

Pan-Kazakh Centrism and the Construction of a Regional Axis in the ‘Innovated’ Asia

Pierre Chabal¹

Abstract: The interest of Kazakhstan for Central Asia is the interest of a ‘constructor’. Since 1991, it has been at the direct or indirect origin of several key initiatives: CICA, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and even a project of a Union of Central Asia. Theories of regional integrations have been enriching Asia for 20 years, and for 60 years in Europe. The key concept is that of a regional axis: a region is multilateral but needs to build itself around a privileged bilateralism among two neighbors-partners. The definition of such an “axis” is: two countries that have born among themselves the seeds of tension but that decide, voluntarily, to turn the page of history, through a strong and enduring bilateral relationship, sometimes through a founding Treaty, investing in the irreversible, political link with the aim of ‘radiating’ throughout the region.

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The link between the concept of “regional axis” and Ibrachev’s concept of “Pan-Asia Centrism” is simple. But there are two ways of understanding the concept of “Pan Asia Centrism”. 1) Pan “ASIA CENTRISM”: Asia is at the center everywhere in the world. Asia is at the center of Eurasia. Eurasia is at the center of the world. In a reverse pattern from Mackinder’s, Central Asia dominates the world. 2) ‘PAN ASIA “centrism: Asia is united and becomes a center among the several centers of a multi-polar world. Central Asia, here, is animated by a more realistic and credible project, that of a legitimate pole. The second manner of understanding Ibrachev’s concept of “Pan Asia Centrism” inspires the present analysis applied to Kazakh centrism and the concept of a regional axis, through three concentric circles around Kazakhstan, which form the three sections of my analysis: I - First circle: the IMMEDIATE NEIGHBOURHOOD / II: THE expanded “GOOD NEIGHBOURS” / III - Third circle: the STRATEGIC INTER-REGIONAL dimension

¹ Associate Professor of Political Science (MdC) at Le Havre University, France & Invited Professor, national universities of Mongolia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Address: 25 Rue Philippe Lebon, 76600 Le Havre, France, Tel: + 33 (0)6 01 18 02 04, Corresponding author: pierrechabal@yahoo.fr.

In total, 12 possible axes for Kazakhstan are examined, starting from the idea of a 2-country “axis” and coming to that of a “3-parter” axis (among 3 countries or 3 organizations). The 3 “circles” analyzed suggest 3 different axes: i) Kazakhstan-Russia, ii) Kazakhstan-India iii) Kazakhstan-ASEAN according to 3 different logics (i-neighborhood, ii) extended SCO ii, iii-continent). Reflection is therefore open towards all options.

The interest of Kazakhstan for Central Asia is the interest of a ‘constructor’. What is at hand is the construction of a region. Since 1991, Kazakhstan has been at the direct or indirect origin of several key initiatives: CICA, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and even a project of a Union of Central Asia.

The region “Central Asia” is building itself. Theories of regional integrations have been enriching in Asia for 20 years, and 60 years in Europe. For me, the key concept is that of a regional axis. It is a simple concept: a region is multilateral but needs to build itself around a privileged bilateralism among two neighbors-partners. The definition of such an “axis” is: **two countries that have born among themselves the seeds of tension but that decide, voluntarily, to turn the page of history, through a strong and enduring bilateral relationship, sometimes through a founding Treaty, investing in the irreversible, political link with the aim of ‘radiating’ throughout the region.** An example of such an axis is that between France and Germany in 1963, which reversed the course of European history.

The link between the concept of “regional axis” and the concept of “Pan-Asia Centrism” of Professor IBRACHEV is simple. But there are two ways of understanding the concept of “Pan Asia Centrism”.

1) Pan “ASIA CENTRISM”

Here, Asia is at the center everywhere in the world. Asia is at the center of Eurasia. Eurasia is at the center of the world. In a reverse pattern from Mackinder’s, Central Asia dominates the world

2) 'PAN ASIA “centrism

Here, Asia is united and becomes a center among the several centers of a multipolar world. Central Asia, here, is animated by a more realistic and credible project, that of a legitimate pole

The second manner of understanding Professor IBRACHEV’s concept of “Pan Asia Centrism” inspires my analysis such as I present it. I will apply it to Kazakh centrism and to the concept of a regional axis, through three concentric circles around Kazakhstan.

