

**CENTRAL ASIA
IN THE FOREIGN POLICY OF RUSSIA,
THE UNITED STATES,
AND THE EUROPEAN UNION**

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The Soviet Union left behind a geopolitical vacuum in Central Asia which augmented the interest of outside powers in the region. | Indeed, its advantageous geopolitical location, natural riches (oil and gas in particular), as well as transportation potential and the possibility of

using it as a bridgehead in the counter-terrorist struggle have transformed Central Asia into one of the most attractive geopolitical areas.

The great powers' highly divergent interests have led to their sharp rivalry over influ-

ence in the region; after 9/11 this rivalry became even more pronounced. The United States, Russia, and the European Union are the key actors; this article will look at the specifics of their regional policy.

Russia-Central Asia

Amid the turmoil of the contemporary world, at a time brimming with global, regional, and national challenges and threats, the Central Asian states, like all the other states the world over, need one another and cherish their contacts. This is true of their relations with Russia.

This is not exhausted by their geographic proximity and 150 years of common history. In the post-Soviet period, each of the newly independent states (NNS) had to ensure its national interests; Russia, the Central Asian, and certain other NNS united into the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

Russia's current Foreign Policy Conception identifies "a belt of good-neighborly relations along the perimeter of Russia's borders" as one of its important strategic aims and speaks of the need "to promote elimination of the existing and prevent the emergence of potential hotbeds of tension and conflicts in the regions adjacent to the Russian Federation," as well as "uphold in every possible way the rights and interests of Russian citizens and fellow-countrymen abroad."

The CIS countries are obviously regarded as one of the main trends in Russia's foreign policy because the perimeter of Russia's borders roughly corresponds to its borders with the NNS, where over twenty million Russian citizens reside.

The same foreign policy document goes on to say: "A priority area in Russia's foreign policy is ensuring conformity of multilateral and bilateral cooperation among the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to the country's national security tasks. The emphasis will be placed on developing good-neighborly relations and strategic partnership with all the CIS member states."

The Russian leaders accepted the five new Central Asian states that appeared in the center of Eurasia, each with its own domestic and foreign policy, as a historical reality; each defends its own national interests and seeks security. In this context, they put much store by Russia in their policies.

In turn, the Russian leaders are currently paying much more attention to this region which they consider very important to them; this explains Russia's efforts to coordinate its policies with the geostrategic realities that appeared in the world at the turn of the new millennium and that are perceived as a threat to Russia's security.

Another document, the National Security Conception of the Russian Federation, points out: "At the same time a number of states are stepping up their efforts to weaken Russia politically, economically, militarily, and in all other ways. Attempts to ignore Russia's interests when solving major issues of international relations, including conflict situations, could undermine international security, stability, and the positive changes achieved in international relations."

At the same time, under President Putin, the state fortified its international position. The National Security Concept says that new challenges and threats to Russia's national interests are developing in the international sphere; the trend toward a unipolar world under America's economic and military domination is gaining momentum.

Today, Russia remains under the pressure of certain power centers, especially along its western border with NATO members, which undermines its geostrategic position. The United States and its NATO allies are out to entrench themselves in Eurasia, they are pressing ahead in the Caucasus and Central Asia, wishing to gain political and military domination there.

The National Security Conception of the Russian Federation points out that today “threats to the Russian Federation’s national security in the international sphere can be seen in attempts by other states to oppose Russia becoming stronger as one of the influential centers of the multi-polar world, to hinder the execution of its national interests, and to weaken its position in Europe, the Middle East, the Transcaucasus, Central Asia, and the Asia-Pacific Region.” The document mentions Central Asia as a region where “other states” might “hinder the exercise of Russia’s national interests and weaken its position.”

What exactly is Central Asia’s role in the system of Russia’s national security?

At all times in the past and today the destinies of the Central Asian people have been affected by the unique geographic location of their common home at the crossroads of Eurasian geopolitical ties, which is indispensable for the regional powers’ cooperation. This means that the situation there has been and remains one of the most important balancing factors on the Eurasian continent.

