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IS THERE A VIABLE FUTURE FOR US POLICY IN CENTRAL ASIA?

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SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Geopolitics aside, the overriding appeal of the United States still remains the principles upon which it was founded and expressed even today by officials. That said, it is clear that the United States can't go back to the 1990s where the attitudes in the region were so overwhelmingly positive, or that one could take for granted the "American model of development" so enthusiastically advocated. Given the constraints placed on the US today, there are a number of important engagement activities that can be pursued:

- Maintain and enhance educational exchanges with various universities and organizations in Central Asia.
- Ensure that exchanges and opportunities for familiarization ought to include the security and armed forces.
- The US government needs to be clear with questions of human rights.
- Information ought to remain a key tool of the US government.
- The US government needs to be clear about financial and policy constraints that will affect how much it can do in the region.
- The US needs to prepare itself to be more of a balancer in the region and less of a "major actor."
- The US government needs to appreciate the value of academics in understanding the region. Finally, the US government ought to think "long term" when it comes to Central Asia. The political, economic, security, and societal problems are all deep-rooted and will require a greater understanding of the region itself to make any US effort in these areas effective.

These steps will not create a radical shift in US policy in Central Asia, but will form a strong foundation for future developments and will elevate the perception of Americans overall.



INTRODUCTION

After more than twenty years of engaging with the five Central Asian countries, the United States is at a critical crossroads. When one looks back at the various initiatives by the US to influence the countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, one can see a consistency of themes. Democratization, human rights, economic liberalization, energy diversification and regional integration regularly appeared in official documents and have been repeatedly highlighted in speeches and policy programs of successive administrations. The conflict in Afghanistan that began in 2001 effectively securitized both the language and policy programs of the US government towards the five Central Asian countries, or at least the perception of US engagement. As a result, the changing role of the international actors after 2014 suggests that the security-focused policy of the US in the region is fast dissipating. As 2001 was viewed as a “turning point” in US policy priorities in the region (emphasizing an Afghanistan-security focus), 2014 suggests another such moment.

The security drawdown of US forces in Afghanistan, coupled with an idealized concept of a “pivot to Asia” – or a “rebalancing to Asia” – have led analysts and experts to question current US priorities and objectives in Central Asia. Add to these developments the current debate over the federal budget of the American government, and one begins to question whether the US could actually sustain an active policy in the region. Perhaps what is not emphasized enough in these discussions is that the Central Asian states are in significantly different situations than they were in 2001, let alone in 1992. The regional dynamics, the perception of the United States as a power, and the capacity of the countries themselves all point to a much more limited environment within which the United States can function and assert its policy objectives. This is not to suggest that the United States ought to give up any hope of being a presence in Central Asia. However, the serious questions of what are *enduring* US interests in the region, and how can these be effectively supported with *limited means*

and even more *limited access* must be addressed. These ought to be articulated prior to the 2014-2015 timeframe when the security transition in Afghanistan is to take place, while there are still resources applied to the region.

This policy brief will cover the challenges facing US policy in Central Asia today and what are expected to be the significant challenges in the years ahead. Proposals on how to address these will be outlined, with a special emphasis on training US officials to think in a long-term framework, as opposed to the habit of short and medium-term policy cycles. US interests are best served by not carrying out a series of “executable projects that can generate easy measures of effectiveness,” but rather by engaging with the specific countries in ways that best suit both US long-term interests and those of the partner countries in the region.

WHAT HAS BEEN UNITED STATES POLICY TOWARD CENTRAL ASIA?

PRIORITIES

A full analysis of US policy towards Central Asia is beyond the scope of this paper, and would turn the focus to what has been, or what could have been, as opposed to what could be. The reality is that US policy has been fairly transparent for the past 22 years. A variety of official documents and presentations over this timeframe outline the sorts of objectives expressed by the US government. For example, one can look at the seminal presentation entitled “A Farewell to Flashman” delivered by the Clinton-era official Strobe Talbott in July 1997 which articulated the US position. During this time, the focus was on the following points:

1. Political development and democratization
2. Economic development and the creation of free market economies
3. Human rights and social stability in the region
4. Energy development and diversification of markets and routes (added in later years)
5. Regional Security

