

REGIONAL POLITICS

**CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES AND
THE UNITED STATES:
UPS AND DOWNS
IN THEIR RELATIONSHIPS**

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The events that took place in Central Asia in the first half of 2005 changed the geopolitical situation in the region to a certain extent. I have in mind the political crisis and the regime change in Kyrgyzstan, the clashes in the Uzbek city of Andijan, the request the SCO summit addressed to the United States to specify the terms for withdrawing its bases from the region, and finally Tashkent's official demand that the United States should remove its base from Khanabad in 180 days. This was the first time in the post-Soviet era that Washington was confronted with political difficulties in the region.

One of the factors behind the new developments is the changed attitude toward the United States obvious both at the top and at the grassroots level: the original welcome has gradually waned to be replaced with a guarded attitude. The region has never been overly enthusiastic about the United States: in the first couple of years of their independence, the former Soviet Central Asian republics still looked at the U.S. from the Soviet viewpoint. At all times, however, local ideas about the United States differed greatly from those in the European part of the U.S.S.R.

Most of the local people are Muslims, therefore a Western lifestyle was at no time accepted as an alternative to the Soviet way of life. The values were different, even though there were exceptions to this rule too.

The local guarded attitudes were mostly prompted by the negative perception of the West's colonial and postcolonial domination in the Muslim countries; its meddling in the Muslim countries' internal affairs, and its openly biased approach and dual standards when dealing with old conflicts, especially in the Middle East. Obviously different people treated these issues and the Western policies in the Islamic world differently. The Soviet Muslims, who discerned not only the political, but also the religious-civilizational aspect of Western policies, responded much more vehemently.

With the Soviet Union receding into the past, the attitude toward the United States in Central Asia began slowly but steadily to improve. The region as a whole and each of its countries individually looked at America and its growing presence in the region with respect: it was regarded as a force able to help the local countries liberate themselves from their former dependence on Moscow and to cement their newly found sovereignties. In part, this attitude was fostered by the fairly contradictory and inconsistent attitude demonstrated by the Kremlin and a large part of the Russian public.

Before Evgeny Primakov was appointed foreign minister and later prime minister of Russia, the Kremlin seemed to look at Central Asia (if ever), first, in the context of its desire to promptly integrate into the West (it kept assessing its cooperation with the local states in the context of bringing it closer to this aim). Second, there was a lot of ideological rejection, if not more, of the political situation taking shape in the region. In the foreign policy context of the time, the Central Asian leaders had good reasons to believe that orientation toward the West would protect them from the hostility of those who came to power in Russia in August 1991.

The Central Asian republics' desire to develop their relations with the United States in all spheres was matched by the Central Asian policy of the Clinton Administration. The U.S. administration demonstrated political pragmatism and was eager to cultivate the local countries' enthusiasm toward the United States. In fact, it was America's pragmatism and its realistic assessment of the political processes unfolding in Central Asia, which became obvious by President Clinton's second term in office, that saved his administration from the mistake of meddling in the local countries' domestic developments, even though the White House voiced its doubts about the course of democratization there. By the 1990s, the United States had created a friendly atmosphere in the region and strengthened its foothold in this part of the post-Soviet world.

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Starting with the middle of President George W. Bush's first term in the White House, signs of mistrust unconnected with the region's Soviet past reappeared in local politics. The 9/11 events and the American course directed toward what it called the struggle against international terrorism (actively supported by Russia) changed the geopolitical situation in Central Asia: the U.S. and its Western allies stationed their military contingents in some of the region's countries. This opened the doors to America's wider political and economic involvement in Central Asia and put an end to Russia's monopoly domination in the region. There was a lot of mutual interest in the military sphere between the West and the Central Asian republics. The local countries interpreted their closer military cooperation, as well as wider political, economic, scientific, cultural, and other contacts with the United States and the West in general as an important factor of independence. It was then that George W. Bush's administration showed that its policies differed from those of its predecessor, which aroused natural concern among the local leaders over the United States' true, rather than

declared, aims in Central Asia. For example, the American president described his counterterrorist initiative as a Crusade, something that the countries with the predominantly Muslim populations associated with a political and religious war of the Christian West against the Muslim states and Islamic civilization as a whole. The traditional Muslim interpretation of Crusade was applied to the counterterrorist campaign. Indeed, this campaign developed into a war against Muslim states with the aim to impose an alien lifestyle and political culture on them. This strengthened the doubts of the Muslims, and the predominantly Muslim Central Asian nations and leaders, about America's true aims in the region.

