

U.S. Interests in Central Asia and Their Challenges

STEPHEN BLANK

Abstract: Since 2005 U.S. interests in Central Asia have been under sustained attack from Russia and China on geopolitical and ideological grounds due to their fear of American presence and ideas about democratization, Central Asian governments who welcome U.S. presence but not U.S. ideologies, and the Taliban, which seeks to regain control over Afghanistan. Thanks to the combined pressure of these attacks and of defects in American policymaking, U.S. interests in the region have suffered as has America's ability to advance them. This article analyzes U.S. interests in Central Asia, the nature of the challenges to them, the shortcomings of American policymaking insofar as this region is concerned, and steps that need to be taken to overcome these challenges and defects in policymaking.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Central Asia, China, India, Russia, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, United States

Introduction

Central Asia's importance to the United States is growing. In 2004 Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage told Central Asians that "stability in the area is of paramount importance and vital national interest."¹ Yet today U.S. interests in the region face attacks from three sides: Russia and China, the Taliban and their supporters, and the authoritarian misrule of Central Asian governments. Worse yet, some local governments might fail, adding to these threats. Former Director of National Intelligence John Negroponte told Congress in 2006,

Central Asia remains plagued by political stagnation and repression, rampant corruption, widespread poverty, and widening socio-economic inequalities, and other problems that nurture radical sentiment and terrorism. In the worst, but not implausible, case central authority in one or more of these states could evaporate as rival clans or regions vie for power—opening

Stephen Blank is a professor at the Strategic Studies Institute at the U.S. Army War College. This is an expanded and revised version of testimony offered to the subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia, House Committee on International Relations, July 25, 2006. An earlier version of this work was published by the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College in March 2007. This draft is not for citation or quotation without consent of the author. The views expressed here do not represent those of the U.S. Army, Defense Department, or U.S. government. Copyright © 2007 Heldref Publications

the door to an expansion of terrorist and criminal activity on the model of failed states like Somalia and, when it was under Taliban rule, Afghanistan.²

Negroponte's successor, Vice Admiral (Ret.) J. Michael McConnell, was even more pessimistic in his 2007 testimony:

There is no guarantee that elite and societal turmoil across Central Asia will stay within the confines of existing autocratic systems. In the worst, but not implausible case, central authority in one or more of these states could evaporate as rival political factions, clans or regions vie for power—opening the door to a dramatic expansion of terrorist and criminal activity along the lines of a failed state.³

Neither is this merely an American perception. When Turkmenistan's dictator, Saparmurat Niyazov, suddenly died on December 21, 2006, the local media openly expressed speculation and anxiety over Turkmenistan's and Central Asia's future.⁴

While some attacks on U.S. policy are or were unavoidable, others stem from shortcomings in policy that gave these adversaries opportunities to attack it to their own advantage. This article addresses these deficiencies and makes recommendations for extricating America from its present difficulties.

U.S. interests in Central Asia are primarily strategic. They derive first from Central Asia's proximity to Russia, Iran, and China.⁵ Indeed,

The United States and the West in general find themselves increasingly dependent on the continued stability and development of the Central Eurasian region. The United States is heavily invested in Afghanistan, and its engagement there and in Central Asian states is a long-term endeavor. The future of this region has a considerable bearing on the development of the Global War on Terrorism and in general on U.S. security interests in Eurasia; the maintenance of access to airspace and territory in the heart of Asia; the development of alternative sources of energy; and the furthering of freedom and democratic development.⁶

Hence Russia and China view any U.S. presence in Central Asia as a standing challenge, if not threat, to their vital interests. Those interests are inherently imperial, entailing Central Asian states' diminished sovereignty. Therefore America's paramount objective under the Clinton and Bush administrations has been to uphold these states' integrity, independence, sovereignty, and security against Russo-Chinese efforts to dominate them and circumscribe their freedom.⁷ As Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Lorne Craner stated in 2004,

The primary strategic goal of the United States in Central Asia is to see the development of independent, democratic, and stable states, committed to the kind of political and economic reform that is essential to modern societies and on the path to integration and to the world economy. The strategy that we follow is based on simultaneous pursuit of three related goals. The first of these goals is security. Our counterterrorism cooperation bolsters the sovereignty and independence of these states and provides them with the stability needed to undertake the reforms that are in their long-term interest. However, in order for these nations to be truly stable over the long-term and to be fully integrated into the international community, to achieve their potential, they must allow for greater transparency, respect for human rights, and movement toward democratic policy. Finally, the development of Central Asia's economic potential, including its extensive natural resources, requires free market economy reforms and foreign direct investment. This is the only way to improve the well-being of the region's people, diversify world energy sources, and facilitate the movement of these countries into the world economy.⁸

Thus energy access, although important, is not and should not be the primary driver of U.S. policy. Rather it is a means to an end. Opening Central Asian states' access to markets, and energy companies' reciprocal access to them, lets Central Asian governments diversify their customer base and gain access to global markets where they can sell their products at global market prices. Freer markets foster conditions that stabilize a state's domestic and foreign relations. Because internal liberalization reinforces and strengthens state sovereignty and relations with other major powers, the United States should open its markets to Central Asian governments so that they can diversify their exports just as the United States seeks access to their markets.