In the early 21st century, the Eurasian geopolitical context changed a great deal with Central Asia receiving a more important role to play in global politics.

Russia’s position in the region is largely defined by its place and role in the post-Soviet balance of forces in the world.

In the post-1991 geopolitical situation, the Russian leaders were very much concerned about Russia’s southern borders. An analysis of the main security threats outlined by the National Security Conception reveals that the larger share of them emanate from Central Asia: the possibility of foreign military bases and large military contingents close to the Russian borders; conflicts that might spring up and escalate directly on Russia’s state borders and the external borders of the CIS countries; and attempts by other state to interfere with the realization of Russia’s national interests and undermine its position.

The world crisis that came to the fore in 2008 and that crippled the world security architecture makes these threats and challenges even more pronounced. Russia had to specify its position in the changing balance of forces on a world scale. In Central Asia, Moscow has to bear in mind the fairly obvious instability factor connected with the ever rising violence in Afghanistan.

The Foreign Policy Conception of the Russian Federation says: “The protracted conflict in Afghanistan creates a real threat to the security of the southern CIS borders and directly affects Russia’s interests.” The war in Afghanistan, which has been going on for many years now, threatens the region with ethnic conflicts, drug trafficking, illegal trade in weapons, terrorism, and religious extremism which will spread further to Russia.

Central Asia has its share of the leading powers’ rivalry over the strategically important expanses: who gains control over Central Asia will control the Eurasian core and its resource, transport, and communication potential. So far, the rivalry is proceeding in the form of squeezing Russia, mainly through U.S. efforts, from a region which is vitally important to it.

Moscow, in turn, proceeds from the assumption that a wider American military presence in the region threatens Russia’s security; in the last few years the United States and its NATO allies have established control over Russia’s southern borders.

The indefinite terms on which NATO’s armed forces are stationed in Central Asia are one of the pertinent examples. It was expected that in 2005 the Alliance would either cut down its military presence in Central Asia or pull out of the region altogether. This did not happen.

Barack Obama built his election campaign partly on the promise to withdraw from Iraq in order to build up America’s presence in Afghanistan. The coalition needs the airbase in Kyrgyzstan and the

airports of Dushanbe and Almaty. In January 2009, during his one-day visit to Bishkek, General David Petraeus, Commander of U.S. CENTCOM, described the Manas base as an important logistical link in the northern chain of supplies and an “extension” of sorts of the Pakistani air route. It was agreed that the coalition would be able to move more cargos across Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. He added that the United States might send 30 thousand men to Afghanistan, not counting NATO’s additional forces, and that the base in Kyrgyzstan would be needed even more than ever.¹

Today, these ambitious plans are endangered by the Kyrgyz government, which decided to close down the Manas airbase. President Bakiev said this much during his working visit to Moscow on 3-4 February, 2009. The denunciation act passed the parliament on 18 February, 2009; the next day it was enacted by the president’s signature. Under the agreement of 14 December, 2001, each of the contracting parties had the right to unilaterally discontinue the agreement by warning the other six months in advance, which means that the coalition forces will be using the airbase until 19 August, 2009.

U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates does not despair; he deeply regrets the decision yet is looking forward to another possible and mutually advantageous decision between the United States and Kyrgyzstan. He probably means a different format with a different legal status and legal underpinnings.

Many hastened to celebrate the victory of Russian diplomacy, but the American military presence in the region has not been removed from the agenda. The Russian leaders know only too well that regional instability will spread to Russia, therefore, as the Foreign Policy Conception put it, it is necessary “to provide elimination of the existing and prevent the emergence of potential hotbeds of tension and conflicts in the regions adjacent to the Russian Federation.”

Drugs and drug trafficking can be described as one of the gravest threats to Russia’s security; the Central Asian countries have become one of the links in the drug chain. According to UNODC, Afghanistan has been increasing opium popper production for the third year running. In 2007, it produced 8,200 tons (an increase of 17 percent over 2006); in 2008, it gathered nearly 8,700 tons. Between 2001 and the present time, it increased the poppy cultivation areas more than 20-fold.

