

RETHINKING AMERICAN STRATEGY IN CENTRAL ASIA

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OVERVIEW

Over the last three years, U. S. influence in Central Asia seems to have significantly waned. Decreasing U.S. influence appears to have been accompanied by a concomitant increase in Russian and Chinese influence in the region. While some have described the competition for influence in the region a “new great game,” others claim that such a description is overstated. It is clear, however, that the United States, Russia, and China all have interests in the region.

It is important, then, for the United States to clearly define its interests and understand whether its interests conflict or complement those of Russia and China. In some cases, U.S. interests may in fact coincide with Russian and Chinese interests, and it should seek ways to cooperate with Russia and China to achieve them.

Regardless of whether its interests conflict or coincide with other major players in the region, it is imperative that the United States understand the interests and challenges of the Central Asian countries. Without such an understanding, it risks pursuing policies that diverge from the goals of Central Asian countries and the United States will find it difficult if not impossible to achieve its own interests in the region.

However, the United States cannot ignore its commitment to the values of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in seeking to placate the interests of Central Asia’s authoritarian and often less than democratic leaders while pursuing its short-term interests. The challenge for the United States is to appropriately balance an understanding of the culture and history of the region and its individual countries without compromising its fundamental values.

This paper will argue that the United States needs to reevaluate its policy in Central Asia in order to bring its advocacy of American values and its pursuit of its strategic interests into proper balance. Ironically, getting the balance correct will make it more likely that in the long term the United States might be more successful in advancing some of its values. Failure to get the balance correct risks a further erosion of American influence and credibility in a critically important strategic region for the United States, to the benefit of both Russia and China.

INTRODUCTION

Central Asia is a critically important region for a number of United States strategic objectives. Although the region’s importance to the United States increased dramatically after the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, U.S. interest in the region was certainly not a new phenomenon. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States sought to help the newly independent countries of Central Asia develop both politically and economically. The United States also had important security interests in the region, though U.S. focus at the time centered on the removal of Soviet-era nuclear stockpiles in Kazakhstan rather than the threat of terrorism and militant Islam. After the terrorist attacks of 9/11,

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Central Asia became a major focus for the United States as it began its initial offensives in the Global War on Terror to unseat the Taliban in Afghanistan. It quickly (and relatively easily) established military bases in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan in order to more efficiently conduct its military campaign in Afghanistan. Yet recent developments in the region have many analysts concerned about a diminishing role for the United States in Central Asia.

Over the last five years, U. S. influence in Central Asia seems to have significantly waned. Decreasing U.S. influence has been accompanied by a concomitant increase in Russian, Chinese, and, to some extent, Iranian influence in the region. For example, Uzbek President Islam Karimov ejected the United States from the airbase at Karshi-Khanabad in July 2005 following harsh criticism of the Uzbek response to the violent uprising in Andijon in May 2005. More recently, Kyrgyzstan President Kurmanbek Bakiyev declared that he would close the U.S. airbase at Manas, outside of Bishkek after receiving a pledge of financial support of over \$200 billion from Russia. U.S. attempts to persuade Central Asian countries to reorient their export routes for oil and gas away from Russia have been frequently thwarted. Feeling that it had no better option, Turkmenistan signed a twenty-five year deal with Gazprom in April 2003. Kazakhstan recently agreed to increase its oil exports through Russia and Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev publicly stated that he intends to export most of Kazakhstan's oil through Russia.¹ China and Russia have both sought stronger bilateral relations with Central Asian countries, and have also asserted themselves through an expanded role for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).² For the first time in its history, the August 2007 SCO summit in Bishkek was accompanied by joint military maneuvers by all six members in China and Russia, ostensibly to demonstrate the growing capabilities of the organization. Iran also participated in the summit as an observer member, a fact that continues to annoy the United States.

While some have described the competition for influence in the region a "new great game," others claim that such a description is overstated and ill-suited given the independence of the Central Asian states.³ It is clear, however, that the United States, Russia, and China all have interests in the region – in some cases their interests are conflictual, but in other areas they share mutual interests. It is important, therefore, for the United States to clearly define its interests and understand whether those interests conflict or complement Russian and Chinese interests. In cases of mutual interest with Russia and China, it should seek ways to cooperate. Cooperation in Central Asia, however, will of course be greatly impacted by the broader U.S.-Russia and U.S.-China relationships.