Consequently, the driving force behind U.S. policy is antimonopoly while the driving force behind Moscow and Beijing's policies is quintessentially monopolistic in nature.⁹ This antimonopolistic policy extends the United States' long-established vital geostrategic interest in forestalling the rise of a Eurasian empire that could challenge it. Imperial success in Central Asia would only encourage Moscow and Beijing to further extend their hegemonic aspirations. Certainly, they have long known that a great power rivalry in Central Asia is developing and regard any alternative method of building organized relationships here as a threat to their vital interests.¹⁰

Since September 11, 2001, a second vital U.S. interest has materialized: defense of America and Europe from Islamic terrorism. Consequently, routing the Taliban and establishing a secure, viable, and legitimate Afghan state is an unconditional vital interest that is as important as victory in Iraq. America's other important interests apply to equal access for U.S. firms regarding energy exploration, refining, and marketing. If the Central Asian states' large energy holdings are restricted to Russia because of lack of oil or gas pipelines, they cannot then exercise effective economic or foreign policy independence. Therefore, equal energy access for American and other Western firms relates significantly to the larger objective of safeguarding the Central Asian states' independence, sovereignty, and secure development. Equal access to energy and other goods for American and Western firms facilitates Central Asian integration not only with Russia but with its other neighbors and, even more broadly, with the global economy, a key American goal.¹¹

The leitmotif of U.S. energy policy has been to foster the development of multiple pipelines and multiple links to outside consumers and providers of energy, including, for example, electricity with regard to India.¹² Central Asian energy producers recognize that their security and prosperity lies in diversification of pipelines and it is here that U.S. and Central Asian interests converge.¹³ Thus, Washington has sought to block a Russian pipeline or energy monopoly with considerable success in the oil market but has had much less success with regard to natural gas. America has also sought to isolate Iran from Central Asian energy by urging states to build pipelines that bypass Iran and by enforcing sanctions on those who trade with Iran.

Among the systems that bypass Iran and Russia: the Baku-Tbilisi-Çeyhan (BTC) pipeline, in which America has long urged Kazakhstan to participate to construct a line under the Caspian Sea; a projected Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TAP) line that may be extended to India or, alternatively, a potential pipeline using newly discovered Afghan energy resources to fuel the subcontinent; and the recent attempt to connect Central Asian and South Asian electricity networks.¹⁴ Indeed, U.S. and Western firms have been relatively successful in gaining contracts to explore, refine, and market Kazakhstan's oil

fields.¹⁵ Washington finally has a major interest in promoting domestic policies in all these states—the five former Soviet republics and Afghanistan—that will ultimately lead them toward democratization, open markets, open societies, good governance, and as a result, to their lasting security against internal and external challengers.

Today these interests are under attack. American policy in Central Asia is embattled and under siege. Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran view America's political and strategic presence in Central Asia with unfeigned alarm. Indeed, they are suspicious of America's desire for bases there.¹⁶ Despite their protestations of support for the U.S. war on terror, they wish to exclude America from the region and fear it will stay indefinitely. In the campaign against U.S. regional involvement, Moscow has taken the lead—with Chinese and Iranian support. Russia has consistently and with some success sought to establish a gas cartel under Russian leadership. Russian President Vladimir Putin started advocating this in 2002 and has moved steadily since then toward this goal, which he reiterated under the guise of an energy club at the most recent summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).¹⁷ Since then Putin has publicly stated that it would be a good idea to organize a cartel with states such as Iran, Algeria, and Qatar.¹⁸ This goal may be attainable. As the U.S. forecasting firm stratfor.biz reported in late 2005,

All natural gas produced in the former Soviet Union comes from Gazprom, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, or Turkmenistan with any natural gas originating in a country ending in "stan" having to transit through Kazakhstan and Russia on its way to any market. The KazMunaiGaz deal means that Gazprom—and by extension the Kremlin—now owns all of that gas. Any state wishing to use Central Asian gas in order to get energy independence from Russia is now out of luck. [Obviously this also includes the Central Asian states themselves.] This is particularly worrisome for states such as Ukraine and the Baltic states who now have no reasonable alternative to Russian-owned natural gas. Russia has been bandying the threat of sharply higher energy prices around for years. Now it has finally taken the concrete step necessary to make that an arbitrary reality.¹⁹

Thus, the degree of openness of Central Asian energy markets is of increasing importance to European energy security and explains Europe's growing interest in Central Asia.²⁰ This heightens the important and obvious consequences of any such cartel. A Russian-led cartel or, worse, a possible Iranian-Russian cartel would prevent the Central Asian states from selling natural gas on the open market through diversified pipelines to customers of their choice, perpetuating their backwardness and dependence on Russia, and slowing their economic growth.²¹ Such a cartel would also allow Russia to squeeze European customers for concrete economic, political, and strategic gains at the expense of Western interests such as the independence of Ukraine, the Baltic states, Georgia, and the Central Asian governments. Thus, Russia has imposed considerable pressure on Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan to desist from supporting the Baku-Tbilisi-Çeyhan pipeline or a trans-Caspian pipeline.²² If Russia succeeds, those regimes might be forced to become Russia's "partners" in natural gas.²³ In Russia and other states such policies promote the consolidation of authoritarian petrostate governments that rely on resource rents to keep themselves in power. Arguably, Putin's regime could not survive in its present state if it did not dominate the Central Asian energy sectors.²⁴ Therefore, American success in opening up these sectors has effects in Russia beyond the visible consequences of liberalization in Central Asia.

Russia has also fought hard to prevent the Central Asian states from affiliating either with the United States or Western militaries. It seeks to have exclusive control of the entire Caspian Sea and be the sole or supreme military power there while Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan rely on Western and, especially, U.S. assistance to help them develop forces to protect their coastlines, exploration rigs, and territories from terrorism, proliferation operations, and contraband of all sorts.²⁵

Russia has formed the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to prevent local states from aligning with NATO or getting too involved with its Partnership for Peace (PfP) program. Moscow also demands a veto power over CIS members' defense ties to the West. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov stated that,

The countries of the region are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). And [if the countries of the region are] making a decision about hosting new bases on their territory, they should take into account the interests of Russia and coordinate this decision with our country.²⁶

In 2003 Ivanov claimed the right to intervene in CSTO countries' decision making and more recently highlighted Russia's anxiety about any potential political change in these states' internal constitution. Russia is undoubtedly considering military responses to such challenges.²⁷ Similarly, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov threatened "disloyal" governments in the CIS with "every conceivable economic pressure tactics [*sic*]."²⁸