Experts believe that 65 percent of the total volume of drugs produced in Afghanistan (including 80 percent of Afghan heroin) is moved across Central Asia and Russia.

The mounting activities of Islamic terrorists in Central Asia are another threat to Russia’s security. Their leaders made the 20-million-strong Muslim population of Russia their target; this is all the more dangerous because Central Asia borders on the predominantly Muslim regions of the Russian Federation.

The specifics of the Central Asian states’ domestic policies might, at some point, trigger regional instability in several spheres, which cannot but affect Russia’s security.

So far the region remains a minefield of ethnic and interstate conflicts with numerous unsettled border disputes. The deficit of land and water adds tension to the ethnic and border issues. Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan have the largest number of disputed border stretches in the Ferghana Valley.

Water and energy are another source of local tension; water in fact is developing into a major source of conflicts and regional threats.

It seems that a water-energy consortium might be the best answer, with extra-regional countries being invited to take part. Russia, which could help to diminish the contradictions among the local states, is directly involved in the problem. In the latter half of December 2008, during Prime Minister

¹ See: D. Petraeus, “Aviabaza ‘Manas’ v Kyrgyzstane igraet kliuchevuiu rol v dostavke soldat i oborudovania v Afghanistan,” available at [www.24.kg].

of Kyrgyzstan I. Chudinov's visit to Moscow, it was agreed that Russia might allocate \$2 billion to complete the Kambaratinskaia-1 Hydropower Plant project. In January 2009, the prime ministers of Russia and Kyrgyzstan deemed it necessary to discuss the problem still further. This was one of the subjects discussed during President Bakiev's working visit to Moscow on 3-4 February, 2009. It was decided that Russia would allot \$1.7 billion to the hydropower project over the next 4 years; besides Russia announced that it was prepared to write off \$195 million of Kyrgyzstan's state debt in exchange for shares of the Dastan plant. At the same time, Moscow promised Bishkek a grant of \$300 million until April 2009. It was generally believed that Russia's generosity was repaid by the decision to close down the Manas airbase.

The fact that the local countries failed to settle their problems themselves and expected Russia's brokerage is very important. Their hopes are fed by the decision of the Bishkek EurAsEC meeting to create a joint anti-crisis plan and Russia's readiness to extend material aid to its neighbors.

The Afghan and local conflict potentials might merge into a force capable of upturning the Central Asian balance of forces and spread to the Caucasian instability belt. This will create many problems for Russia.

To sum up. The external threats and numerous domestic contradictions inside the Central Asian states and among them do not merely keep the region on the brink of instability but also threaten the Russian Federation. On the other hand, for their larger part the local countries look to Russia for support and brokerage. This means that both Russia and its Central Asian neighbors are equally interested in ensuring their security.

The United States-Central Asia

American strategy in Central Asia is part of its wider Eurasian strategy, which means that without complete control over the Central Asian states and their domestic and foreign policies Washington's Eurasian efforts would be deprived of any meaning. This means that it is seeking long-term control over the region's energy resources and a much wider military presence.

Central Asia is an important part of the United States' Greater Central Asia project expected to become, together with Afghanistan, a single military-strategic and geopolitical unit to be later merged with the Greater Middle East under Washington's control. If realized, the project will allow it to wrench the Central Asian countries away from Russia and create a cordon of sorts between them and China.

The United States pins its hopes of turning Central Asia into a zone of its strategic interests on the Caspian Guard program designed to establish its military and political control over the Caspian region. Washington seeks to undermine the positions of Moscow and Beijing, establish its control over the movement of Caspian energy resources to the world markets by bypassing Russia, and achieve military and political domination in the region.

The United States and its NATO allies are seeking stronger geostrategic positions by expanding their political and military influence into the Caucasian countries. The Russian-Georgian war and recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia merely made the situation tenser still.