Regardless of whether its interests conflict or coincide with other major players in the region, it is imperative that the United States understand the interests and challenges of the Central Asian countries themselves. Without such an understanding, the United States risks pursuing policies that diverge from the goals of Central Asian countries, making it difficult if not impossible to achieve U.S. interests in the

region, both in the short and long term. However, the United States cannot ignore its commitment to the values of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in seeking to placate the interests of Central Asia's authoritarian and often less than democratic leaders while pursuing its short-term interests. The challenge for the United States is to appropriately balance an understanding of the culture and history of the region and its individual countries without compromising its fundamental values. Far too frequently in the last several years the United States has not achieved the proper balance. A blind ideological attachment to values without an appreciation for the cultural and historical context of the region, coupled with a lack of a long term vision, are to blame for a failure to get the balance correct. This paper will argue that the United States needs to reevaluate its policy in Central Asia in order to bring its advocacy of American values and its pursuit of its strategic interests into proper balance. Ironically, getting the balance correct will make it more likely that in the long term the United States might be more successful in advancing some of its values. Failure to get the balance correct risks a further erosion of American influence and credibility in a critically important strategic region for the United States, to the benefit of both Russia and China.

I will begin my analysis by defining and explaining U.S. interests in Central Asia. Next I will trace and analyze the influence of the United States in Central Asia since the emergence of independent states after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. I will then identify possible areas of mutual interest between the United States and Russia and China. The next section examines reasons for a decline in U.S. influence in the region. The last section outlines the challenges facing Central Asian countries in order to identify areas where the United States can leverage its strengths to help them meet these challenges. In doing so, the United States can, over time, improve its ability to influence the politics of the region and thereby achieve its interests.

TRACING AND DEFINING U.S. INTERESTS IN CENTRAL ASIA

In the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, the United States was quick to recognize the independence of the new Central Asian states. It was the first to establish diplomatic ties with each of the Central Asian countries, and U.S. interests could be broadly grouped into three categories – political and economic reform, security, and energy.⁴

In the area of political and economic reform, the United States focused on democratization and movement towards free market economies. To this end, the United States passed the Freedom Support Act on October 24th, 1992. Although its focus was on democratization efforts and establishing free markets, it also addressed security and humanitarian issues.⁵ The need to ensure the safekeeping of fissile material was the most pressing security concern of the United States in the early and mid-1990s. In December, 1993, Kazakhstan and the United States signed a cooperative threat reduction (CTR) agreement to remove former Soviet nuclear weapons.⁶ The region's vast natural resource potential was

certainly of great interest to the United States, as it was for most other large, energy-importing countries. However, rather than concerning itself with Central Asian deposits of oil and natural gas for immediate consumption, U. S. policies prior to September 11th focused primarily on ensuring a diversity of long-term Western energy reserves.⁷

In the years prior to 9/11, U.S. interests still revolved around the three broad themes of political and economic reform, security, and energy. In a 1997 address at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, then U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott stated, “Our support [for Central Asia] has four dimensions – the promotion of democracy, the creation of free market economies, the sponsorship of peace and cooperation within and among the countries of the region, and their integration with the larger international community.”⁸ The primary U.S. security interest in the region during the mid-1990s remained the security of nuclear, chemical, and biological weaponry from the former Soviet Union. Building on the successful CTR agreement with Kazakhstan, the United States signed a CTR with Uzbekistan regarding a biological weapons research facility.⁹ Aside from these efforts to defend against the threat of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation, the United States focused on protecting against long-term security threats rather than hedging against more imminent threats. Thus, its focus was on the slow, multi-generational process of building civil society with less emphasis on the potential for state failure or the spread of terrorism and militant Islam.¹⁰ The intent was that by slowly building civil society and democratic governance in Central Asia and by assisting them to develop their energy sector, the root causes of extremism could be eliminated before they ever developed.

By the late 1990s, the United States began to grow wary of Russia’s interests and intentions in the region. Not surprisingly, the United States began to promote the idea of alternative pipelines for the export of Central Asian gas and oil other than the existing ones that all transited through Russian territory. The U.S. government was not willing, however, to provide any funding for the construction of new pipelines. Instead, it limited itself to pressuring Western oil companies and local Central Asian governments to build the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline.¹¹

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 quickly changed the prioritization of U.S. interests in Central Asia. The U.S. significantly expanded its security role in the region by securing bases in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan as it prepared for offensive military action in Afghanistan. Short-term security interests took precedence over all other U.S. goals in the region, to include the previous focus on building civil society. At that time, the United States and Central Asia – particularly Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan – had mutual interests in the ousting of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Indeed, the leaders of all three of these countries had long been concerned about the Taliban – far longer, certainly, than had the United States.¹² Even after the toppling of the Taliban, stopping the threat of terrorism remained the top priority for the United States in Central Asia. In testimony to a newly formed Senate sub-committee on

Central Asia in December, 2001, then Assistant Secretary of State A. Elizabeth Jones listed three long-term U.S. interests in the region:

1. Preventing the spread of terrorism;
2. Assisting Central Asia's political and economic reform; and
3. Ensuring the security and transparent development of Caspian energy reserves.¹³

Thus, while there has been relative continuity in the broader interests that the United States has in the region, their prioritization has shifted since the opening of the war on terror.

