

BOOK REVIEW: “Eurasia’s Shifting Geopolitical Tectonic Plates: Global Perspective, Local Theaters”

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This anthology features articles, short studies, and interviews written by Alexandros Petersen (1984–2014) over the span of ten years starting in 2004, and insightfully addresses the implications of the West withdrawing from its engagement with the Caucasus and Central Asia, the expansion of Chinese influence, and Russia’s strategic interests.

Dr. Alexandros Petersen was a scholar of energy geopolitics with a decade’s experience of research across Europe and Eurasia. Until his untimely death in a Kabul restaurant bombing in 2014, Petersen served as Advisor to the European Energy Security Initiative at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. He was also a Senior Fellow for Eurasia and Fellow for Transatlantic Energy Security at the Atlantic Council, a Visiting Fellow with the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and provided research for the National Petroleum Council’s Geopolitics and Policy Task Group. Dr. Petersen regularly provided analysis to publications such as the Economist, New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, National Interest, and the Atlantic—the most significant of which are included in this collection and constitute a broad and prescient examination of Eurasian geopolitics.

Inspired by the pioneering English geographer Sir Alfred Mackinder’s heartland theory proposed more than a century ago, the main idea promoted in this volume is that, despite all the technological and institutional changes over the decades, the area of the “Eurasian heartland”—comprising Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia—still retains its key importance in the geopolitical developments of the world. Through an original and comprehensive analysis, this book seeks to identify major political and economic forces affecting the dynamics of Eurasia in a post-Soviet world and makes a powerful case for the US and its NATO allies to pursue a vigorous strategy to further and protect essential Western values in the region. The author argues for the development of trade and energy links, coupled with the promotion of good governance and the facilitation of policy independence, integration, and Western-orientation among the Eurasian nations. The collection is organized along four main topics: (1) Eurasia and a changing transatlantic world: the world politics of shifting frontiers in the post-Soviet world; (2) energy geopolitics in the Caspian and beyond, with its crucial implications for European

energy security; (3) the Black Sea world, covering the dynamics of Russia, Turkey, and the South Caucasus, including the role of NATO and frozen conflicts in the region; (4) the New Silk Roads: China's inroads in Central Asia, which are often overlooked in the West but will be critical for the geopolitical balance of power.

The first part of the volume begins by mentioning the significance of the so-called “regions in between”: geographical, political, cultural or economic areas that have alternately served as barriers or corridors, or vital buffers between empires, states and spheres, thus becoming the natural battlegrounds for geopolitical maneuvering. In Eurasia, this “in between” area consists of the Baltic states, the Greater Black Sea region, the Caucasus and Central Asia—all regions traditionally positioned along the East–West border. Since the enlargement of NATO and the European Union, the Baltic states and Eastern Europe have gradually changed their status from “in between” to becoming more “inside” regions of the West, shifting the East–West frontier even more towards the Caucasus and Central Asia. This shift of frontiers means increased potential for the West to establish links further afield and these transcontinental bonds of Eurasia can only be realized through increased understanding of and involvement in the regions in between. In order to achieve this objective, the West—i.e., the US and the EU—should abandon its tired Russia-centric approach towards the region, and engage with Eurasian countries themselves, rather than using them as bargaining chips with Russia or other powers.

In his article “Reimagining Eurasia,” co-written with Samuel Sharap and comprising the third chapter of the volume, the author urges US policy in the region to emphasize transparency, while simultaneously rejecting Russian notions of “spheres of influence” and antiquated zero-sum arguments from Eurasian governments. According to Petersen, Washington should be unapologetic about its involvement while also being open to cooperation with Russia on issues of mutual interest, such as the mitigation of transnational threats and Caspian maritime security: “Substantive but pointedly non-confrontational engagement will increase U.S. influence in Eurasian affairs and give Moscow an opportunity to extract itself from the zero-sum trap, while at the same time raising the costs of playing the role of spoiler in the region.” Petersen also mentions Russia's geographic and historical proximity to the region, implying the idea that a head-to-head competition for influence

in the area will inevitably be resulted by Washington's loss. Thus, "the only way for Washington to 'win' is not to play the game."

Instead, the United States should build substantive relationships with the countries of the greater Black Sea region and Central Asia, providing tangible security, diplomatic, and economic benefits for the United States and Eurasian countries, while allowing for more effective support of representative government. The people of Eurasia would also benefit because local elites could stop thinking about their countries as "geopolitical pawns" and instead focus on economic development, institution building, and regional cooperation. The author likewise lays out a warning that a failure to develop new frameworks for U.S. policy in Eurasia will not only preclude substantive engagement with the countries of the region, but also inevitably renew strategic competition with Moscow, once again forcing the United States to focus its policies on countering the Kremlin, "which would likely spell the end of the Obama administration's reset of U.S.-Russian relations."

