

## AMERICAN POLICY IN CENTRAL ASIA AND RUSSIA'S INTERESTS

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Five years ago I published an article<sup>1</sup> in which I assessed the results of the first decade of America's Central Asian policy. I came to the conclusion that between the early 1990s and 2002, it developed from mere recognition of the newly independent states to a long-term regional strategy. For obvious reasons, 9/11 served as the turning point: "From a geographically remote, unstable and, in general, unexciting region, Central Asia became a zone of the U.S.'s national security interests."<sup>2</sup> After the 9/11 events, America began launching a wide-scale counterterrorist campaign in Asia. In the wake of 11 September, when the United States began its military operation in Afghanistan and set up military bases in Central Asia, the American military and politicians worked against the clock. Tactics, not strategy, was on everyone's mind. The prospect of America's regional involvement was still vague. It was later, in the mid-2000s, that America's interests in the region were soberly assessed both in America and Russia. Today, when America, Russia, and China have outlined their interests in Central Asia in the context of its relative stability

and when regional structures have appeared with good prospects (in particular the SCO), we can return to the problem of America's policy in Central Asia and its prospects. The time has come to give a more objective and balanced assessment, to ascertain whether Central Asia remains high on the list of the U.S. foreign policy priorities, and to outline Russia's response to America's regional policy.

Today, three interconnected factors are responsible for the U.S.'s interest in Central Asia:

- (1) its geopolitical status;
- (2) the insufficient political and economic stability of the local states and the human rights problems caused by regional instability; and
- (3) the prospect of transferring the local hydrocarbon resources to the world market.

Since the United States is pursuing its Central Asian policy in the context of much wider regional and global problems, an analysis of what America is doing in Central Asia should take into account the Iranian nuclear program, the positions and roles of India and Pakistan, and SCO development.

<sup>1</sup> See: M.V. Braterskiy, "Politika SShA v Sredney Azii: itogi desiatiletia," *SShA-EPI*, No. 9, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

### Geopolitical Situation and Political Stability

The United States finds the region important because it borders on China, Russia, Iran, and Afghanistan and is a more distant neighbor of India and Pakistan, two other critically important Asian

powers. America wants to see the local countries politically stable and economically prosperous, because failure in any of them is the only, and unwelcome, alternative to sustainability that might turn the country into a source of regional instability, terrorism, and transborder crime. On the whole, the Central Asian states are not strong enough, which is explained partly by the fact they are geographically remote and isolated from the main world trade routes, and partly by the particular post-Soviet sociopolitical model they have chosen to follow. The ruling Central Asian regimes are authoritarian to different degrees; they infringe on civil freedoms, persecute political opposition, and redistribute the results of their nations' economic activities in favor of the ruling elites and the bureaucratic power-related structures that keep the elites in power.

Under these conditions the political institutions cannot develop properly, while omnipresent corruption reduces to naught the efforts to make economic management effective. No wonder protest sentiments are mounting; most of the local states are not strong enough and are open to domestic and external political risks. The harshest political regimes—those of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan—lived through grave political crises (the Andijan events in Uzbekistan and the change of the ruling regime in Turkmenistan caused by S. Niyazov's death). Today they look stable enough, but this stability is precarious and therefore short-lived. Kyrgyzstan has yet to disentangle itself from the political crisis caused by the removal of President Akaev. Regional poverty is endemic; the people are tired of corruption and repression. New crises and outbursts of popular discontent are inevitable; unrest might engulf the region and spread to neighboring countries. In anticipation, the United States would like to stabilize the situation through social and economic development; the region should no longer remain isolated from the rest of the world; it should join world trade.<sup>3</sup> On the whole, America's view of the local situation is very close to Moscow's position, even though Russia prefers not to discuss the region's social and political problems in public. This is best illustrated by what President Putin said on 31 January, 2006 at a press conference: "We know much better than you what happened in Andijan. We know who trained the people who ignited the situation in Uzbekistan and in this city in particular. We know where and how many people were trained. We also know that there are many problems in Uzbekistan, but we shall never allow ourselves to destabilize the situation in the country. You are probably aware of the complex situation in the Ferghana Valley; you know how people live there, you are aware of the level of its economic health. We do not need another Afghanistan in Central Asia, therefore we shall act with caution."<sup>4</sup>