United States interests in Central Asia today remain centered around the three broad categories of security, political and economic reform, and energy access. In the area of security, the focus is to counter the threat of terrorism and Islamic extremism emanating from the region. Political and economic reform focuses on movement towards liberal democracy and free market reforms. Energy access is important to the United States, both to secure additional sources of energy for itself and the West, but also to ensure the independence and sovereignty of the Central Asian states. Security, political and economic reform, and energy access are all equally important – one should not be the primary driver of U.S. foreign policy at the expense of the others.

Central Asia today is a strategically important region for the United States' Global War on Terror both because of its proximity to Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran and because of the potential for militant Islam to originate from the region itself. The combination of increasing instability in Pakistan and President Obama's plan to substantially increase troop levels in Afghanistan renders Central Asia even more critical for logistical support. More broadly, the United States can project power from Central Asia into the Middle East, Horn of Africa, Persian Gulf, and if ever it needed to, the Asian mainland. Therefore, continued access to bases in Central Asia will remain a vital interest to the United States for the foreseeable future. For the same reasons, Russia and China will continue to oppose any continuing American presence in Central Asia. Base access in Central Asia does not mean the large, permanent complexes that characterized U.S. bases in Europe during the Cold War. In fact, such a presence would be counter-productive to the achievement of long-term U.S. interests in the region.

The United States remains committed to encouraging countries to take steps towards democratization and economic liberalization, and Central Asia is no exception. The United States has an interest in promoting domestic policies in these former Soviet republics that, over time, will help them achieve good governance, politically open societies, and open markets.¹⁴ As stated by Lorne Craner, at the time the Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "the primary strategic goal of the United States in Central Asia is to see the development of independent, democratic, and stable states."¹⁵ Therefore, energy access is an important interest for the United States not simply because it wants to diversify its energy sources, but also because open access to Central Asia's vast energy resources will

help the region maintain its independence from the imperialistic intentions of Russia (and to some extent China). While the United States seeks to open Central Asia's energy sector to the market to allow it to sell at global market prices, Russia and China often seek the exact opposite, attempting to create their own monopolies over the export of Central Asian oil and gas.¹⁶ The United States must continue to thwart Russian and Chinese efforts that threaten to undermine the economic and political independence of Central Asian countries.

MUTUALITY OF INTERESTS

Despite the frequent acrimonious rhetoric between Russia, China, and the United States, their interests in Central Asia need not be zero-sum. All three countries, along with the region itself, have an interest in defeating the terrorist threat from Islamic extremists, countering illegal drug and human trafficking, and addressing illegal arms trading. Additionally, all have an interest in economic development in the region. However, coordinating the efforts of all three to effect positive change still faces significant obstacles. Most significantly, China, Russia, and the United States are all concerned about their relative position vis-à-vis the other two. Moreover, any coordinated effort by the three external powers might be perceived by the Central Asian countries as a challenge to their own independence and sovereignty.

The United States, Russia, and China all stand to benefit from economic development in the region, as does Central Asia itself. Both Russia and China trade heavily with Central Asia. In 1992, trade between China and Central Asia (minus Turkmenistan) was \$500 million. A decade later, it had quadrupled to \$2.3 billion, and doubled again only two years later, reaching \$5 billion in 2004.¹⁷ Trade between China and Central Asia is expected to continue to increase in the years ahead, especially if Turkmenistan opens its economy under the leadership of Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov. Despite the increased trade between China and Central Asia, Russia remains Central Asia's leading trade partner.¹⁸ Reopening the ancient Silk Road trade routes through Central Asia would go a long way towards regional economic development, particularly in Afghanistan.¹⁹

For the United States, increased economic development in Central Asia would likely bring increased stability in the region. Increased stability in turn decreases the threat of extremist activity emanating from the region, and thereby contributes to American efforts in Afghanistan and the broader war on terror. It could also contribute to U.S. democratization efforts in the region. If nothing else, it should help prevent Russia from being able to establish economic hegemony over Central Asia.²⁰ Moreover, economic development based on free market reforms could have the added benefit of strengthening free-market forces in Russia itself.²¹

Security is another potential area of cooperation between Russia, China, the United States, and Central Asia. All consider the threat of radical Islamic and extremist forces to be their most pressing

security concern in the region. The trafficking of illegal narcotics is another pressing security concern for the countries of Central Asia. All three external powers can help the region in this regard by sharing intelligence and cooperating on border security.²² Closer cooperation between NATO and the SCO could be a good starting point to address some of the security concerns in the region, though bilateral or multilateral efforts outside of a NATO framework might be more agreeable to the nations of the SCO.²³

DECLINING UNITED STATES INFLUENCE IN CENTRAL ASIA

There is no doubt that United States influence in Central Asia has declined since 2003. The most obvious examples are the ejection of U.S. forces from the Karshi-Khanabad (K2) airbase in Uzbekistan in 2005 and the recent decision by Kyrgyzstan to close the Manas airbase outside of Bishkek. Additionally, energy agreements between Central Asian governments and China and Russia are indicative of a willingness by the leaders in Central Asia to pursue foreign policies that conflict with U.S. preferences. Although sovereign states are free to pursue their objectives and interests as they see fit, the countries of Central Asia have not always been so dismissive of U.S. interests.

