

Power Politics in Central Asia

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Abstract

Among the many changes brought to American security policy by the attacks of September 11, 2001, is a shift in the strategic geography. Regions and nations that had been at the periphery of concern have taken on new importance because of their relationship to terrorists and the states that sponsor them. Nowhere is this truer than in Central Asia. Until only a few years ago, the United States paid little attention to Central Asia. Now the combination of energy reserves and the regional locations has increased its strategic significance a great deal. On top of the two factors, one new dimension had also enhanced American determination to secure her influence in this region. That is the strategic competition between the United States, Russia, and China in the region of Central Asia. In order to contain China's rapid expansion of influence and prevent the revival of a Russian Empire at the oil abundant region, the United States is likely to consolidate continuously its presence there. The transformation of the nature of regimes in Central Asia will influence heavily the chances to success of the U.S. strategic design. As part of its global policy of promoting democracy, the United States is pushing democratization in the region. It is considered by American policy makers that by making the region more democratic, it suits well to the interest of the United States. However, the results and implications remain to be seen.

Keywords: power politics, anti-terrorism, democratization

Introduction

In the post-Soviet 1990s, the three key players in the geographical space around Central Asia – Russia, China, and the United States – achieved a provisional equilibrium. Russia maintained its traditional dominance in its southern backyard. China, as a fast rising power and enjoying increasing economic relations with the Central Asian countries, is gaining growing political influence in the region and trying to avoid confrontation with Moscow. The United States, the sole superpower of the world, has a global domination interest and an emergent anti-terrorism task at hand in the region. The success of the U.S. efforts in achieving a pivotal role will be depended, to a large extent, on the nature of Central Asian regimes and their resistance to political modernization. Examining U.S. effort in promoting democracy in Central Asian region will cast light not only on the nature of American's intentions but also the intricacy of the relations among the players involved.

After all the wars of the twentieth century, cold and hot, only one superpower remains. For some Americans, this may seem a great opportunity to shape history forever. More accurately, it is a moment of great temptation. Americans are often told that the promotion of freedom and democracy abroad will produce peace. When President Bush said that “the best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world,” in his second inaugural address, he joined a long list of American presidents from Woodrow Wilson to Ronald Reagan who maintained that the triumph of democracy throughout the world will eliminate the prospects of war. They believe, as does President Bush, that the aggressive instincts of military dictatorship and theocratic rule cause war while democracies, founded on the principles of the impartial rule of

law, free speech, and elected representation promote peace. While the United States is promoting democratic values and expressing its “genuine” good will toward Central Asian states, China and Russia are taking a totally different angle in seeing the developments in the Central Asian region. For the new game of power politics in the region factors such as political culture, traditional relations, energy interests, and strategic imperatives are all being contemplated. This paper aims to explore further on these issues and to unveil a bit of the complicity of power politics in Central Asia.

American Interests and Dilemmas in Central Asia

The United States has upheld the banner of democracy for a long time, and its recent outspoken policy of bringing democracy to the Islamic world, whether through reform in Palestine or at the point of gun in Iraq, has drawn heavy criticism for inconsistency and hypocrisy. When George W. Bush took office in the year 2000, few observers expected that promoting democracy around the world would become a major issue in his presidency. In fact, during the first presidential campaign Bush and his advisers had made it clear that they favored great-power realism over idealistic notions such as nation building or democracy promotion. And as expected, the incoming Bush team quickly busied itself with casting aside many policies closely associated with President Bill Clinton. Some analysts feared democracy promotion would quickly be abandoned. But September 11 attack fundamentally altered this picture. In depicting the evilness of the terrorist forces and consolidating American support, Bush Administration started to exalt democratic values. As a result, whether, where, and how the United States should promote democracy around the world have become central questions in U.S. foreign policy debates.