It should be said that despite the shared general assessments of the situation, Russia and the United States offer absolutely different solutions. The United States relies, first and foremost, on its own understanding of the "failed states" problem (most of the Central Asian states are placed in this category to one extent or another). The strategy of democratization, with which President George W. Bush's second administration armed itself, was selected as a political tool.<sup>5</sup>

It would be wrong to say that America has fully concentrated on competing with Russia<sup>6</sup> and China<sup>7</sup> over influence in Central Asia (this is how the situation is sometimes described in Moscow). The United States, though, is undoubtedly pursuing the aim of weakening Russia's traditional and China's growing influence. Rivalry with Moscow and Beijing is not an aim in itself, however it surfaces

<sup>3</sup> See, for example: S.F. Starr, "A Partnership for Central Asia," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 4, Jul/Aug 2005, p. 164; S.N. Macfarlane, "The United States and Regionalism in Central Asia," *International Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 3, May 2004, p. 447.

<sup>4</sup> [<http://www.edinros.ru/news.html?id=110500>], 8 June, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> See: *Fact Sheet: President Bush Calls for a "Forward Strategy of Freedom" to Promote Democracy in the Middle East*, Today's Presidential Action. For Immediate Release. Office of the Press Secretary, 6 November, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> See: A. Pushkov, "'Amerikantsev 'ushli' iz Sredney Azii.' Rossia stanovitsia zhelannym protivovosom SShA," available at [<http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php4?st=1120804020>], 8 June, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> See: S. Mikhailov, "Popytki SShA obosnovat'sia v postsovetsoy Sredney Azii—ne antirossiskiy, a antikitayskiy shag," available at [<http://www.kreml.org/interview/94878025>], 8 June, 2007.

every time America's economic interests clash with those of the large Eurasian powers. The U.S.'s contradictions with Russia and China in Central Asia are rooted in their different approaches to such issues as state sovereignty, democracy as a cornerstone of political order, and the interrelation between domestic and foreign policies. Washington is convinced that the stronger Russian and Chinese influence in the region is helping to reproduce the undemocratic sociopolitical model, the deep-seated source of the region's troubles. Russia and China, in their turn, are convinced that the American democratic model is unique and cannot be applied to other cultures without previous readjustment. America and Russia cannot agree on the approaches to this key issue, which explains why contradictions over Central Asia persist. For this reason, it seems that the American position should be explained in greater detail.

In the post-Cold War period, under conditions of accelerating globalization, the United States discovered that the new world situation created new, hitherto unknown, problems. Indeed, the Western economy and culture could reach the world's remotest corners; by the same token, the West received its share of the problems that, in the past, plagued the rest of the world. In the past, the numerous conflicts from which the Third World suffered could either be ignored because of the distances that separated them from the West or easily dismissed as Moscow's intrigues. Today, no longer controlled by the two superpowers, they became globalized in the form of terrorism, refugee flows, and proliferation of WMD. In this form they are directly affecting the developed world's interests. By a twist of fate, Pandora's globalization box once opened by the West cannot be closed again: there is no escape from unwelcome and troublesome neighbors. The global nature of Western, particularly American, interests has made the West vulnerable to the negative inner dynamics of the political and economic processes unfolding in the Third World, of which Central Asia is a part. In fact, the inability, or unwillingness, of many of these regimes to deal with their domestic problems in a fair and effective way produces instability, protest feelings and extremism, domestic and inter-state conflicts, leads to the proliferation of WMD, and upsets the psychological comfort of the "golden billion" by causing the horrors televised across the world. The destructive processes in the Third World are occurring against the background of economic stagnation and progressing degradation of the social and political life in vast regions. The traditional ruling elite can no longer govern their own countries. It is commonly believed in America that the destructive processes are producing several types of problems which cannot remain local in the globalization context and affect regions, the world, and even threaten America's national interests.