In the immediate aftermath of the demise of the Soviet Union and the establishment of independent Central Asian states, many in the region looked to the United States for hope and leadership in the post-Cold War environment. Almost by default, the United States found itself with relative bargaining strength in the region as the Central Asian republics sought to establish their independence from Russia. The United States, for its part, focused its efforts in the region on securing and dismantling the nuclear threat from the former Soviet countries. Such efforts were welcomed by Central Asia, as the new republics themselves did not have the means with which to dispose of their inherited Soviet nuclear arsenals.

During the first decade of Central Asian independence, the region was a second-tier foreign policy priority for the United States. This is understandable given the competing demands for U.S. attention in the 1990s, coupled with mounting domestic pressure to reduce its international role. United States development aid to Central Asia in the 1990s was modest at best, averaging less than \$30 per capita in every country.²⁴ Importantly, U.S. efforts in the region were aimed at long term change, such as the establishment of civil society and gradual movement toward political liberalization. Thus, American aid was widely welcomed in Central Asia; it was considered a genuine effort on the part of the United States to effect positive change in the region and leaders in the region were somewhat pliable towards U.S. preferences. Moreover, the role of Russia in the 1990s was much more complementary to United States objectives in Central Asia. Because Russia was democratizing in the 1990s, it did not see much threat in the promotion of democracy in Central Asia by the United States. Ludicrous as it sounds today, the U.S. government considered a democratizing Russia a positive role model for Central Asia at the time.²⁵

The period between September 11, 2001 and the summer of 2003 marked the high point of U.S. influence in Central Asia. After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the United States saw a dramatic increase in

its influence in the region. This was somewhat ironic, as Central Asia was in a position of bargaining strength given the U.S. need for base access and airspace over-flight rights. Central Asia did see it as an opportunity to secure increased U.S. economic and military assistance, but it did not want to push its position too forcefully. Moreover, Central Asia welcomed the U.S. effort to topple the Taliban because all of the states in the region considered a Taliban-dominated Afghanistan a threat to their own security. With the Taliban in charge in Afghanistan, Central Asian leaders feared the threats of terrorism, drug trafficking, and international crime that emanated from it.²⁶ All of the countries of Central Asia were therefore quick to grant the United States basing access and over-flight rights, and were rewarded by the ousting of the Taliban by U.S. and coalition forces.

Besides the initial support provided by Uzbekistan's offer of the Karshi-Khanabad airbase, Kyrgyzstan provided U.S. forces the use of the Manas airport. Perhaps lesser known, additional cooperation included the use of the airport in Dushanbe, Tajikistan for refueling, as well as over-flight rights and other support provided by Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.²⁷ Even more remarkable were the pledges by Central Asian leaders to take steps towards political and economic reform. In March of 2002, the United States and Uzbekistan signed the "United States-Uzbekistan Declaration on the Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Framework." This was a remarkable achievement for two reasons – first, it amounted to a security guarantee by the United States to a country of the former Soviet Union, and second, because Uzbekistan pledged to further its efforts at democratic transformation.²⁸ Uzbek President Islam Karimov was probably one of the least likely Central Asian leaders to embrace any political reform. Though he probably signed the framework without ever really intending to enact any reform, the fact that he would concede to this U.S. demand is indicative of the level of U.S. influence in the region at the time.

Evidence of declining U.S. influence in Central Asia in the last several years is clear. The most obvious example was the ejection of U.S. forces from the Karshi-Khanabad air base in Uzbekistan in 2005 following harsh U.S. criticism of Uzbek authorities' handling of the events in Andijon in May of that year. The recent decision by Kyrgyz authorities to close the American air base outside of Bishkek provides the most recent strategic setback for the United States in the region. Both of these setbacks were due in part to Russian and Chinese efforts to undermine U.S. influence in the region. Prior to the decision to close the airbase at Manas, Kyrgyz officials had been demanding increasing payments from the United States. It is doubtful that Kyrgyz President Bakiyev would have been emboldened to demand such large increases in the lease payments from the United States without the support of Moscow.²⁹ Likewise, it is no coincidence that President Bakiyev was in Moscow and had received a pledge by Russia of over \$200 billion in financial aid at the time of the decision to close the American base at Manas.

There are three principal reasons for declining U.S. influence in Central Asia – first, United States policies within the region; second, actions by Russia and China to reduce or minimize American influence

in the region; and third, broader U.S. foreign policy actions. Within the region, U.S. influence suffers from a lack of a coherent, holistic approach. Part of this stems from structural flaws within the U.S. government. For example, Central Asia falls under the auspices of Central Command within the Department of Defense while in the State Department, the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs is responsible. Because it is not always clear which department has the lead in formulating U.S. policy, the United States tends to favor bilateral relations with each Central Asian government rather than dealing with regional organizations, such as the SCO or the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Even in its bilateral relations with the countries of Central Asia, the United States frequently has foreign policy objectives that are at cross purposes (or at least are perceived by Central Asians as working at cross purposes), such as promoting democracy and human rights while at the same time emphasizing the fight against terrorism and extremism.