Some Russian experts are convinced that American interests in the region are very vague: it is still engaged in probing action, intelligence, and wound-licking after the first failures. On the other hand, America is obviously determined not to let Russia and China develop into monopolists. The

United States knows that it is not yet ready for the final move: monopoly is not a light burden. America would like to content itself with competition, something that China and Russia are not prepared to accept so far.²

Here is another opinion. O. Reut, for example, believes that Washington would like to create pro-American regimes in the region, contain Chinese and Russian influence, provoke a conflict between them, and exploit regional potential to launch a long-term dialog with the Islamic world.³

Central Asian experts are of the same opinion. Fatima Kukeeva, in particular, believes that America is seeking energy security, West-oriented regimes, stability, and regional potential that would enable it to talk to the Islamic world.⁴

Washington has armed itself with adequate instruments which invite different comments from different camps in the United States. Those who favor a liberal approach proceed from the assumption that democratic values are more important than national interests, which means that the United States should revise its approach to the Central Asian authoritarian regimes. The realists are convinced that the American administration should be guided by the country's national interests and nothing else.

These approaches are equally applied to the United States' long- and short-term interests in Central Asia.

In 1997, Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott pointed out that democratic reforms were impossible in unstable regions and unstable countries. His doctrine described elements of democracy and the market economy incorporated into the political life and national economy of states as the main factors of regional stability.

The American administration is out to balance its geopolitical and economic interests in the region with the Central Asian nations' desire to achieve democracy. This is best illustrated by the programs sponsored by the U.S. Department of State designed to support and finance the independent media, develop political parties and NGOs, promote the freedom of religion and encourage administrative, educational, and health reforms. Logic suggests that attempts to improve the authoritarian political regimes would follow.

On the whole, it should be said that while the U.S. did contribute to the process of democratization in the Central Asian states, its policy was not always consistent. Washington, which needs economic and military-political cooperation with the region's countries, prefers to keep the authoritarian regimes in power rather than push the nations toward democratic changes.

America still insists that it spares no effort to support the democratic processes in these countries but in actual fact it treats them according to their willingness to deploy American military bases and other facilities on their territories, which made the foreign policy of the George W. Bush Administration a blend of extreme liberal interventionism and realistic unilateralism.

The dual-standard policy does nothing to implant the idea that stability and security are products of democratic development, it leads instead to mounting anti-Americanism in Central Asia.

The attempts to bring together the liberal (Kirgizia) and realistic (Uzbekistan) approaches in America's Central Asian policy failed. The local states did not become America's important partners either in the war on terror or in the triumphal march of Western values.

Muratbek Imanaliev has pointed out that today the position of the new U.S. president is all important: he was elected under slogans of cardinal changes in all spheres, foreign policy being no exception. Judging by what Barack Obama said about America's policies in Afghanistan, Wash-

² See: N. Zlobin, "Interes k osvoeniiu aziatskikh territoriy u Soedinennykh Shtatov segodnia nizok," available at [centrasia.ru], 14 September, 2008.

³ See: O. Reut, "Interesy SShA—ot soprovozhdeniia k upravleniiu?" available at [centrasia.ru], 9 October, 2008.

⁴ See: F. Kukeeva, "Politika SShA v Tsentralnoi Azii: 'novyi realizm,'" Regnum Information Agency, 5 November, 2008.

ington will introduce no serious changes in its policies in the vast Islamic region stretching from Maghreb to the Jungar Gates: only one aspect of America's foreign policy strategy will change radically.⁵

The very first month of 2009 revealed that Afghanistan, and Central Asia as a whole, will move into the center of U.S. foreign policy. *The Sunday Times* of Britain informed its readers that President Obama had asked London to add 4 thousand men to its military contingent in Afghanistan; this information was supported by several other sources. The request came immediately after the statement of Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who said that the United States would shift its priorities from Iraq to Afghanistan. He described the new priorities as fighting drug trafficking and terror. This was why, said the defense secretary, the new president intends to concentrate on Afghanistan and address the problem on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border.

The fact that the Obama Administration selected Afghanistan as its top priority was confirmed by the recent appointment of Richard Holbrooke, the brains behind the Dayton Peace Agreement that ended the war in the Balkans and special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan. The West treated this as a signal: he is expected to do the same in Central Asia.⁶

This means that Central Asia will remain in the focus of American attention: Washington has attached its foreign policy priorities to the region. Relations with Russia, containment of China, stabilization in Iraq and Afghanistan, a dialog with the Islamic world, and promotion of democracy cannot be achieved without Central Asia cooperation.⁷ The far from ordinary step that Bishkek took in February 2009 has warmed up America's interest in the region and in each of its countries.

