

**RUSSIA AND AMERICA
IN CENTRAL ASIA**
(An Attempt at Comparative Analysis)

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At different times, the term “Central Asia” denoted different concepts depending on whether a geographer, politician, paleontologist, economist, historian, or linguist was using it. All of them, however, had to take into account the alignment of political forces responsible for the prevailing trends and developments. In the colonial period, Central Asia was known as “Sredniaia Azia,” a term which applied to certain areas within czarist Russia and to certain republics within the Soviet Union’s borders.

At one time, General Andrei Snesarev, an outstanding explorer of the region, wrote: “I regret to say that the very complicated developments in Central Asia were not investigated by scholars, impartial and sober interpreters of what they see, but primarily by politicians and nationalists who preferred to ignore objective reality and the way it affected the local context. They were looking for what they wanted to find, what was interpreted in their favor, and accepted their findings as the starting points for their political and military ventures. It was politics and political considerations that guided the studies of countries and people.”¹

Indeed, as soon as England captured Hindustan, Central Asia became an area of Russian-English rivalry. The former expected the English to succumb to the temptation of conquering the seem-

¹ *India kak glavny faktor v sredneaziatskom voprose. Doklad predsedatelia sredneaziatskogo otdela obshchestva vostokovedeniia A.E. Snesareva*, St. Petersburg, 1906, p. 5.

ingly “no-man’s land” populated by the Central Asian Turks and to push on to Siberia. England, in turn, accused Russia of encroaching upon British possessions to gain access to the warm Indian Ocean. This doomed Afghanistan to the status of a buffer state for a long time to come. Its rulers tried independent policies: after routing two British military expeditions dispatched to subjugate the local tribes, the Afghan emirs began receiving huge sums of money from London in exchange for promised neutrality in the Russian-English rivalry. In turn, after conquering Central Asia (Turkestan) and failing to gain access to the warm seas, Russia dropped its intention. Stopped at the Pamirs, St. Petersburg was satisfied with Afghanistan’s neutrality. This was wise: tension in Europe was kept high by England and its allies, France and Turkey.

In the 20th century, after the October 1917 Revolution in Russia, Central Asia lived in relative political equilibrium, which looked stable from Moscow. At first glance, the Soviet Central Asian republics were quite content with their status of “Soviet socialist republics,” while their leaders looked and sounded like devout Marxist-Leninists to the extent that they never hesitated to hail the not always wise economic decisions and struggle against “religious prejudices” suggested by Moscow and preferred to ignore the local ethnic problems. This impression was superficial: the presidents of the newly independent Central Asian states came from the former party elite of the Soviet Union. It turned out that the republican communist party bosses had always felt and acted as sovereigns of the vast lands Moscow entrusted to their power. The republics were ruled by clans; corruption and the shadow economy prevailed everywhere; industry and retail trade were used to make rich the local communist bosses who dutifully shared the spoils with their Moscow patrons.

In the post-Soviet period, the republics found themselves in a chaos caused by disruption of the long-standing economic ties; ethnic problems came to the fore, while weapons, military equipment, and nuclear arsenals had to be redistributed. Under the banner of Boris Yeltsin’s populist formula, “Bite off as much sovereignty as you can chew,” the riches created by several generations of Soviet people were shamelessly plundered, while the liberal democrats who came to power in post-communist Russia promoted those who never learned to cherish their citizenship, nationality, party affiliation, and the future of nations and states. They concentrated on personal gains.

As soon as the emotions caused by the end of the Cold War had subsided, the situation started changing. The leaders of the West, the United States, and the Soviet Union saw the dissolution of the Warsaw Treaty, removal of the Berlin Wall, disintegration of the socialist camp, cutting down of Russia’s nuclear arsenals, etc. We all know that nature abhors a vacuum. The military and business circles of the United States and EU moved into the territories that had “suffered under the communist regime.” The onslaught was not only rapid, it was well prepared. The dramatic political events in the Soviet Union did not catch Western experts napping: they had already carefully investigated the huge advantages the U.S. and its allies would glean if events took this favorable turn. Moscow had no strength left to influence the course of events, while the local Central Asian elite had no time to adjust themselves to their sovereignty, vast natural riches, and huge amounts of unregistered armaments, nuclear weapons included. The new states’ capitals were besieged by foreign diplomats, journalists, secret agents, businessmen, and the military offering most sincerely to fortify the newly independent countries’ “national security.”