These problems can be described in the following way: national governments can no longer control their territories and countries (this happened in Afghanistan), which makes such countries seats of extremism, terrorism, international crime, and illegal trade in drugs. More often than not, this process is accompanied by domestic conflicts and civil wars fraught with humanitarian catastrophes that produce flows of refugees all over the world.

Americans are convinced that repressive regimes in various corners of the world not only violate the rights of the local population, but also create statist economic models in which the local ruling elites indulge in appropriating the disproportionately large shares of national income. Removed from the sphere of consumption and investment, the money is channeled into ambitious military programs and aggression against other countries. On many occasions, such programs are aimed at developing nuclear armaments (North Korea, Iraq, Iran).

Such phenomena as lost control over state governance, "bankrupt states," repressive regimes nurturing regional and nuclear ambitions, and nuclear proliferation have become the hallmarks of a world in transition. In the process of grasping the meaning of what has been going on in the world, the United States launched a new political course designed to protect its interests in the rapidly changing world with due account of the new realia and threats.

The March/April 1994 issue of *Foreign Affairs* carried a program article by A. Lake, White House National Security Advisor, which dealt with the "backlash," or "rogue states." It said, in particular:

“...our policy must face the reality of recalcitrant and outlaw *states* that not only choose to remain outside the family but also assault its basic values.”<sup>8</sup>

In September 1997, the then U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, a former professor, presented an academic wrapping of the “rogue states” conception to the members of the Foreign Policy Council. She described the “rogue states” as one of the four categories of countries: the developed industrial states; developing democracies; “rogue states,” and “failed states.”<sup>9</sup> She pointed out that the two latter categories were very close and explained that the difference between them lay in the foreign policy sphere. Later, this served as the foundation of the Bush Doctrine, which saw the remedy to the afflictions of the “rogue” and “failed” states in reforming their authoritarian or crumbled sociopolitical systems according to the democratic patterns used in the West.

The Kennan tradition was continued in the form of the “containment doctrine” for the new post-Cold War epoch: “As the sole superpower, the United *States* has a special responsibility for developing a strategy to neutralize, contain and, through selective pressure, perhaps eventually transform these *backlash states* into constructive members of the international community.”<sup>10</sup> The quote enumerates the strategic tools the United States should use to achieve the desired aim: “neutralization” and “transformation.” These were the two components used, to different degrees, in the Cold War era—containment and engagement.

The former presupposes international isolation of a rogue state by means of international political coalitions, economic sanctions, and military tools designed, first, “to keep the country caged” so as to prevent its further criminal activities and, second, to force it to modify its conduct according to the commonly accepted rules. The “rollback” strategy can be described as an extreme version of containment that changes the nature of the ruling regime by supporting the domestic opposition, by means of special operations, or even by direct military intervention.

The engagement strategy pursues the same aims through different means: the regime is involved in international trade, cultural contacts, and tourism, as well as a system of international organizations and treaties. To preserve the advantages thus achieved, the rogue country is expected to move from petty concessions to complete rejection of its most odious plans, which will finally transform it into a “normal country.” Today, the final aim is described in the following way: “A plan of such scope must first recognize that the roots of the weak-state crisis, and any hope for a long-term solution, lie in development: fostering stable, accountable institutions in struggling nations—institutions that meet the needs of the people, empowering them to improve their lives through lawful, not desperate, means.”<sup>11</sup>

Concern over the human rights issue is part and parcel of America’s Central Asian, and Greater Middle Eastern in general, policy; it is more than a mere priority announced by the Administration of President George W. Bush—it is intimately connected with the country’s policy as a whole. U.S. foreign policy is guided by the following logic: if a certain country begins to observe human rights (political rights included), the public will exert pressure, which will finally change the country’s domestic and foreign policies; it will stay away from military adventures, accept raising living standards as its priority, and will become, on the whole, predictable, wishing to be involved in international cooperation. President Clinton formulated this as follows: “Democracies don’t attack each other.”<sup>12</sup>

Russia is not yet ready to indulge in sweeping generalizations in its foreign policy and to put its strategy on any ideological foundation. In the absence of an ideological pillar, Russia is finding it hard to grasp the meaning of America’s policy in relation to the “backlash states,” the category to which most Central Asian states belong to different degrees. For several reasons it is critically important for

<sup>8</sup> A. Lake, “Confronting Backlash States,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 1994, p. 45.