In this regard, the author also praises the EU's Eastern Partnership initiative and suggests the EU take a step further and steward a formal process of mediation for the frozen conflicts in Eastern Partnership countries, while also engaging with Central Asian states on issues such as containing extremism etc. According to Petersen, the EU can play a unique role in offering a distinctly new model of engagement in the region that will sidestep historical concerns over NATO's military implications and keeps these states within the Western sphere of influence. In order to ensure that the EU's agenda stays focused, the author emphasizes the importance of establishing new energy links and infrastructure investment projects, such as trans-Caspian oil and gas pipelines, to connect resources from Central Asia with the current alternative pipelines from Azerbaijan to the Mediterranean.

Indeed, Part 2 of this volume, titled "Energy Geopolitics: The Caspian and Beyond," is dedicated to the exploration of integration in the energy and transport sectors between the EU and the abovementioned "in between" countries. The role of the South Caucasus is particularly emphasized, which has established itself as a critical corridor for transporting energy from Azerbaijan to Georgia, Turkey, and on to Europe. The new infrastructure projects implemented in this region have created an east-west "Eurasian bridge," in which transnational extra-regional actors

and international financial institutions have played a critical role. The author specifically praises the role of the EU in their assistance in the establishment of the East–West Transport Corridor (EWTC) through mechanisms, such as Interstate Oil and Gas Transport to Europe (INOGATE) and Transport Corridor Europe–Caucasus–Asia (TRACECA), aimed at promoting regional integration and improved governance. Petersen refers to the EWTC as “the primary alternative route available, bereft of Russian influence and along with its attendant aspects, a force for securing the flow of energy supplies.”

Other chapters in Part 2 also draw attention to the roles of countries participating in the EWTC project: Azerbaijan is considered as both a significant oil and gas supplier, and a gateway to vast reserves on the Caspian’s eastern shore and further into Central Asia; Georgia presents not only the sole route through which Azerbaijan can forge ties with the broader West, but also “the needle’s eye through which the countries of the Caspian region and Central Asia can form similar strategically vital links between East and West”; Turkmenistan—the most probable future supplier of this network—holds enormous potential and is expected to be a growing player in the region and globally in terms of natural gas; finally, Turkey, with its multi-vector energy policies and potential, is a major thoroughfare to implement Western-oriented projects such as the Southern Gas Corridor and to connect EU consumers with the suppliers of the Caspian Sea, allowing for supply diversification and less dependence on problematic Russian reserves. All in all, energy and transport infrastructure, referring to the author, will compel the development of Western-oriented policies in the region, “leading to a more secure region in the long term.”

Part 3 of this volume deals with the security dynamics of the Black Sea countries. Drawing attention to the frozen conflicts of the region, Petersen claims that ethnic tensions between the inhabitants of the region were a necessary, but not sufficient, cause for the conflict, and “it was Moscow’s chaotic involvement during a time of unstable transition that caused the outbreak of conflicts in early 1990s.” Specifically concentrating on the Georgia–Abkhazia war, the author asserts that Russia’s one-sided role in ending hostilities in the 1990s meant that the conflict’s causal issues were left frozen, only to be violently thawed fifteen years later. Petersen

then goes on, in the following chapters, to assess the importance of Georgia as a strategic link between Azerbaijan and Turkey and the West, stating that “isolation of Georgia would mean isolation of Azerbaijan,” as most of Azerbaijan’s energy and transportation projects pass through its western neighbor. In other words, it is in Baku’s strategic interest to counter any attempt by foreign powers to isolate Tbilisi, ensuring a friendly, politically stable and economically viable Georgia as its neighbor. In this regard, the author praises Azerbaijan’s measures taken to fulfil Georgia’s energy demands after the war in 2008. Petersen considers the regional grouping between Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey as the basis for the EWTC, which is a small but key piece of an energy and transport network that stretches from Shanghai to London.

In order to protect Western energy interests in the Caspian basin, Petersen recommends, in his article “Black Sea Security: the NATO Imperative,” that NATO develop a real Operational Capabilities Concept to address the crises-related security concerns of the area covering states such as Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Georgia that, together, form a region considered to be a future target for the continued expansion of European and trans-Atlantic institutions and a possible stronghold from which to engage with the Greater Middle East and substantial portions of surrounding regions. This will allow for the expansion of the Partnership for Peace Program to a substantial area of the troubled regions surrounding the Caspian Sea, including the Central Asian countries and Iran. Thus, the author urges establishing a comprehensive program that seriously addresses Black Sea security issues and incorporates the region into the NATO security framework.