The CSTO has also created legal and political grounds for permanently stationing Russian forces and bases in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and possibly Uzbekistan—ostensibly to defend these regimes against terrorism.²⁹ Nikolai Bordyuzha, the CSTO's secretary-general, has also urged its members to coordinate efforts to counter religious extremism (i.e., giving Russia license to meddle in the domestic affairs of CSTO member states). And the CSTO, under Russian leadership, constantly seeks to augment the scope of its missions in Central Asia, moving from air defense to counterterrorism to peace support operations to cement a Russian-dominated security equation there.³⁰

Observers understand that these policy imperatives are part of a larger pattern of intensified Russian efforts to create more effective CIS trade and defense organizations under its auspices and consolidate its hegemony there. Russia's activities regarding the Caspian Sea play an important role in this project but are neglected in the West. Since April 2005 Russia has repeatedly advocated an international naval task force or operations group in the Caspian called the Caspian Force (CASFOR).³¹ Putin organized this task force, or rapid reaction force, allegedly to defend against terrorism, arms trafficking, drug running, and proliferation of WMD components, and supposedly modelled it after the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization's Black Sea Force (BLACKSEAFOR).

CASFOR is planned as a conventional naval force incommensurate to Moscow's proposed missions. Observers suspect that Russia intends to subsume Central Asia's fledgling naval forces—which are set up to guard their coastal installations—within a Russian command structure and prevent them from obtaining Western support for their own defense capabilities. Moscow also hopes to consolidate its dominant position in the Caspian region and in the continuing discussions among the littoral states regarding the ultimate disposition of its waters.

Russia also wants to enhance the CSTO so that the SCO, which it regards largely as a Chinese initiative, is not the only organization providing security in Central Asia. Finally, there are signs that Russia will entertain thoughts of a preemptive intervention in Central

Asia if they believe they need to rescue potentially failing states, such as Kyrgyzstan, from collapse. Ilyas Sarsembaev recently wrote that,

Some Russian military analysts consider that if Kyrgyzstan were overtaken by a complete political collapse, Russia and Kazakhstan could impose some kind of protectorate until stability could be reestablished and new elections held. In this scenario, the United States would allow Moscow to take action in Kyrgyzstan, because most of its own resources would already be mobilized in Iraq and Afghanistan—and probably in Iran and Syria. Russian help would then be welcomed and much preferred to that of China. Indeed, if Russia did not dare to put itself forward as a stabilizing force, China might use Uyghur separatism.³²

Sarsembaev's example also confirms that Russian forces in Central Asia are there to defend Russian interests and/or keep current regimes in power. Russia now has bases in twelve former Soviet republics, and increasing its capability to protect power into these areas, if not beyond, by expanding existing bases or building new ones is a leading drive of current Russian military policy.³³ Another motivating force behind Russian military policy—and its proposals for CASFOR—is the effort to develop, sustain, and project the land, sea (Caspian), and air capabilities needed to prevent local governments from either receiving U.S. weapons and assistance or allowing U.S. military bases in their territories.³⁴ The practical outcomes of a force composed only of littoral states is to confirm them as Russian satellites, put Iran in a subordinate position in the Caspian, and exclude a foreign military or energy presence there.³⁵

Since 2002 Moscow and Beijing have also waged an unrelenting campaign to limit the duration and scope of America's presence in Central Asia.³⁶ They succeeded in Uzbekistan thanks to Washington's misconceived policies there. Washington failed to counter Russo-Chinese propaganda at both the presidential and public level that it was behind the "color revolutions of 2003–04" and the Andijon uprising of 2005.³⁷ Russia and China are also constantly exerting pressure on Kyrgyzstan to force the United States out of the Manas air base and to submit to inclusion in a Russian and Chinese sphere of influence.³⁸ Under domestic and foreign pressure Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev demanded a one hundred-fold increase in the \$2 million annual rent for Manas. Only America's deep pockets, high-level intervention by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and renewed fighting in Afghanistan enabled America to stay at Manas by providing \$150 million in assistance to Kyrgyzstan.³⁹ The recent upsurge of fighting in Afghanistan has, ironically, benefitted Washington because Bakiyev had formally tied extension of the base to the level of fighting in Afghanistan.⁴⁰

Although Rumsfeld also apparently sought increased access in Tajikistan, Dushanbe, ever mindful of its dependence on Russia and its vulnerability to Russian pressure, rebuffed him.⁴¹ Russia has also sought to forestall the Central Asian states from buying Western equipment by selling them Russian weapons at subsidized prices. In return for their debts Russia seeks to restore the Soviet defense industrial complex by buying equity in strategic defense firms there.⁴² Russia and China have also engaged in training programs for Central Asian officers.

Most significantly, Moscow and Beijing have used the SCO as a platform for a collective security operation in Central Asia, sponsoring both bilateral and multilateral Russian and Chinese exercises with local regimes and with each other on an annual and

expanding basis since 2003. The SCO's utility to Moscow and Beijing does not end here. While significant differences exist among Russia, China, and the other members and observers (India, Pakistan, Iran, Mongolia) as to whether the SCO should mainly be a promoter of trade and economic development, a military alliance, another energy forum that Russia would dominate, or a basis for regional cooperation as Kazakhstan and the smaller states would prefer, Moscow and Beijing have clearly envisioned it since its inception as a forum for unifying the Central Asian governments in an anti-American regional security organization.⁴³ Russia and China clearly want it to be a regionally exclusive organization of growing stature so that the Central Asian states will not be members of any other similar organization, such as NATO, which could counter it.⁴⁴ Indeed, the SCO's charter declaration of June 15, 2001, was clearly an anti-American policy document.⁴⁵

There are also divisions among the member states as to whether SCO membership should expand to include the observer states: Iran, Pakistan, India, and Mongolia.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, Beijing openly and consistently proclaims the SCO as a model for its program on security in Southeast Asia and beyond—that is, to replace the U.S.-led Asian alliance system with one of its own creation that is attuned to its own rather than the United States's and its allies' values and interests. China's policies toward Central Asia, particularly through the development of the SCO, exemplify the process by which China hopes to build a prosperous neighborhood under its auspices and shelter its exploding economic development from both internal and foreign threats.

