

The United States and Central Asia

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For American interests, objectives and strategies, Central Asia should elicit an intense focus and engagement, yet few parts of the world are so systematically ignored in American strategic thinking. This is not something new. It was the case throughout the Soviet period, when Central Asia was seen as just one more part of the Soviet Empire whose interests were defined and addressed in Moscow by Russians. For almost 70 years, the study of Central Asia was the provenance of a few intrepid scholars in the United States and Europe. Their works, including my own, were most often dismissed as not central to the study of Russian power and empire maintenance. The only way a young scholar might adequately engage in the study of Central Asia under Soviet rule was to enroll in one of the few centers of Soviet Studies within American, French or British academia that was fortunate to attract the tiny number of classically-trained specialists, who generally floated from one to another institution. The results were predictable. When the USSR was history and Central Asia had five new independent states, American policy wandered and foundered. I for one believe it continues to wander to this day.

Why should we pay attention to Central Asia today? What strategic interests does the United States have there? And how should U.S. policy reflect those interests? Allow me to suggest four areas around which we might consider organizing our thinking on these issues.

First, Central Asians are today no longer part of the Russian Empire, and indeed I would argue they are rapidly moving out of Russia’s historic sphere of influence. That said, all of the Central Asian states, more or less, are mindful of Russia’s continuing designs on former Soviet territories and, to a greater or lesser extent, they say the right things to the Russians most of the time to deflect their former imperial rulers from meddling in the Central Asians’ internal affairs. They occasionally trim their policies to favor Russian preferences and priorities, though this happens less and less. No one wants to poke a sharp stick in Russia’s eye. But neither do they roll over automatically when Russia asserts its interests over theirs, and more and more frequently they adopt courses that favor their own interests over those of the Russians.

Put another way, all of the Central Asian states are crafting and implementing independent foreign policies. Three states—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan—are far down this road. They define their own objectives, and they

design strategies to achieve them. They not infrequently lock horns with the Russians along the way without backtracking. They interact with a wide range of other actors, whose interests the Central Asians accommodate or contest. In short, they act like many other states, and in their statecraft they outperform a lot of them. We should conclude, I believe, that our current preoccupation with Russia's former rule of this region, and therefore a predisposition to approach Central Asia through a set of filters and optics calibrated around Russia and its interests, is an approach flawed from the beginning. Starting with the Russia question will lead to a Russia answer, regardless of how strategically irrelevant that answer might be.

I am not asserting here that Russia is strategically irrelevant with regard to Central Asia, far from it. But we must understand that Russia is weak and failing across every dimension of its former power and authority, the exception being its nuclear arsenal. It is in a well-understood demographic death spiral; its economy depends on one commodity and is threatened with ruin whenever the price of oil descends. To say that Russia lacks governance is a gross understatement; many experts describe Russia as a criminal enterprise in service of a few individuals and groups whose goal is to strip assets from the state and park their profits elsewhere. Not surprisingly political opposition is rising to the Kremlin's monopoly of power. This is a losing hand, and Russia's leaders know it is a losing hand, but to remain competitive they must nevertheless play it as skillfully as they can for as long as they can.

Russia's time to play any hand in Central Asia is fast running out. This brings me to my second point. Russia is no longer the large power Central Asians defer to. China is. China's presence in Central Asia, especially its economic power, has grown dramatically in the last two decades. Its strategy is complex and integrated. Indeed while one is tempted to describe Russia's activities in Central Asia largely as delaying tactics, China's approaches the level of grand strategy. At the heart of this strategy is gaining access to Central Asia's abundant energy resources while securing transport overland to China that cannot be interdicted easily. At the same time, China seeks to build barriers to the spread of radical Islam into Xinjiang, which shares ethnic and religious populations with Central Asia. This radicalism has already penetrated Central Asia from a number of directions including Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Arab lands, is marching through the North Caucasus, and is making significant gains and Russia's Volga region.