Since being kicked out of Uzbekistan in 2005, it is not surprising that the United States has had minimal clout with Uzbek President Karimov.³⁰ With its pending eviction from Manas, the U.S. position in Kyrgyzstan has clearly deteriorated as well. According to Valentin Bogatyrev, declining U.S. influence in Kyrgyzstan is the product of the American-led invasion of Iraq, the apparent U.S. disregard for its relationship with Uzbekistan, and the increasingly aggressive economic policies pursued by China and Russia.³¹ There has been a general decline in popular Central Asian perceptions of the West, but the shift against the West has primarily been directed at the United States. For example, in February of 2007 Kyrgyzstan ended its participation in the „Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative“ (HIPC). Countries that participate in this program agree to implement reforms in exchange for debt relief. Kyrgyzstanis withdrew their support in part because they perceived the program as a loss of sovereignty, but mainly because they perceive international financial institutions as being dominated and abused by the United States.³²

U.S. emphasis on democratization and its explicit links between political reform and economic aid have also alienated many Central Asian leaders. In 2003, the U.S. Congress initially forbade Freedom Support Act (FSA) assistance to both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan unless they made „substantial progress“ toward meeting their commitments toward democratization and human rights (though Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice eventually determined that both countries were making enough progress and thereby entitled to the aid).³³ Again in 2004, aid to Uzbekistan was withheld due to “lack of progress on democratic reform and restrictions put on U.S. assistance partners on the ground.”³⁴ Other than Turkmenistan, all of the states of Central Asia have suffered a decline in FSA funding in 2009.³⁵ Insistence on democratic reform by the United States is perceived by Central Asian leaders as lacking a true understanding of the security situation and concerns in the region. Central Asians fear instability, and

democratic revolutions such as those in the Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan are known in Central Asia more for the chaos that followed than for the democratic government that ultimately emerged.

Further eroding U.S. influence in the region are the implicit and explicit efforts on the part of other external powers, notably Russia and China, to undermine it. Although both Russia and China did not oppose the American penetration of Central Asia in the aftermath of 9/11, in recent years they have actively sought to reduce both the American physical presence and U.S. influence in the region. Both Russia and China try to leverage the SCO as a means of countering U.S. influence in the region. Even Iran, with its recently acquired observer status in the SCO, does not miss any opportunity in this forum to bash the policies of the United States. At the SCO summit in Bishkek in August of 2007, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad spoke derisively of the U.S. plan to employ a missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic.³⁶ At the same summit, Russian President Vladimir Putin added, “We are convinced that...any attempts to resolve global and regional problems alone are useless.” The most obvious attempts by Russia and China to undermine the U.S. position in Central Asia occurred at the SCO summit in 2005, when Central Asian leaders called for a timetable for withdrawal of the „temporary“ U.S. forces from the region. Ultimately they were successful, given the pending ejection of U.S. forces from the Manas airbase. Recent energy deals between both China and Russia and the leaders of Central Asia further demonstrate the deteriorating U.S. position in the region. In particular, Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan, and Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov of Turkmenistan have both demonstrated a willingness to pursue foreign policies clearly contrary to U.S. interests and desires.

Russia continues to assert its influence in the oil and gas sectors in Central Asia. In May of 2007, Russia secured an agreement with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to upgrade the Prikaspiiski natural gas pipeline that travels around the Caspian Sea. This deal would give Russia a near monopoly on Turkmenistan’s gas exports (though the project currently remains stalled).³⁷ Additionally, Russia, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan agreed to refurbish two other natural gas pipelines. Taken together, Russia stands to double its imports of Central Asian gas to nearly 90 billion cubic meters.³⁸ Both of these deals are setbacks to U.S. hopes to build a trans-Caspian pipeline that would circumvent Russian territory. Russia also secured an agreement with Kazakhstan to expand the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) route, and convinced Kazakhstan to supply up to seventeen million tons of oil per year through a Russian-controlled pipeline running between Bulgaria and Greece.³⁹ These „victories“ not only provide Russia with increased leverage over Central Asia, they also provide it with significant leverage over Europe and former Soviet republics.