Finally, Part 4 focuses on Central Asia, with all its contributions wholly devoted to one particular ongoing trend in the region: China’s rapidly rising influence. In his article, “China’s Inadvertent Empire,” co-written with Raffaello Pantucci, Petersen challenges former president Obama’s 2011 “pivot to Asia” policy of realigning America’s geopolitical posture away from Europe and the Middle East to Asia and the Pacific Rim. While this particular measure is known to be aimed at toughening the geopolitical rivalry with China over East Asian seas, it misses the significance of the vast landmass of Central Asia, where China is consolidating its position into what appears to be an “inadvertent empire.” According to Petersen, for most of its unified history, China has been an economically

focused land power. In geopolitical terms today, China's rise is manifest particularly on land in Eurasia, far from the might of the U.S. Pacific Fleet and Washington's Rimland allies—and far also from the influence of other Asian powers, such as India. Therefore, while the West is focused on constraining China's actions in the Asia-Pacific, Beijing is capitalizing on the vast space for influence to its west, in Central Asia. The resulting shift in the region's energy geopolitics reflects China's rise. "Thus, Western policy makers should be dusting off the old works of Sir Halford Mackinder, who argued that Central Asia is the most pivotal geographic zone on the planet, rather than those of Alfred Thayer Mahan, the great U.S. strategist of sea power. Greater attention needs to be paid to China's growing presence in Central Asia if the United States is to understand properly China's geopolitical and strategic rise."

China, according to the author, poses a threat not only to U.S. strategic interests, but also to Russia's legacy in the region. While price negotiations with Moscow slogged on over the years, the China National Petroleum Corp. (CNPC) cobbled together and upgraded largely existing transportation infrastructure to create the China–Central Asia gas pipeline. With its significant investments in various exploration and development projects, and construction of large-scale pipeline projects for the transport of Central Asian oil and gas eastwards, China is expanding its energy infrastructure westwards, while Russia continues to lose influence in the region, as it will have to compete for Central Asian resources that it once took for granted. Thus, according to Petersen, Russia is far more concerned by growing Chinese influence in its backyard than anything the West is throwing its way. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, in turn, has steadily developed into an increasingly important actor that has become a vehicle for China's push to develop Central Asia. In wake of these developments, Petersen even goes on to argue that the establishment of the Eurasian Union is aimed at stemming the tide of increasing Chinese omnipotence in Russia's backyard.

From the perspective of the Central Asian countries, China's growing involvement has many benefits. It provides much-needed investment capital and it helps these countries to break their dependency on Russia. With the recent memory of Soviet Russia monopolizing the exploitation of their resources, both Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have adopted a multi-vector approach in their

energy strategies. In its most basic sense, this means that the vast oil fields of Kazakhstan and gas fields of Turkmenistan are open to competition. In many markets such an approach would promote efficiency and diversity. However, if Chinese influence becomes dominant, the benefits of such competition would be lost, particularly given China's preference for government-to-government deals and its apparent lack of interest in good governance. Although China's approach to Central Asia is very different from Russia's post-Soviet quest for continued influence, there are signs that China could become the region's new hegemon. Consequently, Petersen recommends the EU to become the balancing actor in the region and to play a more significant part in the energy geopolitics of Central Asia. The EU should continue its efforts to establish a southern corridor that will make it possible to ship Caspian and Central Asian gas directly into the EU. In particular, according to Petersen, the EU could help to resolve the trans-Caspian issue by backing the Commission's mandate to help broker a deal on the Serdar/Kyapaz dispute and on a trans-Caspian link between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan.

All in all, Petersen's book re-establishes fundamental Western strategy objectives, analyzing the state of and potential for Western engagement with major geopolitical players of Eurasia and setting out what is at stake for the West in the Eurasian theater. Although some ideas of the author are fairly outdated for objective reasons, Petersen's major arguments throughout the volume are even more relevant today in their prescient analysis. Petersen understood the good things that could result when Western institutions are constructively engaged in the world, especially in seemingly distant lands with geopolitical significance. He brought passion and keen insight to issues that demand far more attention from Western policymakers, and this volume is a fitting tribute to him, his scholarship, and his ideas.

Reviewed by **Polad MURADLI**