<sup>9</sup> [http://secretary.state.gov/www/statements/9770930], 22 May, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> A. Lake, op. cit., p. 46.

<sup>11</sup> S. Eizenstat, J.E. Porter, J. Weinstein, “Rebuilding Weak States,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 84, Jan/Feb 2005, p. 134.

<sup>12</sup> B. Clinton, “State of the Union Address,” 25 January, 1994, available at [http://www.thisnation.com/library/sotu/1994bc.html], 10 June, 2007.

Russia to acquire a clear idea of the American approaches. First, Russia is an important member of the international relations system, and it cannot remain indifferent to what is going on in it or to the motives by which the system's leader is guided. Second, Russia's attitude toward the "backlash" countries shows the developed world, particularly the United States, whether Russia itself has embraced or rejected the values of this world. This means that Russia's policy in relation to the "backlash" states either brings it closer to the West or moves it away from the developed world. Third, Russia may profit from America's experience when dealing with the problems arising on its southern borders or even inside the country, which are similar to those the United States is coping with. Finally, the national interests and policies of both countries are intertwined in many regional problems in one way or another. This might help Russia to develop the best possible foreign policy, which should take the partner's interests and motives into account.

Looking back, we must admit that in recent years, when dealing with regional crises and the "backlash" states Russia concentrated, with a few exceptions, on opposing America. The results can hardly be described as satisfactory: Russia's aims remained unattained, while relations with the United States and the West as a whole were crippled. Russia's efforts to restore effective governance in the countries that belong to its sphere of interests (the post-Soviet Central Asian and Caucasian states) also produced unsatisfactory results. In all cases, Russia placed its stakes on preserving the corrupt post-Soviet regime in power—and often failed.

Its foreign policy failures are rooted not so much in its recent relative weakness as in the absence of clear strategic political and axiological landmarks. While trying to preserve what remained of its formerly high status in Central Asia, Russia has not formulated a socially attractive and constructive agenda. At home and abroad, the Russian elite sees no interrelation between freedom and responsibility of power, social justice, and the supremacy of human rights, on the one hand, and peace, prosperity, and progress, on the other. So far, Russia remains closer to the "backlash" states rather than to the West as far as its domestic order and the society-state relations are concerned. This explains why Russia has no integral, consistent, or highly moral policy in Central Asia.

At the same time, Russia is very suspicious of what the United States is doing in Central Asia. First, it is concerned about the possibility of Color Revolutions in the Central Asian states, which might trigger political instability and might bring to power not merely democratic, but openly pro-American regimes. Georgia and Kyrgyzstan have already demonstrated what might happen elsewhere. Second, Russia is concerned about the continued American military presence in Central Asia. The terms and conditions for the withdrawal of the American bases from the region remain deliberately vague, which makes Russia a host whose guests refuse to leave. Third, and most important for those who wish to understand the relations between the two countries, the U.S. tends to combine democratization principles with seeking advantages for itself and its partners. This is quite natural for American ideology, but irritates Russian politicians. From the American point of view, oil and gas routes that will bring the local energy resources to the world market without going through Russia will help the local countries develop economically and will promote their democratization by making them more open to the world and removing them from the political and economic control of insufficiently democratic Russia. American companies are also seeking profit for themselves by their direct involvement in such projects and by operating on the world energy market. The West Europeans support the idea of the democratization of Central Asia and are seeking less dependence on fuel deliveries from Russia. Russian political tradition finds it hard to accept the blend of American and West European "altruism" and "egotism;" Russian politicians tend to regard American interests in the region as "egotistical." This is also true of Russia's perception of America's position on the Iranian nuclear program: there is the opinion that as soon as Russia withdraws from Busher, Western companies will immediately fill in the niche. Typically enough, Russia is less concerned about China's energy interests in the region partly because China keeps business and messianism separate in its strategic activities.