The most important factor presently impeding the United States’ ability to achieve its foreign policy objectives in Central Asia is the war in Iraq. This is not surprising, given that all of the countries in Central Asia have Muslim majorities. According to Orozbek Moldaliyev, the director of Bishkek’s

Research Center on Politics, Religion, and Security, “Anti-American sentiment practically did not exist prior to Iraq. On the contrary, there was great sympathy for America.....but after the Iraq events such feelings appeared among part of the population, especially religious people.”⁴⁰ Today, one can sense even among everyday Kyrgyz that events in Iraq heavily influence their opinion of the United States. Many in Central Asia supported the U.S. campaign to eliminate the Taliban in Afghanistan, both because it was in their own security interest and because they perceived the action as legitimate. The invasion and campaign against Iraq, however, is often perceived in Central Asia as a broader American campaign against Islam. Recent successes in Iraq and plans to substantially reduce the American presence there should help assuage Kyrgyz concerns about long-term American intentions, but the damage to America’s reputation (and thus its influence) is likely to take some time to repair.

CENTRAL ASIAN CHALLENGES, U.S. OPPORTUNITIES

Despite its recent setbacks in Central Asia, the United States still has the opportunity to reassert itself in the region. This, however, will require a keen understanding of the challenges facing the independent Central Asian republics. Pursuit of American interests that Central Asian leaders perceive as running counter to their own interests is a recipe for failure. Focusing economic development assistance exclusively in the energy sector or promoting democratization at any cost are two examples of policies that are sure to worsen the deteriorating U.S. position in Central Asia.

Security and economic development are the two most pressing issues for Central Asia today. Within the broader issue of security, Central Asian leaders are particularly concerned about border security, the threat from radical Islam, and increased drug trafficking. The United States could help Central Asia address all three of these challenges, and in fact, enjoys a mutuality of interests with Central Asia in these three areas. Border security and drug trafficking are inextricably linked, and steps to improve the former will invariably lead to at least partial success in combating the latter. Border security also can help counter the threat from radical Islamic terrorists in the region. Moreover, improving border security and helping to counter drug trafficking also help the United States’ efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. Ignoring the threat from drug trafficking, however, will certainly alienate the United States’ Central Asian allies who often accuse it of being unconcerned about what they consider to be their greatest security threats.

More than fifteen years after gaining independence, economic development in Central Asia continues to fall short of its potential. While the leaders of Central Asia bear the brunt of the responsibility for this failure, the United States has also missed many opportunities to help positively impact regional development. The United States has certainly assisted countries such as Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to develop their energy sector infrastructure. Regional trade, however, remains an area that has yet to reach its full potential. Two of the largest obstacles impeding further growth in regional trade are a transportation network and modern infrastructure that can facilitate the free movement of goods within

the region. Anyone who has tried to travel between the capital cities of Central Asia is well aware of its poor transportation infrastructure; travel to more remote areas is even more frustrating. Similar to its potential assistance with Central Asia's terrorist and drug trafficking security threats, the United States can be of great assistance to the region's economic development and growth.

If the United States wishes to regain its lost influence and persuasive power in the region, it must seek to pursue policies that align its interests with those of the Central Asian republics. Contrary to what many observers argue, this is not as difficult as it may seem. It does, however, require that U.S. policymakers avoid the common mistake of conflating American interests with American values. Thus, while democracy is certainly an American value, and something U.S. policymakers cannot easily ignore, it is not necessarily an end unto itself. One of the biggest challenges for U.S. policy in Central Asia will be to balance the pursuit of American interests without compromising American values. Given the choice, however, the United States should prioritize achieving its short term interests in the region. In the long term, this will increase the probability of furthering American values in Central Asia.

In addition to pursuing policies that seek to achieve mutual interests with Central Asia, the United States must prevent China and Russia from establishing regional hegemony. That said, it must also avoid instigating unnecessary great power competition in the region that misses opportunities for cooperation. One possible method of both avoiding great power rivalry and preventing Chinese or Russian regional hegemony is to increase cooperation with the region's multilateral security institutions.⁴¹ Cooperation between the United States or NATO and the SCO to address the three evils of extremism, separatism, and terrorism would help counter the possible misperceptions of each others' intentions and motivations in the region. The challenge here is that many Central Asian countries within the SCO do not envision it as a military alliance. Regardless, the United States needs to change the perceptions of both Russia and China, and engaging them through a regional security body like the SCO could be quite useful.⁴² Presently both are deeply suspicious of the United States and therefore reluctant to cooperate with it. They must not see the United States as a strategic competitor in the future – working with them through the regional security organization that the two dominate would help reduce their fears of U.S. intentions.

Some regional analysts are becoming increasingly concerned about the growing role of the SCO in Central Asia, and its use by Moscow and Beijing as a lever to counter U.S. influence in the region. Its importance is indeed growing, and to some extent Russia and China both see it as a means to counter U.S. influence in the region. However, the SCO is not now, and will not in the foreseeable future be, a true military alliance with mutual defense pledges and organizational capabilities.⁴³ There are internal divisions within the organization that presently preclude such an alliance, and all members, Russia and China in particular, believe they have greater interests with the United States than with each other.⁴⁴

Facilitating greater ties between the SCO and NATO would prevent Russia and China from being able to present the two security organizations as mutually exclusive choices to Central Asian leaders. Over time, it will become apparent to the leaders and people of Central Asia that the United States does not have the imperial ambitions that Russia and China both have. This will also increase the likelihood that Central Asia will drift towards the West and increase the appeal of Western approaches to security, economics, and political structures.