Step one for the SCO was to build the group, the first multilateral group China had started on its own. Step two: expand it to discussions of trade, economics and energy. Step three: begin discussions on more substantive security partnerships. The SCO has gone so far as to conduct its own joint military maneuvers, in China's Xinjiang Autonomous Region. This approach of deepening regional multi-level ties will likely be repeated in other forums, such as ASEAN+3 grouping (ASEAN plus Japan, Korea, and China).⁴⁷

Simultaneously, Russia sees the SCO as an organization whose international importance and standing is growing.⁴⁸ America should therefore take the SCO seriously as a template for China's and Russia's, if not Iran's, broader foreign policy objectives.

Both Moscow and Beijing have waged substantive, comprehensive, and systematic efforts to undermine America's presence in Central Asia because of U.S. support for democratic reform. These actions include the rehearsal of counterrevolutionary military operations, which is a conscious decision to foreclose even the possibility of such reforms in Central Asia. Thus Russia and China are stalwart champions of the status quo, which includes massive corruption, repression, and the promise of sweetheart deals, if not complete support for Central Asian rulers and their chosen heirs.⁴⁹ Since Russia's failure to secure its own candidate as the president of Ukraine in 2004 and the country's ensuing Orange Revolution, Russia, China, and local governments have unceasingly advanced the idea that the United States, CIA, and the West in general are behind the so-called color revolutions and wish to overthrow local governments and replace them with more pro-American, and thus anti-Russian or anti-Chinese forces, that have no domestic support.⁵⁰ Russian officials charge that such "pressure," which is allegedly interference in their domestic politics, is "heightening tension" in the region.⁵¹

As local dictators generally tend to believe they are irreplaceable, and that all opposition is external and terrorist in nature, it is easy to sell this idea. Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev publicly and forcefully criticized this new American policy in his address to the Kazakh parliament in February 2005. He explicitly said,

Today we are witnessing superpower rivalry for economic dominance in our region. We have to address correctly this global and geoeconomics challenge. We have a choice between remaining the supplier of raw materials to the global markets and wait[ing] patiently for the emergence of the next imperial master or to pursue genuine economic integration of the Central Asian region. I chose the latter.⁵²

Selling this idea becomes easier when relentless state-run media campaigns from Moscow, Beijing, and the local regime support it, and when there is no effective or coherent response, as has been the case with U.S. policy. Although America spent \$43.7 million in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Azerbaijan in August 2005 to support independent press operations, this effort was too little too late.⁵³ Indeed every official with whom I have spoken agrees that Washington still does not have an effective or discernible public information policy in Central Asia to advance its case. Nor does it take the idea of rebutting these charges seriously.⁵⁴ Consequently, the United States is paying for this complacency and neglect.

On top of this, the United States faces a resurgent Taliban, backed by enormous drug revenues, Pakistani support, and an inconsistent international effort to rebuild Afghanistan while its government remains weak and unsure of itself. Indeed, on July 21, 2006, General David Richards, the most senior British commander in Afghanistan, described the situation there as being “close to anarchy” thanks to the conflicts between private and foreign funding agencies, corrupt local officials, and the lack of control over forces moving back and forth over the border with Pakistan. He also described NATO forces as being short of equipment and “running out of time” to meet “the expectations of the Afghan people.”⁵⁵ Similarly, Supreme Allied Commander in Europe General James Jones (USMC) stated that in fact “We’re not making progress; we’re losing ground” in cracking down on narcotics cartels that help fund Taliban insurgents and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. He also stated that the answer there is not primarily a military one.⁵⁶ Even if the dispatch of NATO forces into the south temporarily stemmed the Taliban offensive, unless the underlying nonmilitary causes of their resurgence are addressed and overcome, we will return to the same situation in 2007.⁵⁷ Indeed, NATO commanders admit that they were surprised by the strength of the Taliban resurgence and that military forces alone cannot win this war.⁵⁸ Moreover, it was believed that the United States could not relieve its forces in Afghanistan or withdraw them to other duties until at least spring 2007.⁵⁹

Because of these attacks against the U.S. position in Central Asia, the United States has lost the Karshi-Khanabad air base (K2) and faces constant pressure in Kyrgyzstan—where its hold on Manas remains precarious—and elsewhere. Furthermore, the United States and its NATO allies are fighting a revived and strengthened Taliban under conditions that are in many ways less favorable than in 2001. Worse, if a situation arises where only Russia, and possibly China, can decisively engage Uzbekistan during a crisis while Washington is wholly excluded from doing so it would be a palpable strategic loss for the United States.