In the energy sphere, the rivalry is fiercer, but more transparent.

## Development of Local Hydrocarbon Reserves and Their Transfer to the World Market

America's interest in Central Asian oil and gas is an independent aspect of the U.S.'s Central Asian policy, but is nevertheless connected to all the other aspects. At no time did the United States pose the task of establishing its direct control over the Caspian's energy resources; it wanted the West to buy energy resources from the countries outside OPEC to intensify competition among the oil producers on the world energy market and to increase and diversify supply. Issues of secondary political importance were to be addressed together with the central ones: maintaining control over the transportation of energy resources critically important for China's economic development; depriving Russia of its monopoly on selling Central Asian fuel on the world market; and encouraging social and economic development in the Central Asian countries along lines leading to a market economy and democracy under American patronage.

The story of the American-Russian rivalry over the Caspian oil and gas routes and control over its oil and gas fields is only too well known.<sup>13</sup> The United States insisted on the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, while Russia recently convinced its Kazakhstani and Turkmenian partners to abandon the idea of a trans-Caspian gas pipeline in favor of Russia's alternative project. China invested in a pipeline from Kazakhstan. It looks as if all the rivals have succeeded without achieving a monopoly and the storms around the Caspian hydrocarbon reserves have subsided. The sides achieved a balance of interests and realized that the Caspian reserves are large, but relatively limited. In the early and mid-1990s, the interest in Caspian oil and gas was enormous; some experts went as far as saying that the local reserves might be larger than those of the Gulf countries.<sup>14</sup> Recent and more exact figures testify that the reserves are large, but by 2015, even if oil production is expected to reach its peak, the region will produce about 4 million barrels a day, while the OPEC countries will be able to extract 45 million barrels a day.<sup>15</sup> In addition, investments and transportation costs will make Caspian oil fairly expensive. As for the situation with gas, President Putin's visit to Central Asia in 2007 demonstrated that so far Russia could find a common language with gas-producing Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan much easier than the United States.

## Regional Context of American Policy in Central Asia

Central Asia is not one of America's foreign policy priorities, but it figures prominently among Russia's priorities. Today the United States is the sole superpower, while Russia, a regional power, is much more sensitive to Central Asian developments and sees them beyond the context of many other global political issues. The United States treats Central Asia as an important crossroads of problems and interests that belong to the regional and global contexts. Seen from Washington, Central Asia, the Caspian, and the Southern Caucasus look like a single geopolitical zone closely connected with

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example: A. Cohen, "U.S. Interests and Central Asia Energy Security," *Backgrounder #1984*, Heritage Foundation, 15 November, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> See: D. Malysheva, "Many-Sided Rivalry on the Caspian Sea," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 2 (14), 2002.

<sup>15</sup> See: U.S. Department of Energy, Energy Information Administration, "Country Analysis Briefs: Caspian Sea Region," September 2005, available at [[www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/Caspian/Oil.html](http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/Caspian/Oil.html)], 15 November, 2006.

America's other foreign policy priorities: the Greater Middle East as a whole and the Iraqi operation in particular, as well as the continued operation in Afghanistan, Iran's nuclear problem, China's economic growth, global nationalization of energy sources, the West's energy security, and the development of the structures of regional integration in Asia.

Today, America's Central Asian policy and its intensity are strongly affected by the Iranian nuclear program issue, the war in Iraq, India's new regional role, the problem of safety of Pakistan's nuclear weapons, and the development of the SCO as an organization set up to stabilize the situation in Central Asia.

It seems that in recent years the United States has channeled its resources, political resources included, into the settlement of the Iraqi and Iranian crises. In this context, Central Asia was temporarily pushed into the background. Today America is content to allow the SCO, CSTO, and to a certain extent India (which the U.S. recognized as the regional hegemon of South Asia) to shoulder a large share of responsibility for Central Asian stability. To cope with its priority issues, America needs cooperation with Russia and China, hence it is treading with caution in the spheres both countries find sensitive.

The country is moving rapidly toward a presidential election, which means that America is unlikely to initiate new steps in the region. It will revive its involvement in the region no earlier than 2009.