Economic development remains critically important for Central Asia, and is another possible avenue of support for the United States. Although the energy sectors in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are generating huge profits for those states, there are few other economic success stories in the region. Without successful economic development, the prospects for instability increase; and as instability increases, the prospects for democratization and political reform decrease substantially. The United States should help Central Asia's five countries work to establish a strong regional trade market. A strong regional trade market would greatly help efforts to create jobs for the region's comparatively young population.⁴⁵ Reducing unemployment would mitigate one of the common conditions that allow Islamic extremism to increase its appeal. There are 75 million people in a possible regional market in Central Asia, all of whom can be reached, to a large extent, by the existing transportation market within the region. However, present cross-border transit restrictions are the largest impediment to establishing this potential market.⁴⁶ The United States should encourage the states of Central Asia to coordinate their efforts at reducing these restrictions through the SCO given that security concerns are their reason for restricting cross-border movement.

Mounting foreign debt is another impediment to Central Asian economic growth. While the root cause of the problem rests with poor leadership and poor economic policies in the countries themselves, increased international economic assistance could provide help. Conditionality requirements for economic and political reform, both from donor countries as well as international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank have thus far limited the assistance provided to Central Asia. Central Asia had also been ineligible for U.S. foreign assistance money from its Millennium Challenge Account since its inception in 2004 until recently – Kyrgyzstan will receive \$16 million through the MCA over the next two years.⁴⁷ It is certainly reasonable for donor countries and institutions to establish standards required of aid recipients. However, a more nuanced appreciation for the dynamics at play in Central Asia should guide U.S. foreign policy here. Central Asians have an incredible fear of instability, whether it is caused by Islamic extremist terrorism, economic turbulence, or domestic political transitions. Given the history of the region, this is unsurprising. This explains why a leader such as Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan can continue to remain popular among Kazakhstanis despite clear evidence of

authoritarian rule. It also explains why Central Asians are often quite suspicious of Western, and especially American, requirements for political and economic reform.

Democracy promotion in Central Asia should remain a long-term goal of the United States, but the current methods being used to achieve this goal must be adjusted. Lectures by U.S. political leaders about democracy, corruption, human rights, and political repression are unlikely to gain much traction with Central Asian leaders or their populations. Attaching stiff conditionality requirements to foreign assistance money is perceived by Central Asian leaders as lecturing about how to run their countries. Given the perceived failure of these conditions to effect change in Iraq or Afghanistan, Central Asians feel that the United States has no business doing any lecturing. The United States would be wise to allow itself flexibility in how it makes its foreign assistance decisions. It should establish mutually agreeable objectives with the governments of Central Asia, understanding that it might be unreasonable to expect sweeping political reforms in the short term. Domestic political support for such a „realist“ policy is likely to encounter stiff opposition from U.S. lawmakers. Successful implementation of such a pragmatic approach to the region will require persuasive convincing by U.S. administration officials and political courage on the part of U.S. lawmakers to look beyond the next election.

Kazakhstan is a perfect example of a country that has made admirable progress in the last five to ten years, but certainly is far from what any Western observer would call a liberal democracy. Rather than lecturing Nazarbayev and Kazakhstanis on what they should do, U.S. leaders should publicly praise the efforts at reform that they have made thus far. Given the clan dynamics that he has to contend with and the lack of any democratic tradition in the region, it is remarkable that he has accomplished the political reform that he has.⁴⁸ The United States should appropriately reward Nazarbayev so that he can demonstrate to Kazakhstanis that Kazakhstan's achievements thus far and its support of the United States has not gone unnoticed or unrewarded.⁴⁹ U.S. support for Kazakhstan's bid to chair the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) should send a clear message of support to Kazakhstan for its progress thus far and is a wise decision by the United States; it hopefully will also send a signal to the rest of the region that progress is duly rewarded by the United States and the West. Perhaps even more importantly, the United States and the West could use OSCE chairmanship to indirectly pressure Nazarbayev and Kazakhstan to live up to the standards of the OSCE and advance its political reform agenda. Just as signing the Helsinki Final Act in 1975 pressured the communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe to lessen their oppression of their people, the burden of leadership in the form of the OSCE chairmanship could „shame“ Kazakhstan into reforming faster than it otherwise might.

As slow as the democratic process has been in Kazakhstan, the evolutionary model chosen by Nazarbayev is a more appropriate and realistic path for countries in the region. The slow development of a middle class in Kazakhstan will likely lead to demands from within for more political reform. Attempts

to push Central Asian leaders to speed up their reform processes will likely be counterproductive and could lead them to abandon reform altogether. It would certainly push them towards Russia and China.