Although the war on terrorism has greatly raised the profile of democracy as a policy matter, it has hardly clarified the issue. The United States faces two contradictory imperatives: on the one hand, the fight against al Qaeda tempts Washington to put aside its democratic principles and seek closer ties with autocracies throughout the Middle East and Asia. On the other hand, U.S. officials and policy experts have increasingly come to believe that it is precisely the lack of democracy in many of these countries that helps breed Islamic extremism. Resolving this tension will be no easy task. So far, Bush and his foreign policy team have shown a case of split personality. While the Bush government is maintaining warm relations with “friendly tyrants” in many parts of the world, it also campaigns for a vigorous new democracy movement in the Middle East and Central Asia. How the administration resolves this uncomfortable dualism is central not only to the future of the war on terrorism but also to the shape and character of Bush's foreign policy as a whole. The promotion of democratic values, after all, can easily lead to uneasy relations with U.S. partners and war with American foes.

Central Asia, as widely noted, has been a traditional sphere of Russian influence, and intermittent Russian irredentism looms on the horizon. Despite the last two decades of China's emergence, China and Russia have managed to maintain a workable relationship with each other for the regional affairs. However, the September 11 terrorist attacks have altered the geopolitical dynamics in Central Asia. The United States has emerged as the preeminent power in the region, causing Russia and China to adjust to radically changed circumstances. The war on terrorism and increasing instability in South and Southwest Asia call for a long-term U.S. military presence in Central Asia. Such a presence could also complement ongoing U.S. diplomatic relationships in the region. In the long run, U.S. influence in the region will have to contend

with the residual advantages that Russia and China have by virtue of their geographic proximity, cultural ties, and trading patterns. The American ability to promote the security and stability of Central Asia will depend on the cooperation of and perhaps partnership with one or more of these states.

Nevertheless, the onus of American policy success falls on the nature of the Central Asian states' politics. American dualism of pursuing strategic and military cooperation as well as democratic correctness with Central Asian states will exert pressure and expect resilience from the latter. While facing more of internal rather than external threats, the Central Asia states leaders tend to stress the "external meddler" as a source of Islamic political activism, a viewpoint that minimizes the strength and appeal of indigenous Islam within the national population and tends to demonize it. Indeed, Central Asian states will have to contend with poor governance, widespread corruption, and authoritarian regimes, with all the ensuing consequences for U.S. efforts to promote economic and political modernization. Balancing short-term stability against considerations of long-term political and economic reform will further complicate these efforts. The roles of partner, security manager, and advocate of reform are not easily reconciled in Central Asia. Still, the events of September 11 have left the United States with no alternative but to address these issues. Defining the right role for the United States in Central Asia is no easy task.

As the world's sole super power after the cold war, United States prefers to maintain an aloof but pivotal role in regional politics, safeguarding its own multi-dimensional interests. Therefore, the unwanted scenario in terms of American interests would be a geopolitical power struggle between Russia, China, Iran, India, Pakistan, and even Turkey for control of Central Asia. Such a struggle could spoil many other interests that the United States might

have elsewhere. An ideal situation is that all parties involved would allow Central Asia to become a great-power-free zone, to let it develop its natural resources and achieve stability through economic development. Hence, the unspoken but obvious conclusion: the United States would be willing to help with economic development and democratization, but most of all it has focused mainly on security issues that are of American concern alone, generally speaking.

Despite enjoying preponderance in military power and economic resources. The U.S. still suffers some weakness in its relations with the Central Asia states. Retrospectively speaking, the early record of U.S. engagement in Central Asia immediately after the breakup of the Soviet Union and through the 1990's was not a positive one, resulting in mutual disappointments in Washington and the Central Asian capitals. Once the Central Asian countries had become independent from the former Soviet Union in 1991, America concentrated its attention in the region on Soviet nuclear leftovers, the decommissioning of which it hailed as a great success. But by the end of the second Clinton administration, U.S. relations with Central Asia reached a difficult stage. The region's image in Western media had become tarnished by widespread reports of corruption, growing authoritarianism, and lack of progress on economic reform. Increasingly, the expert community came to view the "stans" not as the next generation of Asian tigers but as the next wave of failed states. And continued American engagement focusing on security concerns with these states certainly invites criticism of supporting repressive and corrupt regimes.