There is another factor behind the local suspicions about the United States: today its foreign policymakers tend to misuse ideological issues when talking about Central Asian events and developments. This is mostly true of civilian politicians: under Colin Powell, a four-star general, America's attitude to what was going on in Central Asia was much more balanced.

The manifestations of this are varied: Washington refuses to accept regional specifics and to take them into account in its policies. The United States is absolutely convinced that everything it believes to be positive should be accepted in the region with thanks; it is deeply convinced that the American model of democracy not only perfectly fits the Central Asian republics, but that it should be immediately planted there, local conditions notwithstanding. America is pursuing its policies in the Muslim countries with the deep conviction that they are benefiting from its efforts and that, therefore, its policies are totally justified. The American politicians believe that the Muslim countries should guide themselves by what the United States thinks about them and offers them, rather than what the nations and leaders of these countries think and offer. Finally, the United States tends to accept a priori the opposition in any of the local countries as a source of truth and to dismiss the leaders as a source of lies. It would have been wiser to accept a more realistic approach to both as much more complicated and contradictory phenomena.

The same applies to the United States' conviction that democratic freedoms are much more important for the local countries than what is potentially much more important for them at present. For example, there is no greater value in Tajikistan than its statehood. The experience of the last fifteen years has shown that the Tajiks will hardly survive as an ethnos without a statehood of their own, or outside the borders of their own state. The republic, confronted with numerous problems and struggling to fortify its statehood, should concentrate on everything that will help it survive and develop. Strong presidential power and the political specifics stemming from it is one such element. Anyone expecting the country to embrace Western political thinking and fully correspond to it is indulging in wishful thinking.

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Washington's response to the Andijan crisis is another example of an excessively ideological approach to Central Asian developments which erodes its foothold in the region. It was absolutely obvious to any unbiased observer that what the Uzbek authorities were doing, starting with the armed attack at the locally-stationed military unit, was having a harsh response to an equally harsh attack. The armed opposition tested the Uzbek leaders' readiness to respond in kind—the leaders accepted the challenge, otherwise they would have lost control of the country. The results might have been appalling: a wave of crime, mass disorders, and looting. We already saw this in Kyrgyzstan after the parliamentary elections of 2005 when the government building came under attack. This might have triggered a civil war: this was what happened in Tajikistan in 1992.

The very nature of the anti-government actions in Andijan, the media reports about regular rallies, picketing, and other mass actions in this and other Uzbek cities speak of a vast protest potential in the country. This, and the fact that the opposition and authorities were equally prepared to go to extremes, made the situation far from simple: the opposition cannot topple the regime, while in the current worldwide situation official Tashkent cannot squash the opposition with the use of arms. A long and harsh confrontation will undermine statehood to the extent that any careless or ill-advised step by the sides or the international community, for that matter, will upturn stability and negatively affect Uzbekistan's neighbors.

It would have been wiser to respond to the Andijan events by moving to a different paradigm of relations: the sides should abandon the barricades and move toward a discussion of settlement alternatives for the sake of the country and the nation. There were objective prerequisites for this course of events: President Islam Karimov has always wanted, and still wants, to see Uzbekistan an independent, united, strong, and prosperous country. His secular and Islamic opponents obviously want the same. Tajikistan's experience has already proved that this is more than enough to start negotiations.

Sooner or later the sides will be forced to do this; this will not be easy even if there are objective prerequisites for this and a mutual subjective desire to prevent a catastrophe. Everyone aware of the very complicated relations between power and its opponents in Uzbekistan knows that even the tiniest step in the right direction will be burdened with huge political and psychological problems. They are hardly capable of doing this today, therefore it is vitally important to bring in initiatives able to freeze the conflict and lead to a constructive dialog. The world community and the United States, in particular, could have helped defuse the situation. Yet politicians—let me say once again, civilian politicians—burdened with their excessively ideological foreign policy with respect to the Central Asian states preferred another, far from fruitful, course. They subjected the president of Uzbekistan to scathing criticism and insisted on international investigation of the Andijan events.