China's strategy of engagement in Central Asia—evident to anyone who travels there today—seeks to marginalize a weakening Russia, take advantage of the power vacuum left by America's departure from Afghanistan, and deter any ambitions by Central Asia's other large power, India, which it seeks to outflank along India's vital northern frontier. China's growing presence in Central Asia also improves its position in the long-term competition to see if Russia or China ends up with the former's Far East and Siberia. China's strategy for Central Asia is captured by the organizations it has created for this purpose, beginning with the Shanghai Five in 1996, which was transformed in 2001 into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the premier organization for discussing Central Asia's economic and political present and future.

China has developed increasingly robust trade routes and economic enterprises in Central Asia, which China clearly hopes will advance development and stability in its own Central Asia territories through gradual integration. In 2009, the last statistics available, trade between China and the five Central Asian states stood at about \$25 billion and growing rapidly. China has a keen eye for strategic minerals and hydrocarbons, and it has cutting deals worth billions of dollars in the last few years. It sweetens its trade and development deals with soft loans, direct payments and advanced technologies. Beyond this, China's assistance comes without the criticism of the Central Asian states' spotty records on human rights and democratic practices.

A casual stroll through the bazaars and department stores of most large Central Asian cities reveals stores stuffed with Chinese goods, Chinese businesspeople with ties to China's government filling the hotels, Mandarin blaring from loudspeakers, and opportunities for people to learn Chinese from a growing network of Confucius Institutes. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are particular targets, both sharing borders with China. Lately Uzbekistan has been receiving growing Chinese attention. Whole Chinese communities are springing up, and many more are likely, given the velocity of Chinese investment and the state's preference for ensuring it with lots of Chinese on the ground.

China's evident supplanting of Russia as Central Asia's dominant power introduces my third point. The shape of the geostrategic competition for Central Asia is changing radically, at least since the early 1990s, with more actors seeking opportunities to satisfy their own objectives there. Russia and China are the most active today, but they are joined by India, which seems to have awoken from a decades-long strategic lethargy to realize that its historic ties to Central Asia give it special advantages there that China does not possess. Moreover from the Indian point of view to allow China free rein in Central Asia cedes a critical frontier in its competition with China—a competition that touches Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kashmir and even Tibet. We will hear a great deal more on Central Asia from India in years to come.

Turkey, too, has strong and vital interests in Central Asia, driven by ethnic, cultural and linguistic attachments and a natural facility for trade. Turkey was expected to be the big winner in newly independent Central Asia, and most Western governments looked to Turkey as the secular model for Central Asian development. This has not happened for a variety of reasons, but Turkey remains a powerful player on the ground through trade, education and diplomacy.

We tend to forget that Iran is first and foremost a Central Asian state, and its influence through culture and history remains powerful there. This influence is more localized than general, and it is not clear if Iran currently has the capacity for a grand strategy that embraces Central Asia. But make no mistake. Iran looks to Central Asia to enhance its strategic position throughout the region, while complicating the strategic position of other actors.

The Arab Gulf states have also been active in Central Asia, particularly Saudi Arabia, mostly to inject into Central Asia's fertile religious soil their own brand of Islam. Central

Asian governments, especially Uzbekistan, have been pushing back as the influence of these ideological states has grown and as radical Islam has sunk deeper roots in what has historically been a moderate and modern Islamic milieu. But this is a challenging game, as Saudi influence often comes with Saudi cash and incentives, which are for the most part welcomed.

Other actors could shape this landscape yet further, mostly through trade, but also through education and civil society capacity building. The United States and Europe both figure in this tentative category, with Japan, Korea and other Asian states filling in the margins.