However, after the September 11, 2001 attack on U.S. mainland the United States has used Central Asia as a stepping stone to Afghanistan since it toppled the Taliban government there for sheltering al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and expanded military engagement with Central Asia with the design of

shoring up these weak states that are vulnerable to terrorism, promoting their integration into western institutions. Moreover, with the troop presence in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, the defeat of the Taliban government in Afghanistan, and all signs pointing to a long-term U.S. military presence in the region, the United States has become Central Asia's security manager. In the meantime, the U.S. arrival has been a definite gain for the Central Asian regimes. In the last decade of the previous century, U.S. reluctance to fill the void had pushed the states of Central Asia toward uneasy relationships with Russia and China, both of which lacked the requisite muscle and will to become effective regional hegemon but were more than willing to throw their weight around and assert themselves at the expense of indigenous rulers. The U.S. arrival in Central Asia has changed that, displacing both Russia and China as the region's preeminent powers and giving its leaders room to maneuver vis-a-vis Moscow and Beijing.

American engagement and the assuming of a new critical role in Central Asian security affairs by the United States have prompted the important question: what is the nature of U.S. interest there? One expert has pointed out that the American interests in this region are at least fivefold. The first is to assure independence and territorial integrity for Central Asia states. The second is to keep Iran in check until more pro-Western policies are pursued by its leaders or a new regime is established. The Third is to defuse the violent and anti-Western potential of Islamic fundamentalism through economic growth and to shore up civil society throughout the region. The last policy priorities are to prevent destabilization in the region and to ensure access to energy resources throughout the entire region. There can be no doubt that, in the short and medium term, the United States is committed to maintaining its military, political, and economic presence in Central Asia. As policymakers in

Washington D.C. have defined U.S. security interests in Central Asia, the United States military has taken a series of steps to engage Central Asia and enhance military-to-military cooperation. Expanding U.S. military engagements with Central Asian States has been viewed as a key mechanism to promote their integration into Western political-military institutions, encourage civilian control over militaries, and institutionalize cooperative relations with the United States military, while dissuading other regional powers, especially Russia, China, and Iran, from seeking to dominate the region.

If taken the amount of dollars poured into the region as an indicator of the nature of American interests in Central Asia one can find that security assistance is the largest category of American financial input, so far. And Uzbekistan has been the largest beneficiary. Assistance directed to economic, health and social, and civil society affairs makes a much smaller proportion in the region. U.S. policymakers are well aware that democratic and prosperous Central Asian states would provide the strongest bulwark against terrorism and are funding an impressive list of economic, social, and political programs in addition to military aid. Yet the emphasis has been on rewarding states for their cooperation and providing aid incentives for continued participation in the anti-terrorism coalition, rather than on using closer cooperation to encourage higher standards of economic and political openness.

In fact, the increased U.S. military presence in the region gives the public the impression that Washington supports these authoritarian regimes, while providing their leaders reason to hope that American forces would back them up in case of a mass effort to oust them. Although U.S. policymakers did highlight the lack of progress toward democratization in the region prior to September 11 attack, they tend to overstate the degree of progress after the September 11 attack in an effort to make a case for continued close security

cooperations. According to human right groups such as Human Rights Watch, however, there is no reason to point to any fundamental change in the overall human right record in these countries. Furthermore, it has been reported that more than 60 percent the region's 50 million people are under the age of 20, a generation of restlessly pressing for change. Turmoil and government oppressions in Uzbekistan occurred in May this year can be a case at point. The calling for stressing democratic transformation has added pressure to the U.S. in taking a stronger position on human rights' stand.