For all who followed these trends – or have actually been part of the process – this outline is nothing new. Of course, the relative value of these specific “lines of policy” has changed over time. In the early 1990s, the focus was on political, economic, and human rights development – at least rhetorically, that was the case. However, it is important to note that during these early years, the US pursued what one could call a “Russia-First” policy. American and Western European attention was focused on the problems in Bosnia and the broader Balkan region, as well as out of theater concerns such as Somalia and Rwanda. The civil war in Afghanistan, let alone the one that took place in neighboring Tajikistan, were of concern for a limited number of policy officials and academics, but remained outside of mainstream discussions. To say these were “Russia’s problems” is an overstatement, but it was

clear that *Russian* security interests trumped others when it came to Central Asia. Arguments based on national interests to the personal ties between Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin have been used to illustrate this reality.

When US-Russian relations began to fall apart in the mid-1990s, however, American interest in the Central Asian and Caspian regions increased. For the remainder of the decade, “energy studies” programs proliferated to address this newfound need and take advantage of the money spent on the topic. By default, it became a “new Great Game,” as some readily claimed. These arguments were based on the belief that Central Asian energy resources could only go in one primary direction, not the multi-directional reality of today.

When Afghanistan became a security concern after September 11th and the subsequent campaign in Afghanistan that began a month later, the idea of “security” quickly dominated official US discussions on Central Asia. American concerns focused on basing and fly-over rights with respect to the Central Asian countries: specifically the bases in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan became nodes of engagement. Now, one should be mindful that even if a particular trend dominated the US policy discussions, it did not mean that the other issues vanished. The “human rights OR security” dichotomy one saw in writings at the time was a bit simplistic and misrepresentative of the efforts made by US government officials in the State Department, the Defense Department, among other offices. Regardless of the purpose (energy or security), US policy tended to be reactive, tactical, and situation-conditioned. This made it hard to couch these policy shifts in a broader, strategic framework, as if that were even possible.

PROBLEMS SPECIFIC TO US POLICY

One can make several observations about the challenges facing American policy-makers as they attempted to develop a coherent strategy in the Central Asian region.

1. For most of the first two decades, US officials and policy writers tended to view the region as a whole. The notion of the 'stans' typified the discourse used with respect to the five countries. With some exceptions, policy prescriptions varied little throughout the region which was even blended into a broader "former Soviet Union" or "newly independent states" rubric.
2. As noted, the US tended to view the region through the prism of our relations with Russia. Institutional reorganizations that placed the Central Asian states with South Asia, or a Central Command framework were attempts to decouple the countries from this "post-Soviet space" mindset, but that has not always resulted in officials accepting different orientations. Claims that they ought to still look to Europe or "engage westward," as opposed to engaging with eastern or southern neighbors, challenged any policy initiative to think of these states in their own light. At best, this has created confusion for both the leaders and populations of the Central Asian countries.
3. Mirror Imaging was paramount. Particularly in public addresses, there was a tendency to express beliefs that the governments and people of Central Asia wanted to be just like the United States. This resulted in aid programs highlighting "Western values or ideas" that did not always resonate in the region. Political party development, media training, and civil society programs ended up being particularly challenging for US officials to carry out.
4. US policy was developed "on the cheap," with the exception being the years immediately following the Afghan conflict's beginning (2001-2003).
5. Debates about future roles of other outside powers, such as Russia, China, EU, Turkey, and Iran focused on who could be American surrogates and who could be opponents/obstructions.

6. Therefore, policy towards Central Asia maintained a quality of an instrumentalist approach – US priority was, and has always remained a part of some other dynamic – be it with Russia, Iran, or Afghanistan.
7. Ultimately, there was, and remains a lack of expertise on, and interest in the region in Washington, DC. The core of officials who truly know Central Asia must work hard to advocate the region's importance.

By 2013, it has become clear that the US finds itself in a distinctly different position: as an object of criticism and mistrust. The tendencies noted helped create this perception deficit. Moreover, recent trends have exacerbated the tensions.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

The phrase “pivot to Asia” has become a source of much confusion in the region. This curious turn of a phrase has been unnecessarily stressed, retracted, analyzed, and questioned. Does this mean a policy shift? A refocus of military might? An articulation of what could be an anti-Chinese security agenda? As the “pivot to Asia,” or “rebalance to Asia” are further detailed, it does call into question what this might mean for Central Asia. Is it part of Asia, or is it really a pivot to East Asia? Presumably, the next US National Security Strategy will outline what this means. Suffice it to say, in the region, the concern is that this will be a move away from Central Asia, to include a lessening of resources, expertise, and attention.

