‘Great Game’ with outsiders contending for the exclusive right to control market access.”

According to the NIC, Russia and China adhere to a “state capitalist” development model wherein the government largely directs national economic activity typically left to private sector market forces in traditional liberal democratic states. They believe that the success of this model, especially in the case of China, could induce other countries, including in Eurasia, to adopt the paradigm. Although these states’ common adherence to state capitalism would not by itself serve as the basis of a Sino-Russian alignment, mutual fear of further democratic revolutions also binds the Eurasian autocracies together within the SCO framework. The organization legitimizes Sino-Russian interventions into the internal affairs of Central Asian countries, allowing Beijing and Moscow to prop up compliant governments and suppress democratic opposition movements.

**IMPLICATIONS:** The emergence of a Sino-Russian condominium in Eurasia would have disastrous implications for world order. NATO and the SCO would come to be seen as two Cold War-type blocs divided, if not by ideology, than by enduring geopolitical and other cleavages. China, Russia, and Iran could use their pivotal position to monopolize the production and export of Eurasian oil and gas, leveraging government controls to manipulate for political advantage energy flows to Western markets.

However, the NIC recognizes that several factors make such a dystopia avoidable, perhaps not even likely. First, Russia will experience severe demographic problems. The overall Russian population is expected to decrease from approximately 141 million people today to less than 130 million by 2025. In less than a decade from now, Russia is projected to have only 650,000 18-year-old males. Even if they were all healthy and willing to serve in the military, the Russian armed forces currently employ 750,000 conscripts. Russian leaders have evinced a strong reluctance to allow for more non-Russian immigration, allocate the resources needed to develop a fully professional army, accept a substantial reduction in the size of the Russian armed forces, or take additional necessary measures to manage this demographic problem. In addition, the share of ethnic Muslims in the Russian population will grow from 14 percent in 2005 to around 19 percent in 2030 and perhaps 23 percent in 2050. Their willingness to participate in future counterinsurgency campaigns in the Muslim-majority regions of the North Caucasus or Central Asia is likely to prove extremely problematic.

Second, the Russian political system remains underdeveloped as well. One-party states under the control of a single dominant individual are prone to serious secessionist crises. In

addition, the NIC analysts acknowledge that forecasting Russia's trajectory is extremely difficult because of the uneasy coexistence of "liberal economic trends and illiberal political trends." Furthermore, "Russia's sensitivity to potential discontinuities sparked by political instability, a major foreign policy crisis, or other wild cards, makes it impossible to exclude alternative futures such as a nationalistic, authoritarian petro-state or even a full dictatorship, which is not a probable but nevertheless plausible future. Less likely, Russia could become a significantly more open and progressive country by 2025."

Under any of these scenarios, Russia is likely to present a challenging ally even for China's notoriously ideologically indifferent ruling elite. Adverse demographic changes, a demand from rising economic sectors for increased political rights, and deteriorating relations with Japan or India might make it difficult for Beijing to project power into Central Asia. Moscow may react negatively should China – as present trends predict – possess the second-largest economy by 2025, which would provide Beijing with the wherewithal to acquire a much more powerful military. Conversely, a slowdown in China's economic growth could lead Beijing to blame their problems on external forces. Either development could increase tensions between Russia and China, vitiating the SCO's effectiveness.

**CONCLUSIONS:** *Global Trends 2025* alerts Western policy-makers to the dangers of failing to sustain their commitment in Afghanistan. Not only would an abrupt NATO military withdrawal risk leaving behind a sanctuary for drug lords and Islamist terrorists in the heartland of Eurasia, but Russia, China, and Iran might exploit the resulting vacuum to enforce their preferred regional and domestic political, economic, and social order over weaker Central Asian countries. The Obama administration, like its predecessor, has affirmed its commitment to "staying the course" in Afghanistan, and the U.S. military has recently announced plans for a troop surge in the region. Yet, doubts persist whether European countries will provide the necessary complementary support to maintain NATO's long-term presence in Central Asia. The NIC warning will hopefully reinforce the effort of some Obama advisers to prioritize the Afghan issue at next April's NATO summit in Strasbourg.

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