When dire needs of military operations in Iraq were rampant, U.S.government would shift the balance of its interest calculation toward security cooperations and take American normative agenda lightly. Uzbekistan is a salient example, despite its poor human right performance the Bush government didn't identify it as a "state of concern" in 2003. Only until the bloody Andijon incident occurred in May of 2005 did the U.S. govermemnt raised eyebrows. American relations with Uzbekistan have grown increasing strained recently, after a government crackdown in the wake of a prison break and protest in Andijon, in northeastern Uzbekistan, on May 13 in which hundreds of unarmed demonstrators died. Uzbek authorities restricted American military operations at the air base, in June after Washington officials called for an international inquiry into events in Andijon. And when American Secretary of States Condoleezza Rice paid a visit to Central Asia October of this year, Uzbekistan was excluded from the trip due to the strained relations between the two countries.

Under heavy criticism from within and without the country toward the Andijon incident, U.S. State Department officials commented that the United States "cannot and will not" have a one-dimensional relationship with any country in the region based solely on security concerns or economic interests.

Assistant Secretary Daniel Fried said on October 7 that his agency is taking President Bush's "freedom agenda" seriously and not rhetorically. By these words one can note that the U.S. has been losing positions in the region in obtaining both security and political relations with these states. As noted widely, Uzbekistan is evicting American military from its K-2 base and the U.S. is trying to reverse it. It is not easy to reconcile the ideals of democracy with the practical imperatives of international politics and diplomacy. So the dilemma of American policy toward Central Asia will persist and power politics will continuously to be the major feature of American foreign policy for Central Asia.

Russia and China Factor

The Realist perspective of a Sino-Russian "strategic partnership" balancing the U.S. is the most prominent theme in the study of Central Asian regional politics in the past decade. However, commentators often believe that deep suspicions plague Sino-Russian partnership, and the keystone of the partnership, Russia's arms sales to China, reflects asymmetry of weaknesses, rather than the potential of combined strengths. Russian and Chinese leaders all proclaim their desire for a world of multi-polarity, in which American dominance over world politics should be reduced. Balancing rhetoric is obviously the reflection of a genuine sentiment that the world finds it unfair, undemocratic, and sometimes frightening to have so much power concentrated in the hands of one state, especially when the United States aggressively goes its own way. This sentiment becomes even stronger when it comes to the U.S. new role and policies in Central Asia.

Although initially justified as needed to support combat operations against

the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, the establishment of bases by American forces has the effect of creating new facts on the ground, facts that have a way of becoming permanent. When U.S. troops arrive, they tend to stay. That axiom remains as true today as it was in 1945 or 1950 or in the 1990's, as the continuing presence of U.S. forces in Europe, Japan, Korea, the Persian Gulf and the Balkans proves. In Central Asia, that pattern may be repeating itself as U.S. Central Command has completed a major program of what the U.S. Defense Department likes to call "engagement," employing a panoply of military activities and initiatives as an instrument of statecraft. When Donald Rumsfeld visited Central Asia July 2005, his top agenda was precisely to extend the stay of American military bases. In a similar vein and around the same time, the highest American military ranking officer General Richard Myers, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, even made a remark saying that Russia and China were trying to bully Central Asian nations into demanding a timetable for a U.S. troop withdrawal. When asked about Myers' comment, Rumsfeld did not back off. The strategic designs of the U.S. for Central Asia can't be more obvious.

It is widely noted that the most prominent victim of the new post-September 11 security order in Central Asia has been the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and, by extension, China. Established in the mid-1990s by Russia, China, and the Central Asian states, SCO was intended to serve many purposes. For Russia and China, it was a chance to manage Central Asian security affairs and cross-border issues free of U.S. influence. While the two giants have at times sought to use the SCO as a macroregional balancing mechanism against the U.S., the Central Asian states are more interested in the existence of a balance between Russia and China in the body. In other words, the SCO offers the Central Asian states the opportunity to sit at the same table with the two biggest players in the region, to harness their resources to help

make Central Asia more secure against the stir of militant Islamic movements and domestic insurgents, and to do all this while getting both Moscow and Beijing to guarantee their existing borders.