These three circles form the three sections of my analysis:

1. First Circle: the Immediate Neighborhood

This is the invention of a neighborhood and of post-Soviet internationalization.

Kazakhstan is analyzed here with its “bordering neighbors”, a voluntary redundancy because these neighboring states are “new” in 1991. These 6 neighbors are new, even China because until 1991, China is located geopolitically above all in East Asia. Kazakhstan and its neighbors must do three things at once: i) to manage post-Sovietism ii) to invent a “neighborhood” and iii) to understand the international character of this neighborhood: that is, to become aware of “new possibilities”.

Internationalization is especially the equalization of neighbors among whom to choose a partner for an “axis”.

1) a Kazakhstan-**China** axis represents the greatest innovation and thus the greatest need for “confidence building”. It would be a return to the pre-Kazakh-Russian partnership from the 18th century onwards. For China, too, is an innovation within its policy geared towards its “periphery of the west”.

2) a Kazakhstan-**Russia** axis, classic, places the center of the 7 partners in the northeast of the area. Such an axis, if it were to become the ‘center-axis’, also suggests to ‘hook up’ onto it Belarus and Ukraine. This is the hypothesis of the extension to the west of the “new” Asia.

3) a Kazakhstan-**Uzbekistan**, thus among two great civilizations, nomadic and sedentary, places two middle powers at the center of the Russia-China-India triangle. This is a geopolitically logical axis, that of a *realpolitik* looking to the future, which innovate with respect to a “supposed domination” by India, China or Russia.

4) a Kazakhstan-**Kyrgyzstan** axis has all its meaning for the creation of a ‘community management’ of common problems, notably of water resources. The economic and political models of the two polities are different but the differences, economic or political, do not prevent, as such, the invention of an axis, for example in Europe.

5) a Kazakhstan-**Tajikistan** axis is less likely, as in Europe an axis between “France-a Benelux country.” However, in Europe, the Benelux countries welcome each one of the European institutions (Commission, Court and Parliament). In addition, Tajikistan too could help directly a common management, in a unified Central Asia, of water.

6) a Kazakhstan-**Turkmenistan** axis would be an “energy” one and would guide the region towards an “energy community”, as the ECSC in Europe from 1951. It would be an axis of “producers” (oil and gas) interesting for a “consumer”: China.

There is a Forum of Gas Producers or OGEP. But one would need to know better the positions of Turkmenistan.

In all, 6 scenarios, some of which suggest a “three-partner axis”. Concepts are flexible.

2. The Expanded “Good Neighbors”

This is the institutionalization of a “good neighborhood”, the deepening of the Shanghai dynamics in 1996 and from 2001/2012. The “good neighborhood lies at the heart of the SCO philosophy since the SCO Charter of June 2002.

The dynamics of the SCO, its geopolitical potential, is a 10-partner dynamic. It also allows us to consider an axis between two non-neighboring countries even. The question is the degree of institutionalization of this axis between i) two countries already heavily involved in the SCO and ii) the China-Russia-India triangle.

Kazakhstan imposes itself here for four reasons: it is the largest country among the new States of 1991, it is a country at the center of the SCO space with 10 countries, it is a link-space for the transportation of goods; it is also the country suggesting initiatives transcending the OCS: the CICA, an Central Asia Union.

But with whom should one constitute an axis within the framework of the SCO ?

7) a **Kazakhstan-China** axis within the framework of the SCO would be one of the “middle” Asia, ranging from the Caspian to the mouth of the Tuman River. This axis would complement the “China-Russia” logic of the Shanghai Group. It would be a logical axis of ‘surveillance’ of i) boundaries, ii) East-West transport corridors (from East Asia to Europe). Russia would “resent” such an axis, just as in Europe Britain “resents” the Franco-German axis, but this Kazakhstan-China axis best corresponds to the new Asia since 1991.