The way “sovereignty” and “independence” were interpreted was the key to the newly found statehood. Well-known American political scientist Zbigniew Brzezinski did a lot to destroy the Soviet Union; later he continued talking about Russia’s hostile intentions toward Central Asia, which he called “the Eurasian Balkans.” He was convinced that the new regional political elite “will not voluntarily yield the power and privilege they have gained through independence. As the local Russians gradually vacate their previously privileged positions, the new elites are rapidly developing a vested

interest in sovereignty, a dynamic and socially contagious process.²² The years of independence have demonstrated, however, that the national elite was by far homogenous: some of its members interpreted “sovereignty” and the nationalist slogans as a chance to get rich themselves by plundering what was left of the Soviet Union. Other, much larger groups supported the leaders in their efforts to stabilize the region through all-round and equal cooperation with all interested countries, Russia in the first place. This is confirmed by the Treaty on Extending the EurAsEC signed by Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in October 2005.

Russia’s vital interests in Central Asia are explained by the need to ensure its national security, stability, and wider and stronger cooperation with its Central Asian neighbors rich in energy fuels and able to compete with any other country in export and import. We should not forget that the development of the regional statehoods has specifics of its own. First, not all local leaders have overcome the euphoria of sovereignty and remain too ambitious and too sure of their own importance on a global scale. Second, by bragging about their raw material and energy resources some of the local leaders have become too fond of talking about their special way of development and keep forgetting about human values. The local leaders, however, cannot ignore the deep-rooted ties with Russia (and they understand this). The region’s advantageous geographic and geostrategic locations allow the local leaders to tap these advantages to pursue independent development and seek close cooperation with most countries.

Any government is primarily concerned with national security. This term was first coined by the U.S. military-political establishment, and it was American experts and political scientists who clarified it. In the wake of World War II, the U.S. found itself a great world power “with influence in all corners of the world—from Japan to the Soviet Union’s western borders.”²³ The national security doctrine based on extensive and profound studies was regularly revised to be adjusted to latest developments. In the past, it was spearheaded against the Soviet Union and its allies; early in the 1990s, under the pressure of radical geopolitical changes, it was revised. Washington announced that America and its allies were no longer threatened by the Soviet Union and that the new national security conception concentrated on the struggle “for the most favorable conditions for American industrial companies.”²⁴ At first, Turkey was assigned the role of NATO’s vanguard in Central Asia, yet attempts to exploit the linguistic kinship of the Turkic-speaking nations (all local peoples with the exception of the Tajiks use Turkic tongues) failed.

As soon as the Soviet Union disappeared from the political map of the world, the newly independent Central Asian states became a testing ground for the revised American-NATO doctrine. What do Americans and their allies want to achieve in Central Asia? To answer this question, let us look at what two highly respected international experts say on the matter. One of them is Richard Giragosian, visiting lecturer for the U.S. Army Special Forces at the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center & School at Fort Bragg (NC, U.S.A.); the other is Roger N. McDermott, honorary senior research associate, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Kent at Canterbury (U.K.). They agree that the United States and other Western countries concentrated on “the development of their [Central Asian states’] energy reserves and the challenges of securing export routes amid the competing interests of the regional powers.” However, “this long-standing energy focus has now been superseded by the pursuit of security and stability, within the prism of the global fight against terrorism.”²⁵ It should be said that early in the 1990s, while the

²² Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard. American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives*, Basic Books, New York, 1997, pp. 143-144.

²³ N.S. Leonov, *Osnovy natsional'noi bezopasnosti*, Lecture delivered at Moscow State University in the Spring of 1998 [<http://www.radonezh.ortodoxy.ru/oboz/n19-20/ob.htm>].

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ R. Giragosian, R.N. McDermott, “U.S. Military Engagement in Central Asia: ‘Great Game’ Or ‘Great Gain’?” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 1 (25), 2004, p. 54.