As for China, it surely will take the American military presence in Central Asia as evidence that the United States is engaged in a concerted effort to encircle the People's Republic. Initially Chinese leaders believed that the U.S. focus on anti-terrorism coalition-building would counter unilateralist trends and reduce the focus on China as a potential threat to the U.S. interest in Asia. China also saw an opportunity to find a new area of cooperation with the U.S. But soon the Chinese leaders saw a deterioration in its security environment when its key allies, such as Russia and Pakistan, tilted toward the United States; relations between Washington and India have improved; instability along China's western borders has deepened, and so on. Thus far, China finds itself marginalized, displaced, and virtually alone, pondering the unenviable option of playing second fiddle to the United States and a host of its newfound best friends. Beijing is well aware of that many American conservative elements believe China is destined to be America's next arch-antagonist.

Taking the case of Chinese state-owned oil company CNOOC's offer to buy American oil and gas company Unocal Corp, many commentators and newspapers have expressed the concern that such a deal would threaten US national security. American Congress also had given pressure on the Bush administration to carefully examine the bid by CNOOC. A Congressman from Illinois pointed out that he worries that the Chinese bid to buy Unocal could mean that China would keep the company's vast Asian oil reserves for itself, and not put the oil on the open market. As a consequence China understands that a policy of American military encirclement toward China is justifiable for the U.S. In fact, the United States has established itself as the main power

broker in China's strategic backyard since September 11 and has displaced China as Russia's principal interlocutor in Central Asian regional affairs. No matter how much China has gained from the U.S. military campaign, and there can be little doubt that it has been a beneficiary of the campaign against the Taliban and the ensuing blow to operations of its own Uighur militants, U.S. preponderance in Central Asia must be a setback to the Chinese government that aspires to the role of the Asian superpower.

As to Russia, its post-September 11 position in the Central Asian region is more bittersweet. Putin was the first leader to offer moral support to the U.S. after the attack, but it was the Central Asian states who pushed Russia into greater cooperation with the anti-terrorism effort which might otherwise have been forthcoming. Undoubtedly, few among Moscow's foreign policy and military elite cherish the sight of U.S. troops in their strategic backyard. U.S. military presence has been an awkward reality for Russia's national security establishment; after all, the Russian government granted the United States access to facilities that the Russian military still controlled in areas that were Soviet only a decade ago. For Putin, the September 11 attack represented an opportunity to rejoin the superpower club. By participating in the U.S.-led anti-terrorism coalition, closing bases in Vietnam and Cuba and taking a conciliatory stance on Bush's decision to withdraw from the ABM treaty, Putin hoped to regain Russia's great power status by winning American favorable treatment. At least, some must have thought resentfully, the United States had the decency to consult with Russia before moving into the region.

Still, the friendly public stance by President Vladimir Putin in support of U.S. actions has brought a number of important advantages to Moscow. The United States has tacitly acknowledged a certain Russian privilege in Central Asia. Russia's own military campaign in Chechnya ceased being a barrier to

Moscow's relations with the West and instead became something of a bridge on the strength of the argument that both Russia and the United States are fighting the same militant Islamic enemy. Russian claims of Osama bin Laden's complicity in Chechnya's separatist movement have also been perceived in a different light since September 11. The issue of violations of human rights in Chechnya has been effectively relegated to the back burner in favor of the more immediate concerns about terrorism and other issues in relations with Washington.

Nevertheless, Russia will view any long-term U.S. presence in the region as another American intrusion into its sphere of influence. On July of this year, Russia, China and four Central Asian nations have jointly demanded a U.S. deadline for closing the bases. While Russia argued that American military operations in Afghanistan were coming to an end, the Pentagon disputed that notion. Russia keeps viewing Central Asia as its backyard and the fear and insecurity felt by Russians with the American military's presence should not be understated. Over the past dozen years Moscow has endured a long list of slights, insults and humiliations, some real, others imagined. Therefore, some American commentators have asked the question whether it is the interest of the United States to allow more Russian humiliations, not because Russian power no longer commands special deference or respect, but because a wounded and resentful Russia poses a source of potential danger and diplomatic enervation.