The other mantra of recent times is the changing security mission in Afghanistan, stated in shorthand as “2014.” Specifically, on December 31, 2014, the NATO-ISAF mission will cease to exist in its current form, with the security responsibilities in the country to be in the hands of the ANSF and the government of Afghanistan. The US role will be limited to training and some counter-insurgency efforts yet to be defined. Troop levels, originally thought to be in the range of 20,000-25,000 are now most likely to be 2,500-8,000, with a distinct possibility that the number will be zero. Both of these will have substantial effects on our engagement strategy in Central Asia – not just the USG, but the US in

general, to include the private sector and non-governmental organizations, particularly if they receive federal support.

Equally important is a domestic matter in the United States: budget austerity. At present, the US government is wrestling with a mounting national debt and deficit and one sees a fundamental shift in how policy is being framed. Indeed, it appears that national security is increasingly based on budgetary grounds (*what can we afford?*), as opposed to national interests (*what should we do?*). Oddly, it is important to stress the budgetary challenges facing any set of programs and potential policies towards Central Asia. This is not going to change because of the political climate in the United States against increasing support for “foreign engagement” with the exception of a limited number of special cases. Moreover, the national debt and deficit crises that have plagued the United States since 2008 continue to affect funding options among government agencies. Whether it is “sequestration” or simple percentage reductions in programs (“do more with less”), the past decade of increased money for international engagement will come to an end. And, as the Afghan conflict fades, perhaps even in the same swift manner that the Iraq campaign exited from the US collective memory, the “value” of Central Asia drops precipitously, as previously noted. Barring a unique interest on the part of a particular Congressman or Senator, it is unlikely to see the value of Central Asia ever return to that of the 1990s.

WHAT CAN BE THE BASIS OF A VIABLE US POLICY TOWARD CENTRAL ASIA?

In addition to the current interpretation of US policy in Central Asia, it is important to stress that it cannot function in a vacuum. It's no surprise that although these lines of effort/policy have remained fairly consistent over the past 20+ years, how the Central Asian governments' views have changed. Specifically, their points of reference and positions vis-a-vis the United States have evolved along a number of different lines.

1. They ARE independent states with their own views of national security, national interest, and international relations
2. They have engaged with other states that are equally concerned about remaining involved in the region – so bargains are being made all the time, even with states that are not cooperating themselves
3. They understand news – and interpret events – through filters that American officials might not appreciate as much as they should
4. The US standing in the world has changed – as viewed by Central Asian officials

Each of these points is premised on perceptions that have evolved over time and influenced by a range of outside sources. Moreover, each will vary from country to country within the region and would be worthy of further analysis. As suggested by the official positions expressed by their governments and researchers who work for the governments, the US's role in Central Asia does appear to be limited and unimaginative. One hears about a decline, with comparisons made to Great Britain and the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, suggesting the United States has “seen better days.” In contrast, other countries – China most often noted – are now on the rise.

Given these perception hurdles, the US would be wise to assess what the true interests really are in Central Asia. Knowing that

the US government can't commit the resources needed to fully engage the states of Central Asia as in the past, is it wise to limit expectations, or find complimentary partners in the region? For example, would India be a viable surrogate?

Should the US understand and accept that other countries will be in the region for some time to come – and might, in fact, be dominant? Moreover, as organizations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization increase their own activity in Central Asia, it is incumbent upon the US to recognize them for what they are: alternate options. This does not mean that the United States ought to automatically defer to other powers, but can it play a supporting role in the region working in cooperation with one of these structures?

Geopolitics aside, the overriding appeal of the United States still remains the principles upon which it was founded and expressed even today by officials. And while this "idea" of the United States has taken a beating, especially in the past decade, it is not gone. Indeed, honest discussions of America's weaknesses and foibles remain important to this broader narrative of the US as a country that can reform and change itself, as much as it calls upon others to do so. One just has to look at the example of Myanmar/Burma where the US has been able to re-engage or the warning of Pakistan, where cutting off ties in the past still vex our relationship today. Fortunately, the US relationship with the Central Asian states is not as long-lasting, nor as complex, so presumably restructuring ties need not be saddled with such challenges. That said, it is clear that the United States can't go back to the 1990s where the attitudes in the region were so overwhelmingly positive, or that one could take for granted the "American model of development" so enthusiastically advocated. Given the constraints placed on the US today, as noted earlier in this report, what could the country do to actually further policy objectives?