Soviet Union was falling apart, the White House did everything to strengthen its military position in the region. Americans talked to all leaders of the newly formed states and drew up corresponding documents which envisaged much more than merely economic issues. The authors quoted above say: "The U.S. approach to Central Asia was also driven by overarching geopolitical considerations, with the underlying goal of containing the influence of China, Iran and Russia."⁶ They wrote in particular that the military of the local states which they call "failed" or "failing" were trained in America and Western Europe and said: "For the U.S. and NATO, the program also offered a unique venue for fostering a greater integration of these states into Western political and military institutions." The knowledge thus obtained was "also important in initiating a concerted effort to overcome the legacy of decades of outdated and inappropriate Soviet military indoctrination and training." More quotations in the same vein can be offered. What has been said, however, is enough to understand that military training was not limited to antiterrorist operations. The Central Asian military was trained by American special units that operate throughout the world under the slogan "Liberate the Oppressed!" In the United States these operations are known as Foreign Internal Defense and are paid for from the U.S. budget, their main aim being formulated as "development of democracy and protection of human rights." The Pentagon supplies the region's republics with the latest armaments under the Foreign Military Financing Program. In 1995, armed forces from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan formed a new joint peacekeeping unit called Centzbat, which was to function under the auspices of U.S. CENTCOM.⁷ Obviously these measures by the United States and NATO have nothing to do with the "containment" policy.

An objective observer of the seemingly good economic and political cooperation between the U.S. and NATO and the newly independent Central Asian states will inevitably conclude that military tasks are treated as a priority and that the U.S. and the West look at Russia, China, and Iran as their main adversaries. In this context, the Central Asian states serve as the base for deploying NATO containment forces. It should be added that American special units started re-training and re-arming the local armies in 1995, that is, long before 9/11, after which Washington launched a global counterterrorist operation. Today, the list of those wishing to penetrate the Central Asian market is rapidly growing. Stephen Blank, professor at the U.S. Army War College, wrote: "U.S. and Russian companies remain the major players in the contest to develop and export energy resources in Central Asia and the Caspian Basin. However, Chinese and Indian entities have become increasingly competitive in recent years." He has also pointed out that Iran and even Pakistan, which has lowered the tension in its relations with India, are striving to enter this energy market.⁸

From the viewpoint of international economic cooperation and the national security principles which each state elaborates for itself, this rivalry is beneficial. Certain, not always adequate steps taken by the United States and NATO cannot but cause concern: when the local countries were threatened by Islamist terrorists stationed in Afghanistan, they allowed America and its allies of the Endurable Freedom coalition to use their airfields.

Since that time, Afghanistan has held presidential and parliamentary elections recognized as legitimate by the world community. NATO, however, has not yet removed its troops from the country; there is information that it even plans to increase its contingent and cut down the number of American troops still stationed there in order to allow the Pentagon to move them to Iraq. This indicates there is no intention to stabilize the situation in the region.

⁶ R. Giragosian, R.N. McDermott, "U.S. Military Engagement in Central Asia: 'Great Game' Or 'Great Gain'?" *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 1 (25), 2004, p. 54.

⁷ See: *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56.

⁸ For more detail, see: S. Blank, "Central Asia's Energy Game Intensifies," *EurasiaNet*, 2 September, 2005.

The sociopolitical circles of many CIS countries (especially of the Central Asian republics) are very much concerned with the West's intention to use the Color Revolutions to "democratize" the post-Soviet territory. The Central Asian leaders fear that the successes scored in Georgia and Ukraine will urge the U.S. and EU to apply the pattern in Central Asia.

Recently, the public became aware of more active American and European efforts to use official channels and latent potential (including the specially created NGOs and public associations) to influence political processes in Central Asia. They are placing their stakes on stronger centrifugal processes in the CIS and seeking to re-orientate the CIS members away from political, economic and military aid coming from Russia (or China) toward the aid supplied by the West and its Central Asian allies.

Local experts believe that in acting this way the West is failing to take full account of the local traditions and specifics and that by planting alien political norms and values, the West risks upturning the precarious balance and triggering ethnic and religious conflicts. When saying this, they refer to the obvious stalling of the Greater Middle East conception formulated by the West, which has destabilized the situation there and discredited the democratic freedoms.

If realized, these plans in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus may fail to create civilized opposition and political schemes approved by the West—they may bring to power radical political groups and turn these regions into seats of tension and instability, which will make it harder to develop their energy and raw material resources.