This was hardly rational: domestic tension had reached its highest point, therefore international investigation could only plunge the country into a far deeper crisis. Such proposals (in an imperative form, as it were) lead to heightened tension, since they are essentially spearheaded against the one side in support of the other participant in the domestic conflict.

The U.S. civilian politicians' viewpoint on the Uzbek issue was also irrational because, in the context of Moscow's and Beijing's concern over the U.S.'s growing influence in the region and their greater efforts to consolidate their own presence in Central Asia (which provided Uzbekistan with a wider leeway), America's continued pressure on President Karimov might bring unwelcome results. And this was what happened. At first Tashkent and some other countries initiated an address from the July 2005 SCO to Washington in which the SCO summit countries asked the United States to specify the term its bases would remain in the region. Later, because of the White House's even harsher stance, Uzbekistan asked America to evacuate its air base in Khanabad within six months.

Much is being said today about America's intention to maintain the state of controlled conflict in the Muslim world, in Central Asia in particular, which perfectly serves U.S. national interests. Indeed, continued conflicts squander a lot of material and intellectual resources which could be otherwise used to promote these countries' development and bring them closer to Western development standards. Today, they remain dependent on consumption rather than oriented toward independent scientific and technological progress. The war on Iraq, accompanied by the total destruction of its infrastructure, as well as the West's obvious desire to prevent Baghdad from acquiring science-intensive and high-tech technologies of its own, which will liquidate its dependence in these spheres on the West, are ample proof of America's true goals. In Central Asia, the continued permanent crisis is allowing the United States to cut down Russia's influence in the region by driving away the Russians and Russian speakers as vehicles of this influence.

This is hardly rational. First, it is obviously impossible to contain the Muslim nations' desire to achieve a development level, in science and technology among other spheres, comparable to that of the West. In fact, inside and outside the Western world there are forces wishing to help the Muslim states advance in the right direction. Second, today as never before Russia's influence in the region is supported and strengthened not so much by Russian speakers, as by members of the titular nations who move to Russia as guest workers and whose money earned there supports stability and economic development of their countries. Third, controlled crisis politics is not only promoting anti-American sentiments—it spreads them far and wide. In other words, the ideological bias of America's Central Asian policies is not merely irrational—it is anti-American, since it has already damaged Washington's interests in the region.

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It fell to the lot of Donald Rumsfeld, John Abizaid, and other top-ranking Pentagon officials to remove America from the corner into which the civilian politicians had driven it. It should be said that from the very beginning the military displayed much more pragmatism on the Andijan issue. They were convinced that by confronting Karimov on the ideological issue, they would achieve little or no progress in improving Uzbekistan's domestic policies, economic and political transformations in particular, over which both countries have so far failed to agree.

They were also aware that this confrontation would force the leaders of Uzbekistan to question the expediency of continued military cooperation with the United States, as well as continued functioning of the U.S. military base in Khanabad. In fact, the American top military could easily predict that continued confrontation with Washington would drive Tashkent closer to Moscow and Beijing in the military sphere, among other things. The nature of power in Uzbekistan, Russia, and China, as well as Russia's and China's desire to intensify their relations with Tashkent make this variant possible.

The fact that the American professional military displayed a lot of pragmatism when dealing with the developments in Uzbekistan and in the region as a whole is typical of all career military in any country: they abhor adventurism. Most of them are practically-minded people due to their professional training and education, which taught them to soberly assess any new situation.

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The political upheavals in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have brought to light the problem of the best possible correlation between the development level of any country and the level of its relations with any of the influential external forces, the United States in particular. The crises in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have demonstrated that the contacts between the Central Asian countries and the United States should strictly correspond to these countries' real development level. If these contacts in any sphere, military, political, economic, information, etc., prove greater than these countries' mentalities and their institutional, cultural, and other abilities to adequately use them, they will find themselves in a crisis for the simple reason that if the level of relations with the United States overtakes the absorption potential of any of the Central Asian countries, partner relations will rapidly backslide into the painfully familiar "elder brother" pattern. The "elder brother" will dominate and will strive to realize its interests in total disregard of what the "younger brother" wants or needs.