The European Union-Central Asia

The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership (2007-2013) presented in Berlin on 22 June, 2007 opened the latest stage of cooperation. The EU is expected to extend financial assistance totaling about •750 million to pay for bilateral contacts in several spheres.

The 2007 strategy is a comprehensive framework document that outlines the spheres of possible practical cooperation based on universal values such as democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. The document presupposes that the EU will use both traditional (special representatives, grants, and cooperation with other international actors) and innovative (so-called EU initiatives in various spheres and the "profound dialog" format in human rights and energy) instruments.

The strategy officially accepts two levels of EU policy in Central Asia: bilateral and regional approaches, which suits the Central Asian countries. This policy makes it possible to take the unique nature of each of the countries into account and develop regional projects to promote their integration.

It presupposes much more emphasis on various spheres from democratization to environmental protection; the EU has assumed responsibility for developing, encouraging, and supporting specific proposals (a united energy system, in particular).

⁵ See: M. Imanaliev, "Kyrgyzstan-SshA: nuzhdaemia li my drug v druge?" available at [www.bpc.kg], 20 January, 2009.

⁶ See: O. Allenova, "Na Afghanistan nastavili priority. SShA vybrali strategicheskoe napravlenie," available at [www.centrasia.org].

⁷ F. Kukeeva, op. cit.

On 23 June, 2008, the European Commission Council published a progress report of the EU Strategy for Central Asia that analyzed the achievements and pace of implementing the strategy as the key indicators of the relations between the EU and the regional countries.⁸

The document pointed out that the strategy was going ahead and that the political dialog and practical cooperation between the EU and Central Asia had intensified.

To keep up the pace and positive trends the European Union intended to do the following:

1. Establish a regular, result-oriented Human Rights Dialog with each of the Central Asian countries to support human rights and democracy and involve civil society, the parliaments, local administrations, and other participants in monitoring the strategy's progress;
2. Start a European Education Initiative and support Central Asian countries in developing an "e-silk-highway."
3. Start an EU Rule of Law Initiative to establish close cooperation on key legislative and judicial issues.
4. Maintain a dynamic political process in the environmental and water resources sphere designed to create an integrated system of management of these resources.
5. Become more actively involved in coordinating anti-drug efforts as well as in keeping drug trafficking in check and establishing tighter border control to be able to successfully address the common problems.

It is most important to maintain the effective political impulse and pace of practical work achieved in the previous year.⁹

Today, Europe is mostly interested in free access to the region's hydrocarbon resources, an interest exacerbated by the gas crisis of January 2009 which added weight to the Nabucco gas pipeline project expected to bring Central Asian, Turkish, Azeri, and probably Iranian gas to Europe. The project figured prominently at the international conference held on 27 January, 2009 in Budapest, which failed to reach a corresponding agreement. This means that the EU will become even more interested in Central Asia.¹⁰

Conclusion

The Central Asian states treat economic cooperation with their foreign partners as their key priority, which suggests that the present situation is highly favorable for all of them. The global war on terror increased the region's value for the external actors, which resulted in greater financial and military aid. The pressure on the authoritarian regimes was eased by the greater urgency of the energy issue and the need to oppose religious extremism. The common interests and more or less moderate rivalry among America, Russia, and the European Union offer the Central Asian countries many more possibilities than before.

However, they should be soberly assessed because the continued contradictions among the local countries might lead them toward greater tension and unpredictable results. The external actors are not alien to exploiting the contradictions in their interests.

⁸ See: "Evrokomiissia opublikovala otchet o progresse Strategii ES po Tsentralnoi Azii," available at [www.centrasia.org].

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ "'Nabucco' ostaetsia mechtoi. Konkretnykh dogovorennosti uchastnikam Budapeshtskogo sammita dostich ne udalos," available at [www.centrasia.org].