The larger point is important: The Central Asia American policy makers must deal with today is composed of many moving forces, not just one or two. No longer hermetically sealed by Russian power, Central Asia has become a crucible in which the active strategies of a variety of powerful and determined players interact, collide and converge. This is a new game for American strategists, and so far they have not shown any particular skill in playing it. Moreover these multiple forces are already in motion, anticipating America's withdrawal from Afghanistan. We tend to think of America's departure as a snapshot in time, as in "It's 2014 and the Americans are gone." But Central Asian governments, as well as the many peripheral actors who seek to improve their strategic advantages in Central Asia, see this as a process that began some time ago. Not surprisingly, most are actively recalibrating objectives and designing strategies that reposition themselves now, with the view of consolidating positions once the Americans are gone. Most long ago discounted the purported goals of America's involvement in Afghanistan, with Pakistan's failure hanging in the balance.

It is worth speculating how a continued American presence in the region, perhaps no more than a few hundred soldiers in training missions and other endeavors, might change the strategic dynamics that have already been unleashed. My own view is that this would be a very positive influence on what could rapidly become an unruly and likely violent competition amongst the others. And I suspect that this kind of presence, for example in Uzbekistan, would be welcome.

Fourth, what is America's interest in all of this? At the most general level, Central Asia no longer resides on the far periphery of the West. As Europe has expanded eastward, Central Asia has increasingly become Europe's new borderland. Kazakhstan held the presidency of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe in 2010. Energy umbilical cords stretching from Central Asia feed Europe, Turkey and the global marketplace in which the United States does its business. Helping to maintain the stability and develop the prosperity of this region is therefore a pressing national interest. But we should think about it less as some kind of expeditionary development project and more as stabilizing an increasingly proximate borderland.

The dynamic competition in Central Asia amongst powers with different and often conflicting objectives and strategies will increase, with all the attendant pathologies such a competition can unleash. Nowhere else in the world does such competition involve so

many nuclear powers—China, Russia, Pakistan, India—with several nascent nuclear powers—Iran, perhaps Turkey—standing in the wings. The potential for serious conflict in Central Asia should be seen as neither without consequences for us nor far away.

It is likely that in a few years Russia will be a minor player in Central Asia, while China will dominate. Is it in American interests for China to sit unchallenged astride the energy and resource corridors developing there, to effectively flank American ally India, and to link, as it has shown an appetite to do, with actors like Iran and Pakistan? This question should preoccupy American strategic thinking.

Central Asia's status as a pathway of drugs from Afghanistan is another compelling American interest. With American engagement winding down, we should expect to see activity along this pathway generating new energy. Similarly, it takes little to imagine radical Islam finding a new adherents and campgrounds in many parts of Central Asia, especially in the Ferghana Valley. This is an especially difficult development for Central Asians, who typically have been among the Islamic world's more moderate adherents, with a rich tradition of Islamic scholarship going back centuries. One of the consequences of Soviet rule was to eradicate this tradition and most of its practitioners—which the Soviets trumpeted as a great social and political achievement. Ironically this “achievement” has damaged a potent barrier to today's radicalism, thereby opening the door to the Islamist tendencies slipping in from the Arab world, Pakistan and elsewhere today.

The upside to Central Asia's development is especially appealing. Opportunities for developing robust trade corridors and overland routes between East and West across Central Asia could kick start the economies of many American friends and allies across Eurasia, including in the Caucasus and the Black Sea region. Several schemes are underway or contemplated, and these should attract favorable American attention.

In conclusion, finding reasons for a robust and active American engagement with and in Central Asia is not difficult. Reasons to avoid this engagement are short-sighted and contrary to American interests, in my view. But to engage effectively, we need first to understand what the strategic chessboard looks like, how the players are establishing their objectives on it and are designing strategies to pursue those objectives. We need a good assessment of where those strategies are likely to collide to cause conflict, or to coalesce or converge to create something larger than the sum of their parts. In short, we need to get strategic in our thinking about Central Asia, far beyond the tactical and incremental thinking we currently practice. This is a new and different kind of competition that America can help to shape. Or it can stand back and reap a whirlwind.