Under Askar Akaev, Kyrgyzstan reached the point in its relations with the United States when first, power, and second, the country's sustainable development depended on Washington and its goodwill. As soon as this became obvious, the country's leaders were immediately confronted with the demand to meet certain standards, which while absolutely natural for the United States, could not be accepted as such in Kyrgyzstan for obvious reasons. These demands, which absolutely ignored the country's real circumstances, were one of the reasons why the country moved dangerously close to the boundary beyond which disintegration and loss of statehood were inevitable.

The political and military-political contacts between Tashkent and Washington were steadily growing stronger from the very first day of Uzbekistan's independence; the process accelerated after 9/11 when America acquired its military base in Khanabad. Many of the Western and Russian media assessed the new situation as one of the key conditions under which Islam Karimov could retain his power.

It seems that after a while Washington's politicians imagined that they could toughen up their attitude toward Uzbekistan's leadership without straining American relations with this country too far. They started openly insisting on a domestic (and less openly, foreign) course corresponding to the political, legal, and economic norms allegedly widely accepted in the West, as well as the specific interests of the United States and its allies. (Washington was pursuing a more or less similar course in other countries as well.) This could have been accepted; however, after the Andijan events, America's persistent efforts developed into open pressure and attempts to impose its conditions on Uzbekistan's leadership.

Tashkent has never doubted and does not doubt that the country should eventually embrace Western political and economic standards; in many respects, its political and other aims correspond to those of Washington and its Western allies. The republic's authorities, as well as the authorities of other Central Asian countries are convinced that closer relations with the U.S. and the West are helping them consolidate their newly-found independence and overcome the social and economic problems of the post-Soviet period. This shows that a dialog about these issues could have brought success.

It seems that the White House interpreted its growing influence in the region not only as a chance to extend the range of its possibilities needed to help the Central Asian countries realize adequate models of post-Soviet democratic development, but also as a condition conducive to planting the ready-made Western models in local soil in the shortest time possible and in total disregard of the local realities. In Kyrgyzstan, that all ended in the downfall of President Akaev, the most consistent supporter of Western political standards among the Central Asian leaders, and in chaos.

Uzbekistan, which was developing its military-political cooperation with the United States on a grander scale than its neighbors, experienced the Andijan tragedy, for which the Kyrgyz events served as the background—directly or indirectly they blazed the trail for it. The United States could use its influence to channel the relations between the opposing sides into a positive dialog, yet the civilian politicians from Washington preferred to put pressure on the country's leaders, who turned out to be staunch enough to resist the pressure and cut short all attempts to impose unacceptable conditions on them.

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It seems that today the Central Asian countries should maintain relations with the United States and other large countries with their own interests in the region at a level equivalent to their absorption potential in order to be able to keep the contacts going without negative consequences.

The level might change from country to country—there are different criteria of its equivalency. For example, in Tajikistan the level and volume of contacts with any of the three world powers (Russia, China, and the U.S.), which can affect the republic's political and socioeconomic context, are considered equivalent if they correspond to the country's main task: building up a stable nation-state. This state alone can save the Tajiks from the danger of being engulfed by their much stronger and more numerous neighbors.

The present level of relations between Dushanbe and Washington, as well as the American presence in Tajikistan (direct and indirect, in the form of international and local organizations functioning on American money), completely corresponds to the republic's main task and does not strain the absorption potential of the state and the nation. This level of bilateral relations and of America's presence cannot develop into destabilizing factors threatening to undermine Tajik statehood.

At the same time, any further development of relations with the United States (which might not prove equivalent to the absorption potential of the state and society), such as permanent U.S. military bases in Tajikistan, a great increase in the number of NGOs and other structures living directly or indirectly on American money, a great increase, indirect or indirect, in American funding of the local media or American interference in domestic political processes, and excessive interest from U.S.-controlled international financial structures in the economic and other transformations occurring in Tajikistan may cripple the so far equivalent Tajik-American relations and make the level of American presence excessive. This will negatively affect the nature of their bilateral relations: instead of a partner we will acquire a mentor with all the negative consequences for both sides. In any case, this happened in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan when American's presence in both countries became excessive. This may happen in Ilkham Aliev's Azerbaijan.