8) a **Kazakhstan-Russia** axis within the framework of the SCO would be is a conventional way to balance out Chinese power. It would also be a classic logic of the “middle” Asia but one that could attract India into this new Asia, the Asia of the SCO. The difficulty here lies in the risk of the perception of “encirclement” of China. This difficulty is not real: the SCO is already multilateral and, in Europe, a bilateral axis has reinforced the multi-lateral construction secured by the Franco-German axis

9) a **Kazakhstan-India** axis within the framework of the SCO would be the most innovative. It would anchor the SCO to the “south”, at the risk of placing China and Russia in the “periphery”. This is today the less likely axis but an SCO one day with 10 members will necessarily reflect and give way to India. A Kazakhstan-India axis would be a better solution than an India-Russia axis, difficult for China, or than an India-China axis, difficult for Russia. A Kazakhstan-India axis is also a

better solution than a 3-partner axis (China, Russia, India), which would place Central Asia in the position of “second inner circle.”

In total, these three scenarios confirm that an axis can be between two not-bordering countries. These scenarios, mainly, raise the logical assumption of a three-country” axis.

Concepts allow this flexibility.

3. Third Circle: the Strategic Inter-Regional Dimension

This is the level of an inter-regionalization strategy within a context of continental competition. To ‘think’ Asia strategically is a natural intellectual activity. One of the ways in which to do so is to consider the acquisition of regional influence, including i) in *relation* to other regions and ii) in *response* to other regions.

Asia is characterized by a proliferation of initiatives in 10 years since the CIS in 1991 to the SCO in 2001, with in between APEC, ASEAN “+”, ASEM, SAARC, the CSTO, CICA, etc. In this multiplication, which axis should one choose?

The choice of an axis depends on the preferred strategy: a strategy of direct power or of influence? A strategy of expansion of Asia and of inclusion of West Asia? A strategy of hard rivalry, especially vis-à-vis the ASEM? Among these, Kazakhstan may thus consider:

10) axis Kazakhstan-**Mongolia** axis, a strategy rejected by most of my colleagues. Mongolia is considered peripheral to central Asia. Yet, the two countries, Kazakhstan and Mongolia (considered together in the Soviet vision) are at the center of the Sino-Russian space. They form a “link-space”, in the geopolitical sense, between the East of the continent and the Caspian region. Here again, a 3-partner axis with Turkmenistan would make sense. Mongolia is the first SCO Observer since 2004 but is tempted by a third, extra-continental circle.

11) a Kazakhstan-**Turkey** axis, an original Turkic strategy. Kazakhstan has been for 20 years an initiator. Turkey has been looking for 50 years for a “direction” of foreign policy after: Europe, the Arab world, the Black Sea, which direction? Europe again or the “wider East” of Central Asia ? This would be an axis of strength between i) Asia and the Middle East, and between ii) Southeast Asia and the wider Europe. With China, this axis would be, with 3 countries, capable of welding the 3 Asias: East Asia, Central Asia, West Asia.

12) an axis between Kazakhstan and a **region**, an abstract but challenging hypothesis. This partner-region could be either the European Union or ASEAN. Kazakhstan would here be the symbol of Central Asia as a country which has suggested a “Union of Central Asia” and a founding-State of the SCO. It would be

an axis between two organizations or a “bi-organizational” axis, yet at the “expense” of another organization:

- an Kazakhstan-EU-SCO axis would be at the expense of ASEAN and of ASEM
- an Kazakhstan-SCO-ASEAN axis would be to the detriment of ASEM and of the EU

but this 2nd axis would provide a “direction” for all Asia (continental Asia and maritime Asia). Already since 2007, it is suggested to bring the CSTO and SCO together!

In total, I examined 12 possible axes for Kazakhstan.

In conclusion, I started from the idea of a 2-country “axis” and I come to the idea of a “3-partner” axis (among 3 countries or 3 organizations). The 3 “circles” which I have analyzed suggest 3 different axes: i) Kazakhstan-Russia, ii) Kazakhstan-India iii) Kazakhstan-ASEAN according to 3 different logics (i-neighborhood, ii) extended SCO ii, iii-continent). Reflection is therefore open towards all options. None of these options is useless in Europe in 1950, nobody imagined such a lasting construction and integration. A hypothesis can become a reality. It is the job of diplomats.