The establishment of democracy in the region will require institution building, and it will take time – therefore, the United States and the West will need to be patient and focus on the development of civil society, a free press, rule of law, legitimate opposition parties, and an independent judicial system. Support must be given both to the current regimes as well as to legitimate opposition parties. Failure to provide support to elements of the existing regime will undermine the efforts of the reform-minded elites in the current regimes, and more importantly, add to the perception that democracy promotion by the United States is synonymous with regime change and therefore instability. The Russian-dominated media in the region continues to reinforce this widely held perception by Central Asians. To counter the perception that democracy and democratization means instability and revolution, U.S. embassies in the region need to step up their public diplomacy efforts within the restrictions imposed by the existing regimes. Their message should emphasize that the revolutions experienced by the Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan were not the inevitable byproduct of democratization; rather, they were the inevitable result of political systems that did not allow their citizens any meaningful participation. Therefore slow and steady reforms and democratization will not necessarily mean instability or revolution, but failure to do so will increase the probability of both. Outposts such as the „American corners“ in Turkmenistan are valuable public diplomacy tools to provide information to local populations about the functioning of democracy and the benefits that it can bring. These outposts provide literature and information on the United States and democracy, and are critical to recruiting young people to take part in the educational exchange programs sponsored by the U.S. government.

Lastly, the United States needs to help Central Asia face its security threats because without stability and security, there will not be any significant investment in the region.⁵⁰ The two most important security threats in Central Asia are Islamic fundamentalist terrorism and drug trafficking. Implicit in helping Central Asia address both of these threats are efforts to increase border security. All of the large external powers – the United States, China, and Russia – share a common interest in countering the threat of Islamic fundamentalist terrorism and fighting the drug trade. Both NATO and the SCO also have an interest in fighting terrorism and the drug trade; again, cooperation between both security organizations to address these mutual threats would be welcomed in Central Asia, and would go a long way towards restoring confidence in NATO and the United States among Central Asians. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Patrick Moon’s attendance at the March 2009 SCO summit could be a useful first step towards cooperation or at least coordination between the United States (perhaps even NATO) and the SCO.

One challenge for the United States will be the ability to differentiate between Islamic terrorist groups and legitimate opposition groups within the Central Asian states. It will be critical for the United States to

successfully make this differentiation because its competitors for regional influence in the region do not need to do so. Both Russia and China consider domestic opposition groups a threat to their regimes and consider them „terrorist“ groups. Many Central Asian leaders are quick to do the same. Actual terrorist groups are well aware of U.S. criticism of human rights violations, and will exploit this to their advantage whenever and wherever possible. The 2005 riots in Andijon, Uzbekistan provide the most salient example, but there are sure to be similar events in the future. The United States must be careful in admonishing Central Asian governments as they deal with events such as Andijon. Certainly the United States should not condone the human rights abuses employed Uzbekistan, but it could balance such criticism with an acknowledgement of the legitimate security threat that the rioting groups posed.

CONCLUSION

The United States has seen its influence in Central Asia fluctuate quite dramatically in the last eight years. From its highpoint in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the United States has suffered numerous strategic setbacks in recent years that indicate a precipitous decline in influence in the region. Given the importance of the region for so many U.S. foreign policy priorities, it is imperative that the United States work to re-establish itself in Central Asia. The good news is that the challenges facing the countries of the region present opportunities for the United States to do so, but it must reinvigorate its Central Asia policy if it wishes to reverse the decline.

Failure to re-establish itself in the region would concede defeat to Russian and Chinese interests in the region, and could possibly threaten the sovereignty and independence of the Central Asian states themselves. Moreover, allowing Russia to establish a monopoly on Central Asian oil and gas would threaten Europe's ability to effectively engage Russia in any policy area. Working with Central Asia to address its security and economic development challenges will improve the image of the United States in the region. It can have a direct and immediate impact by helping to stem the trafficking of illegal drugs, improving border security, and working to bring stability to Afghanistan. These are also areas of mutual interest to Russia and China, and therefore provide opportunities for at least coordination, if not outright cooperation.

To reassert its influence in the region, the United States also needs to tone down its rhetoric on reform in Central Asia and understand that reform will be a very long-term process for the region. At present, the United States does not have any effective carrots or sticks to accelerate the democratization process in the region.⁵¹ Attempts to accelerate or force democratic reform run a very high risk of alienating Central Asian leaders and their people. This would cause a precipitous loss of any influence for the United States and the prospect for democracy, even in the long term, would diminish greatly.

To successfully engage Central Asia, the United States needs to take a balanced approach. It must balance its interests with its values, and not let promotion of the latter preclude it from achieving the

former. A long-term approach to the region and how it sees its relationship with it will help the United States to achieve this balance. Short-sighted and ideological approaches to its Central Asian foreign policy will inevitably lead to self-marginalization in the region, allowing Russia and China to easily fill the void. And a dominant Russia or China in Central Asia would not be helpful to U.S. interests in the region, nor to the interests of the Central Asian countries themselves.

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