This eviction represented the worst of all possible outcomes for the United States. The United States did not receive credit for standing on political principle and voluntarily leaving K2, nor did it manage to secure operational use of the base.⁶⁰

Until quite recently Uzbekistan seemingly listened only to Moscow and Beijing. At the same time, not even Kazakhstan has made the United States its priority partner, even under the best of circumstances.⁶¹ The State Department's hope of Kazakhstan as the United States' strongest partner in Central Asia and as a potential leader for advancing U.S. goals is, therefore, fundamentally unsound and cannot serve as a basis for a successful future U.S. policy.⁶² Certainly one cannot truly call Kazakhstan "a corridor for reform," as Secretary Rice has done, while its domestic political developments reflect the opposite.⁶³ This remains the case despite Kazakhstan's impressive economic and social reforms; its economy has grown steadily.⁶⁴ Although Kazakhstan has made numerous proposals for regional cooperation among the local governments and has occasionally stood up to Russia by selling gas to Georgia and joining the BTC pipeline, its calls for regional integration have failed. Additionally, the geopolitical limits for independent action imposed on Kazakhstan are quite clear because its primary orientation—because of obvious geostrategic considerations and as a series of recent deals reconfirms—remains Russia, which nevertheless frequently disregards Kazakh interests.⁶⁵ Indeed, as one Russian news report observed, "not once in the years of independence has Astana's policy gone counter to Moscow's interests."⁶⁶

While Kazakhstan will continue working with Washington on pipeline issues, obtain equipment and training for its self-defense in and around the Caspian, participate in the PfP, and accept foreign investment, it will not lead on Washington's behalf against Moscow and Beijing in the region or forego its rigorously balanced multivector policy.⁶⁷ But it more than suffices for U.S. interests if Kazakhstan assumes a leadership role for itself, strengthening the diversity of its policy instruments and the range of its influence. Despite its espousal of regional integration and assumption of a greater role as "economic locomotive" of the region, without U.S. support, which is necessary, its field for maneuver is restricted by Moscow and Beijing and by conditions in the neighboring states.⁶⁸

Washington should not ignore opportunities for comprehensive engagement with all the other states either. Doing so would be a serious mistake. As Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasia Daniel Fried has said, America "cannot and will not have a one-dimensional relationship with any country in the region based solely on security concerns or economic interests."⁶⁹ Recent statements by Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Evan Feigenbaum only reinforce that multidimensionality.⁷⁰ Similarly, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense James MacDougall has observed that, "You cannot allow your security interests to prevent the agenda of political development, and you cannot prevent your agenda of political development from stopping your interests in the security and energy fields. These have to go hand in hand."⁷¹ Any U.S.-Central Asian policy must exploit every opportunity to interact productively with the local governments.

Recommendations

If the United States is to regain its footing in Central Asia, it must first understand where it has gone astray. The United States's mistakes are in shortcomings in its policy processes and equally, if not more important, in its policies as seen in and from Central Asia. The Bush

administration cannot recover the U.S. position in Central Asia without addressing both sets of issues quickly and decisively. First, the policy process—including the interagency process—with regard to Central Asia and many other issues—such as Korea and Russia—and security cooperation in general is broken.⁷² Some analysts and observers believe that there is no regular policy process and that the administration prefers it that way.⁷³ The Pentagon seeks evermore control over foreign policy and takes a hard line in doing so while administration officials are divided against each other. The result is that no clear line emerges.⁷⁴ Alternatively, the State Department invokes democratization and democracy as absolutes and elevates values to interests—for example, that the main agenda item in regard to Central Asia is

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democracy, not security interests—thus blocking consideration of other alternatives. Indeed democratization trumps the latter in the State Department’s view.⁷⁵ For example, before an October 2005 trip by Secretary Rice, Fried proclaimed that “U.S. interests in advancing political and economic reform in the region will not be subordinated to security concerns.”⁷⁶ Thus, democratization trumped security interests and in a time of war no less.⁷⁷

Because of the war in Afghanistan and the war on terrorism beginning in late 2001, U.S. security interests naturally prevailed in U.S. policy toward the region and in its assistance packages. Central Asian leaders soon realized that this situation gave them a freer hand as long as they gave the right verbal assurances about ameliorating internal conditions in their own countries that fostered unrest. Western funders, including the U.S. government, grasped this reality, however, and funding for institutional and other reforms began to dry up under domestic pressure to curb spending on democracy promotion and heightened regional repression. Thus, the Bush administration’s rhetoric on democracy was belied by the fact that it steadily spent less on democratization projects each year from 2003 to 2005, and the initial funds involved were relatively small. That shortchanging of democratization projects continues as spending on Voice of America and Radio Free Europe broadcasts in Uzbek are being cut.⁷⁸ Because there was no real penalty for Central Asian leaders who rejected domestic reforms, by 2005 U.S. policy had neither carrots nor sticks with which to secure its overall objectives. Consequently, that policy and its instruments, such as the Karshi-Khanabad air base, were vulnerable to any reversal of fortune.⁷⁹

Since the loss of the Karshi-Khanabad air base, it is unclear whether the United States has assimilated the lesson of its failed policies or refined its objectives into a coherent strategy for attaining them. Fried’s remarks, cited previously, show that the values of democracy and human rights take precedence over national interests relating to defense and security, particularly regarding the war on terror. Fried further announced that U.S. security and democratization interests were indivisible. While such rhetoric makes its authors and audiences feel good, it does not constitute a foreign policy or effective diplomacy. It does not explain how the United States will reconcile these two strands

of policy when faced with a tangible choice between them. Thus, it cannot serve as the basis for a coherent policy. This was evident in Washington's uncoordinated and ineffectual response to the Andijon massacre in 2005, which led to the U.S. ouster from Karshi-Khanabad.⁸⁰

Nevertheless, these sentiments accurately reflect Secretary Rice's remarks that "the greatest threats to our security are defined more by the dynamics within weak and failing states than by the borders between strong and aggressive ones."⁸¹ Furthermore,

Our experience of this new world leads us to conclude that the fundamental character of regimes matters more today than the international distribution of power. Insisting otherwise is imprudent and impractical. The goal of our statecraft is to help create a world of democratic, well-governed states that can meet the needs of their citizens and conduct themselves responsibly in the international system. Attempting to draw neat, clean lines between our security interests and our democratic ideals does not reflect the reality of today's world. Supporting the growth of democratic institutions in all nations is not some moralistic flight of fancy; it is the only realistic response to our present challenge.⁸²

Although we have laid down a marker to Central Asian and presumably all CIS governments, such statements, no matter how strong, can only alarm them further concerning our predictability and concern for their stability. These statements also ultimately lead to a situation where U.S. government officials either make futile protests to deaf governmental officials or end up trying to dictate to the CIS governments how they should democratize so that the "right results" are produced.⁸³

Such policies lead the United States either into too great an immersion in the domestic politics of targeted countries or to the charge of a double standard because it cannot pursue this policy with each state with equal intensity. The policy is physically impossible and morally and strategically dubious.