Basically, since the September 11 attack the U.S. and Russia have maintained an amicable and functional relations. In response to Bush's moves toward further U.S. cooperation with Russia, Putin has called for closer cooperation with NATO and announced the withdrawal of Russian forces from the last two major overseas military bases, the electronic eavesdropping base in Cuba and the Cam Ranh Bay Naval Base in Vietnam. Although the main reason

for closing the bases was the lack of financial resources. The U.S. and Russia also signed the Joint Declaration on 24 May 2002 in Moscow. This document declared that the relationship between the two states should be based on friendship, cooperation, common values, trust, openness, and predictability, so that they may respond to new challenges and threats and thus contribute to creating a peaceful, prosperous, and free world and to strengthening strategic security. Nevertheless, it would be naïve to take the ceremonial words at their face values in analyzing relations between the two countries.

Speaking from Central Asian states' own perspective toward the interplay of the major powers, it is their delight to see the balancing game to be evolved. In other words, despite its geographical and historical affinity between Russia and the Central Asian states, the latter still prefer to use the United States and China as a counterweight to the Russian Federation policy. For Russia, the addition of a new regional player has only reinforced its sense of siege. Along with NATO's welcoming of new members from regions of traditional Russian periphery, Russia will inevitably be forced to stand guard over its strategic interests. The ultimate outcome of the emerging geopolitical tug of war between Moscow, Beijing, and Washington is still far from clear, all the parties involved will be expected to establish a *modus vivendi* of sorts in the new century.

Conclusion

Given the prominence of security concerns on the U.S. agenda in Central Asia, American involvement in the region obviously have a strong military component. Even when situations in Afghanistan and Iraq could be stabilized to certain degree, the U.S. military will still feel that there are other issues, such as

narcotics smuggle and border control to stop the flow of terrorst – require the continued presence of American forces. Ironical or sarcastic it mithg sound, the Pentagon is thinking only in using military means to achieve U.S. national goals. In checking the record of American military presence throughout the world, one can easily find that the Pentagon always believe that the presence of its force is indispensable to the area’s stability unless the host country strongly resist it. However, military engagement, by nature, will not help the democratization cause pursued by the U.S. government and instead it will invite other regional powers’ suspicion toward American long term intentions.

Democratization is certainly a noble goal for American foreign policy, but it is unlikely to be achieved through American unilateral initiatives and military engagemnet alone. Democratization requires far more resources, imagination, and patience than the Bush administration, or perhaps any U.S. administration, is willing to muster. The Unites States must learn to respect each country’s unique history and social situations. A sound foreign policy has to be based on a more accurate notion of what accounts for reliability. The one indispensable factor in forming reliable partnership is not democracy or the lack of it, but self-interest, and there is not the slightest reason to think that will change. A sound American foreign policy should also be based on a clear understanding of how the rest of the world actually sees the United States.

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中亞權力政治

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摘 要

在九一一恐怖攻擊事件後，美國國家安全政策產生了多項變化，其中之一就是地緣戰略。過去被認為是邊緣地帶的中亞地區，如今因為與恐怖主義的關係而變得重要。數年之前，美國鮮少注意中亞，但如今由於石油能源以及中國崛起等因素，使得中亞地區變得對美國益形重要。尤其是爲了要遏止中國影響力的延伸與擴大，美國愈加地堅定要鞏固自身在中亞的地位與影響力。美國期盼在中亞推展民主，這是其全球政策的一部分；基本上，美國認為在中亞地區推動民主化是符合美國的國家利益，但其結果如何則尚待觀察。

關鍵字：權力政治、反恐怖主義、民主化