First of all, the United States can continue one thing it does well – *maintain and enhance educational exchanges* with various universities and organizations in Central Asia. The desire to obtain

an education from an American university is still evident, even if perceptions of the US government have faded. Moreover, such person-to-person experiences help create a more positive attitude towards the US society beyond what is often stereotypically portrayed in the international media.

Second, such *exchanges and opportunities for familiarization ought to include the security and armed forces*. Military and policy officials from the five Central Asian states would do well to gain a better understanding not just about how the US system works, but the constraints and challenges that currently exist in the American policy process. Even though there has been more than twenty years of engagement, exchange opportunities have been limited – and often limited to a select group of regional actors.

Third, the US government needs to *stop “playing poker” with the human rights question*. The internal debates that create conditions of either human rights or security are tiresome and misguided. That the issue of human rights and democratization is unevenly applied globally only reinforces the perception that the US maintains double standards, discrediting the entire focus on human rights. If allies or trade partners of the US aren’t criticized, why should the Central Asian countries take such chastisement seriously? This is especially the case today, as the Central Asian countries do not necessarily need the United States engaged in the region. The issue of human rights ought to be raised and remain part of the broader bilateral discussion – as it should throughout the global community.

Fourth, in this increasingly interconnected world, *information ought to remain a key tool of the US government*. Free and open access to media is a mainstay of US global engagement and efforts to repeatedly stress that such a policy is not threatening to a state is essential. As other nations in the world discuss ways in which internet media can be restricted, the US can continue to help engage with the respective regimes in Central Asia to allow more places in which citizens can access electronic media.

Fifth, one can follow the old adage of *“say what we mean and do what we say.”* The United States does like to present itself as a generous nation that is willing to do about anything for an ally or a potential friend. In international crises, few states rival the United States in terms of response, financial commitment, and volunteerism. Sadly, fiscal constraints are now a reality and there will be situations when the United States cannot take the lead on an international mission. Moreover, when it comes to assistance programs – including the ones advocated above – the United States ought to be more truthful in presenting what is available. Indeed, even in terms of absolute dollars provided, the US ought to stress the amount that is actually going into the country, excluding overhead and other “back in the US” costs.

Sixth, the US needs to *prepare itself to be more of a balancer in the region* and less of a “major actor.” Indeed, with the exception of a few short years, the US has never been the primary actor in Central Asia, so this is actually not much of a transition from past policies. While there may be a revisiting of “strategic partnerships” as happened between the US and Uzbekistan during the years 2002-2005, the truth is that other powers, specifically Russia and China, will have a greater national interest in the Central Asian region.

Seventh, the US government needs to *appreciate the value of academics* in this understanding. Much as in the policy-academic relationship in other subject or area matters, it is essential that both communities talk to each other. As trite as this might sound, it is still the case that the two communities cooperate on a limited bases and through a select group of individuals.

Eighth and finally, the US government ought to *think “long term”* when it comes to Central Asia. The political, economic, security, and societal problems are all deep-rooted and will require a greater understanding of the region itself to make any US effort in these areas effective. In the 1990s, US efforts were colored with a naive optimism that suggested just our very presence would convince government and civil society actors alike

to want to emulate us. This has not happened and now these very same policy officials are significantly more jaded and cynical. By maintaining a consistent message in all of these areas, and understanding that change will not take place overnight, the US position would be better served.

These steps will not create a radical shift in US policy in Central Asia, but will form a strong foundation for future developments and will elevate the perception of Americans overall. But this is not just about perception – it is about creating conditions for effective policy in an area of limited opportunities. The US no longer has the resources to devote to the region (even if it never really did in the past) and other countries are, quite frankly, better equipped to engage. The multi-polar, or even non-polar world is a reality today. The US can maintain viable foreign and security policies in this environment – to include being a positive influence in Central Asia.

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