Therefore, although such statements are rhetorically powerful, in Central Asia, according to expert observers, they are empty and irrelevant to the realities of the region.⁸⁴ Moreover, they undermine U.S. strategic and security objectives because they feed the belief that those promoting democracy work for an elitist foreign concept that is alien to local realities and traditions and seek to undermine either local or central authorities.⁸⁵ Because Central Asian authorities believe their only real opposition is Islamic terrorists, the United States' position fuels their belief that it understands neither the region nor Central Asian interests.⁸⁶ If democratization is the United States' first priority, then it surrenders the region to Russia and China because both Washington and Moscow have convinced local leaders that their aforementioned beliefs about U.S. policy are correct whatever the truth might be.

If the United States continues to balk at dealing with leaders of energy-producing countries because of democracy concerns, then "Soon there won't be any more democracies in the region to participate with. You can say all you want about how we will not take part in these great games, but Russia and China are taking part in them, and the United States risks losing out."⁸⁷

Obviously, a Russian- or Chinese-dominated Central Asia is hardly compatible with any progress toward democratization.

The contradiction within the U.S. government's policy process implies to local elites that the United States is not serious about democracy. Moreover, because Washington has steadily cut economic assistance to Central Asia, including Afghanistan, it has stimulated

the belief that it does not understand the region, that it will not stay the course, and that Central Asia means less to it than previous rhetoric implies.⁸⁸

The United States' and Europe's refusal until recently to address the issue of Afghanistan's drug problem has fostered an explosion of narcotics across Central Asia, reinforcing the belief in American and Western inattention to local states' security interests and needs.⁸⁹ The failure to devise a viable American information policy tailored to this region's mores, cultures, and special needs has reinforced previous negative feelings while also leaving Russia and China to operate with total freedom in support of retrogressive rulers or corrupt dictators. The United States has failed to foresee what might happen in states so misgoverned that violence is likely, either through economic distress or through a succession crisis. Thus, its reactions have been uncoordinated and haphazard with visibly negative consequences for U.S. policy. As Negroponte and McConnell warned, all Central Asian states, particularly Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, could become failed states when the present rulers leave office.⁹⁰ Meanwhile, Uzbekistan is vulnerable to both violent incitement and outbreaks of public violence.⁹¹

The United States lost its position in Uzbekistan not because it championed human rights, but because Washington neglected to take Uzbekistan seriously, address its real problems, answer its queries concerning U.S. plans for Karshi-Khanabad, and pay off President Islam Karimov and the other members of his government and family as it did in Kyrgyzstan, and because of the accumulated outcomes that are traceable to the aforementioned defects of U.S. policy process.⁹² In 2004 Assistant Secretary Craner testified that,

Central Asia has a major strategic importance for the United States and Uzbekistan inevitably plays a key role in our policy toward the region. It occupies, as we know, a core position in Central Asia. It has, by far, the largest population, and it is the guardian of a centuries long tradition of enlightened Islamic scholarship and culture. And it boasts the largest and most effective military among the five countries.⁹³

Yet today, because of its policy failures, Washington has little or no dialogue with Uzbekistan and pro-American politicians such as former Defense Minister Sergei Golunov, who was a genuine reformer in the Uzbek context, have been publicly purged and arrested because of their ties to the United States. These trends occur even though the successful removal of nuclear materials from Uzbekistan recently shows that such dialogue is sustainable if the issue is sufficiently vital.⁹⁴

NATO's continuing divisiveness and dilatoriness about sending troops to Afghanistan and giving them sufficiently robust rules of engagement has slowed U.S. and allied ability to counter the Taliban resurgence, especially as the United States has reduced the number of troops there.⁹⁵ Because NATO seeks to stabilize the country with only about a half the number of troops that Moscow sent there between 1979 and 1989 in its abortive effort to Sovietize Afghanistan, more troops might be needed. NATO's current commitment will probably not suffice on a purely military level, let alone the political and state-building level. America has failed to press the international community strongly enough to make good on its pledges to Afghanistan, which are still lacking and without which regional reconstruction will be greatly prolonged even if it is successful.⁹⁶

Regarding Afghanistan there is the unsolved problem of Pakistan. Afghanistan cannot be pacified if the border with Pakistan is unpoliced and insurgents have free reign to come and go. Unfortunately, this continues to happen.⁹⁷ Since 9/11 Pakistan has been constrained

to accept formally the fall of the Taliban. Nevertheless considerable evidence suggests Pakistan still assists the Taliban in and around the Pakistan-Afghanistan border areas.⁹⁸ Moreover, in 2006 Pakistan signed a peace agreement with the tribes in Waziristan and other regions bordering Afghanistan, suggesting its inability or unwillingness (if not both) to deal firmly with the terrorist enclaves there. This accord probably formalizes continuing cross-border destabilization from Pakistan to Afghanistan.

As part of this agreement, the Pakistani military will cease its unpopular military campaign in the semi-autonomous North Waziristani region. In exchange, the local Taliban militants will halt their attacks on Pakistani forces and stop crossing into nearby eastern Afghanistan to attack Western and Afghan forces hunting Al-Qaeda and Taliban militants. For Pakistan, this was an acceptance of the ground reality that its military would never be able to defeat tribal militants in a region where Pakistan's writ has never extended. For the critics, however, the deal amounts to giving an effective amnesty to the insurgents, allowing them even more freedom to cross into Afghanistan and pursue their militant agenda. While Pakistani officials claim that foreign militants can stay in the region only if they obey Pakistan's laws and stay away from militancy, it is unclear how this can be enforced in a region that has become even more out of bounds for the Pakistani government after this agreement.⁹⁹

A successful policy must learn from these mistakes and surmount them. Therefore the administration must undertake the following steps.