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To some extent, to a great extent in certain cases, as Tajikistan's experience has demonstrated, the dogmatic attitudes of influential politicians far removed from the region are alleviated by the realism of the career American diplomats stationed in the Central Asian countries. While being exposed to the political processes and aware of the real level of these countries' political, social, economic, information, etc. development, they have to adjust the abstract schemes imposed on them from above to the local developments—life has shown that this cannot always be accomplished.

So far, the situation in Tajikistan has been favorable; we owe a lot to the American ambassadors in Tajikistan, who are career diplomats not burdened with ideological considerations about life in the republic and their mission. The first of these ambassadors was Stanley Escudero, who was well aware of the problems plaguing post-Soviet Tajikistan and who was delighted to talk to the Tajiks in their native tongue. As distinct from other members of the American mission and, certainly, from his Washington-based bosses, he recognized the fact that this former Soviet republic had chosen the road of independent national development and that this transformation comprised the main content of its post-Soviet development. The question about Tajikistan's political future—totalitarian, authoritarian, or liberal—was purely utilitarian. The country obviously needed a state order and form of power best suited to its national character and had to carry out the task of cementing its independence. Our experience, as well as that of our neighbors has demonstrated that in the final analysis the Central Asian countries preferred strong presidential power.

Stanley Escudero fully recognized this, while his colleagues from the American embassy and, what was even more important, their bosses across the ocean continued living in the Cold War realities. They regarded the fight of the Tajik opposition against then President Rakhmon Nabiev as a fight of anti-Soviet (read democratic) forces, against the post-Soviet (read anti-democratic) structures. In fact, the forces that came to power in Russia after the events of 19-21 August, 1991 in Moscow were similarly deluded. The political situation in Tajikistan actually comprised two elements: one of them, according to a very apt description by Tajik political analyst Parviz Mullojanov, was the fierce struggle of the regional elites for supreme power to gain access to the republic's fairly limited resources, while the other was the fight over the future nature—national-secular or national-clerical—of the new Tajik state. In other words, the political passions that developed into a civil war as soon as the country became independent cannot be described as the “good guys”(democrats) fighting the “bad guys” (anti-democrats).

An adequate assessment of these events by all influential foreign forces would have probably changed their treatment of the situation as a whole. The first American ambassador to Tajikistan used to say that the U.S. State Department was too big for its own good and needed at least ten years or more to re-adjust and start treating the local states as sovereign nation-states rather than as former Soviet republics.

Today Washington no longer looks at Tajikistan and other Central Asian states as post-Soviet republics, yet Washington's inveterate desire to arrange life in the Muslim countries to its own liking cannot but make the task of the American ambassadors much harder. Indeed, they are stationed to translate into practice the unrealizable ideas of their Washington bosses, while working hard not to come into conflict with the local realities and retain America's foothold in the region to the extent possible.

Current U.S. Ambassador Richard Hoagland is successfully coping with this far from easy task, mainly because of his highly realistic approaches to the processes underway in Tajikistan and thanks to his understanding that some of the positive changes are evolutionary. Mr. Hoagland and the U.S. embassy offered an adequate assessment of the February 2005 parliamentary elections when they described them as another step on the long road to democracy. On 11 August, 2005, when talking at the Johns Hopkins University, he described Tajikistan as a state following the road of political reforms and completely corresponding to international political standards. He also pointed out that thanks to the peace settlement, which put an end to the civil war, the republic has become the most politically pluralistic state among its Central Asian neighbors with real political parties, including the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan, the only legal religious political organization in the entire region, rather than puppet ones set up by the government for its own purposes.

Still, the smooth and mutually advantageous relations between the Central Asian countries and the United States depend on the local leaders' rather than on the ambassadors' ability to maintain a balance between the key international players. More than that: the heads of the Central Asian countries should learn to preserve this balance in order to prevent it from being overturned. They should avoid excessive relations which will inevitably develop from partnership into something undesirable.