First, it must repair the broken policy process. The Bush administration must decide to what degree Central Asia is important to the United States and assign sufficient material and political resources to support an equal investment. President Bush and his cabinet members must impose policy discipline on the players after forging a consensus on these issues among themselves. They must establish clear and coordinated interdepartmental priorities for the United States' placement in Central Asia and implement them. Relatedly, it is encouraging that recent statements—for example, by Feigenbaum—contend that the real goal is to enhance every dimension of the Central Asian states' sovereignty.¹⁰⁰

Without sovereignty, their most precious asset, they become vulnerable to both terrorists and to further Russo-Chinese encroachments. Given the existing regional situation, these states' security and independence must come first. Otherwise, neither democratization nor security is remotely conceivable. This does not mean neglecting democratization as an issue. Rather, the United States must engage both governments and civil society or other opposition groups that do not claim terrorists as members. It must engage governments with the argument that they have signed international conventions upholding these practices and that the United States seeks not to supplant them but to ensure that their countries become both more secure and more prosperous. Because their interest is at stake in a violent overthrow, this argument may have some resonance. But it must be supported by increased assistance, the commitment of real resources toward specific goals, and policies that truly address their needs.

It is also essential to continue the series of high-level visits by cabinet members, and even those of Vice President Dick Cheney, and reinforce them with regular visits from lower-ranking officials to monitor policy implementation and maintain regular policy discussions. It might also be useful to set up a commission such as the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission to ensure regular progress on all sides in a mutually consultative process that addresses common needs and projects. Likewise, the United States must come up with alternatives to Russo-Chinese projects for regional association. Reports of an expanded Pentagon-sponsored collaboration to combat the drug trade are to be welcomed—not just

because Russian analysts fear they signify an anti-SCO ploy but also because they show that the United States means business regarding local states' security threats.¹⁰¹

Similarly, Washington must find ways to reestablish a viable policy dialogue with Uzbekistan, even if only at a low level. U.S. policy cannot omit any local government that wishes to cooperate with it on a mutually beneficial basis.¹⁰² Moreover, Uzbekistan has now given tangible signs of its desire for rapprochement.¹⁰³ U.S. Central Asian policy, to be successful, must not only be multidimensional but must also include Uzbekistan. If this cooperation or dialogue is built on a solid foundation, even at a low level, U.S. officials can then talk to Uzbekistan on issues of shared concern and rebuild mutual confidence, because it is clear that Islam Karimov fully understands the nature of whom he is dealing with in Beijing and Moscow. Even though he may wrongly feel that the United States betrayed him, he knows that he cannot afford to become Russia's satellite. Neither can the United States let Uzbekistan fall into that trap, especially as the country might again turn to violence at the first sign of Karimov's weakness or succession.

Second, on deciding its priorities and beginning to implement them, the United States must also address NATO, the EU, and India, its new strategic partner in Asia, to devise an agenda or common agendas oriented toward achieving shared objectives and then work to fulfill them throughout the entire region. This applies both to the integration of energy and electricity links to Europe, or to India and Pakistan and to sustaining Afghanistan's comprehensive recovery and victory over the Taliban.¹⁰⁴

Third, it is essential that the U.S. government quickly develop and execute a viable public information program for Central Asia using all the media at its disposal. This program must address the region's cultural framework and present the truth about the United States and other policies. Washington must also endeavor to retain and/or open every outlet available to it, such as Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, to spread the word about local events. Under no circumstances can the United States concede to Moscow, Beijing, or local dictators a total monopoly over the dissemination of information.

Fourth, the Bush administration must devise rewards and punishments for those who would use the SCO as a means to eject the United States from Central Asia. Even if the United States needs Russo-Chinese cooperation on key proliferation issues, this does not mean that they can strike U.S. interests or undermine regional security with impunity. This also means upgraded bilateral relations with local governments to strengthen them against Russo-Chinese pressures. Although the United States obviously has a wide-ranging agenda with Moscow and Beijing, it should not surrender its own or the Central Asian states' interests in return for progress on other issues with Russia and China. For example, Washington and Moscow are about to negotiate Moscow's capability to store spent nuclear fuel and distribute it to states that wish to use it peacefully.¹⁰⁵ While these negotiations can prove helpful regarding Iran or even North Korea, behind it lies Moscow's desire to centralize all the CIS republics' nuclear energy operations under its control, dominate the field of Central Asian energy, and deprive those states independent access to their own energy resources.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, Washington must be careful how it approaches these two larger states. As a general rule it must engage the states around Russia or China as much as it does Russia and China to prevent a successful neoimperial policy in Central Asia or elsewhere.

Fifth, the United States must continue to offer these states—particularly Georgia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan—the resources with which to defend their sovereignty and territory independent of Moscow and Beijing. Washington cannot allow Russia, China,

or Iran to turn the Caspian Sea into a closed sea for their own exclusive benefit. Nor can it allow the CSTO to achieve NATO recognition as the only legitimate organization providing security for the Central Asia that it so ardently craves or the SCO to be the only provider of regional security.¹⁰⁷ This is because for NATO, according to Russian officials, Central Asia is “a zone of interests” whereas for Russia it is a zone of “responsibility.”¹⁰⁸ This support for their military development becomes particularly critical if the United States will, as General John Abizaid, former commander of U.S. Central Command, announced, reduce its presence in Central Asia but enhance military cooperation with local countries.¹⁰⁹

There are numerous ways to do this. One is to expand bilateral programs involving all services with their opposite numbers in receptive Central Asian (and Transcaucasian) states. A second alternative is to expand reliance on NATO as a means of improving the quality and training of Central Asian militaries. NATO now directs operations in Afghanistan and is also the security organization of choice for most

post-Soviet states. Even Armenia is significantly upgrading its military ties with the West and NATO.¹¹⁰ The new states seek to identify as Western and recognize that adherence to the PfP program provides meaningful enhancement to their security through affiliation, if not membership, in a nonpredatory, multilateral, and cooperative security arrangement.¹¹¹ Furthermore, it is the only organization that provides a standard of measurable activity and security against terrorism, proliferation, and so on.¹¹² It also has demonstrated its ability to provide security for Afghanistan’s elections and to work on behalf of broader security stabilization beyond a conventional peace support operation.

Expansion of international ties between Central Asian militaries and Western forces could also mean starting discussions on upgrading India’s participation in the modernization and westernization of Central Asian forces. Those forces could be introduced to the bilateral Indo-American exercises now being conducted among all branches of the military to build strong trilateral working relationships based on experience and trust. The same applies to educational exchanges and expert dialogues. New Delhi and Washington share many critical interests in Central Asia: the prevention of terrorism, the stabilization of Afghanistan, and other issues. These fora would reinforce activities toward those ends and toward the larger end of stabilizing all of Central Asia. Admittedly, any program undertaken with India would likely anger Pakistan, especially if it embraced the new Afghan army. However, the initial scale of such activities could remain relatively small, be confined to the five former Soviet republics, and take place under a primarily bilateral Indo-Central Asian umbrella. If it is successful, it could then expand to bring Pakistan and Afghanistan into the program as a confidence-building measure. In time Pakistan’s participation could help further integrate its military with Western democratic notions of conduct and provide a lasting institutional mechanism by which to influence it. Such fora could also stimulate a regional dialogue with Indian and Central Asian militaries or governments that would benefit all parties.

“[I]t is essential that the U.S. government quickly develop and execute a viable public information program for Central Asia using all the media at its disposal.”

Sixth, U.S. economic activity in the region must extend beyond ensuring equal energy access to helping these states move toward overall independence and economic and political development by supporting diversification of energy connections, helping them build pipelines to the seas and oceans, and allowing them to bring products more easily to Asian and European markets. Such a policy must also include trade, investment, and financial instruments and not be restricted to energy. This also includes supporting projects that would upgrade and integrate Central Asia's infrastructure to facilitate more rapid growth of economic ties among states and people. Only the United States can do this given its strong economic position and ties to international economic institutions. Consequently, such efforts must be intensified.

Seventh, while addressing each of these issues, the Bush administration must also upgrade its capability to act promptly in case of unforeseen contingencies. The State Department's Office of Reconstruction and Stabilization, under Ambassador John Herbst, must be directed, if it not already doing so, to begin planning for the real possibility of state failure in Central Asia, particularly in Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan. If and when state failure occurs, it will usher in violent responses. Such chaos cannot be allowed to go on in uncontrolled fashion or to undermine the United States' real interests here. Adequate forecasting and rapid economic-political-military response policies must be thought through and implemented so that the United States can move on a moment's notice if necessary and provide whatever is needed to reinstate or ensure stability. Although assistance to forestall state failure need not be exclusively military in nature, it must be timely and well focused because rival states such as Russia are already discussing publicly potential intervention scenarios to forestall this same contingency.¹¹³

Regarding Afghanistan, the United States should undertake the following actions to maximize its chances for both victory and reconstruction under an enduring and legitimate government that is moving, however slowly, toward democratization. First, the United States must exert more pressure on Pakistan to reduce, if not terminate, its support for the Taliban and other terrorists. The Bush administration has already brought considerable pressure to bear on Pakistan, but it and NATO cannot ease up. If America's good offices are requested and acceptable to both sides the Bush administration should use them regarding the Indo-Pakistani negotiations on Kashmir. Second, the administration should continue to promote India's overall ability to interact economically with Central Asia and Afghanistan, seek pipelines and electricity outlets to strengthen the individual economies and polities of the region, and build a foundation for greater and more enduring regional economic integration through infrastructure links that open up these areas to greater development. Third, it should encourage the continuation of Indian support for the Karzai regime in Afghanistan. Fourth, Washington must keep pushing NATO members to maintain, and if necessary expand their commitment to Afghanistan and provide their forces with sufficiently robust rules of engagement to prevail. Fifth, the Bush administration must also pressure the international community to fulfill their pledges to revive Afghanistan and to join the United States in doing so in a way that strengthens its capability for self-rule without external interference or tutelage. This also means a substantial offensive against the drug lords and the drug problem, which is now the main financial pillar for the Taliban if not other terrorist groups. Success in this campaign requires a comprehensive approach to the problem and can only be undertaken if there is sufficiently strong political will among all the players inside and outside of Afghanistan.

Although none of these recommendations for Central Asia and Afghanistan represents a panacea, especially if undertaken in an ad hoc, individual, or incomplete fashion, taken together they provide a foundation from which the Bush administration can repair its past policy shortcomings and retrieve at least some, if not all, of its past position in the region. If Central Asia is as important as Richard Armitage said it was, the Bush administration must be prepared to demonstrate that importance in word and deed through a coordinated multidimensional strategy. This strategy uses *all* the instruments of policy, not just the military instruments, and does so in ways that leverage the United States' and its allies' superior ability to work for peace, security, liberty, and prosperity. Although such a plan will require years, if not decades and generations, of work, it is incumbent on Washington to begin doing what it can now—because if it does not seize this day and those that follow, the crises that could engulf this region will likely happen sooner rather than later. These crises will also come more quickly and more violently than would otherwise have been the case. And then even our best efforts may not prove enough to avert them.

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