

U.S. Engagement Toward Central Asia: No Great Game¹ After All?

Mathieu BOULEGUE

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, Washington has defined general foreign policy objectives towards the Republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. They were broadly defined as helping with the integration to the world economy; the protection of Human Rights; the respect of territorial integrity; good governance and transparency; the fight against transnational threats; etc. However, there has never been a clear-cut strategy or even a vision for Central Asia as a whole that would have made the implementation of those objectives possible. In the context of the withdrawal of Coalition forces from Afghanistan, the engagement of the United States in Central Asia must be assessed.

For the past few years, U.S. engagement towards Central Asia has been based on the think tank-empowered concept of “connectivity”², namely a leitmotiv seeking the expansion of business opportunities and trade linkages in order to “integrate the region more firmly into the global economy”³. The idea is that the U.S. can foster and profit from increased interregional connectivity in a number of areas⁴ as well as bolster the resilience of Central Asian states against transnational threats. While not really shifting away from the focus on security, the U.S. policy acknowledges that a “more stable, secure Central Asia”⁵ will bring about increased trade and investment with emerging Asian economies. If the traditional U.S. objectives of strengthening governance and security remain, they are now encompassed within the realm

1. The “Great Game” refers to the 19th century competition between the Russian and British Empires in the region and its subsequent use as an analytical framework to explain renewed control over the region by external actors after the end of the Cold War.

2. Roman Muzalevsky, “Central Asia’s Shrinking Connectivity Gap: Implications for U.S. Strategy”, *Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press*, November 2014.

3. Andrew C. Kuchins and Jeffrey Mankoff, “Central Asia in a Reconnecting Eurasia. U.S. Policy Interests and Recommendations”, *CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program*, May 2015.

4. Namely trade, investments & FDIs, transportation, soft infrastructure, etc.

5. Antony J. Blinken, “The United States and Central Asia: An Enduring Vision for Partnership and Connectivity in the 21st Century”, *Brookings Institute*, Washington DC, March 31th 2015, <www.brookings.edu/>.

Mathieu Boulegue is a security and policy analyst in post-Soviet affairs. Partner at the risk management and business consulting firm AESMA.

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ISBN : 978-2-36567-464-5
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7 octobre 2015

of connectivity as a new “inclusive, multidirectional, and rules-based”⁶ approach to Central Asia. This offers a more realistic leverage based on U.S. comparative advantages in the region, i.e. boosting the development of soft infrastructure to facilitate trade and the transit of goods⁷. Washington recently conducted an interagency review of its Central Asian policy to adapt it to the framework of connectivity⁸.

The connectivity leitmotiv was fleshed out within the framework of the “New Silk Road Initiative” (NSRI), unveiled in October 2011 alongside the stabilization effort in Afghanistan and with the aim to promote the “Northern Distribution Network” (NDN)⁹ through infrastructure and trade development – namely connectivity – towards Afghanistan and the wider region. The NSRI rests on four main areas of operation: creating a regional energy market¹⁰, strengthening trading systems and transport corridors, customs and border operations, and promoting businesses and people to people networking¹¹. Altogether, the U.S. policy underlies that improving the regional environment will foster prosperity and security to Afghanistan and the wider region¹². Nonetheless, fearing increased Russian pressure, Central Asian Republics cannot be seen as cooperating too much with Washington, especially since tangible non-U.S. alternative trade and transport corridors are already in place¹³.

If the objectives of the NSRI are laudable, they were mostly perceived in Central Asia as an exit strategy from Afghanistan and a U.S. disengagement from the region, rather than a long-term reinvestment approach. From its inception, the NSRI solely focused on Afghanistan as the focal point of action to support military operations and fill the void of the 2014 withdrawal. Lacking genuine financial resources, high-ranking political support, and proper institutions to work with, the NSRI failed to create a positive outreach towards Central Asia. Furthermore, the Republics did not welcome the close policy entanglement with Afghanistan, a country that is seen as a bad omen in the whole region.

U.S. engagement in Central Asia lacks substance and no longer seems (if it ever did) a priority of U.S. foreign policy. It only stirs a modicum of interest depending on international contingencies – here with regards to Afghanistan. Even worse, policy makers seem to be afflicted by an administrative fatigue concerning “Eurasian affairs” that goes beyond the Republican/Democrat divide or the current administration, as both Congress and the political leadership grow uninterested in these issues. The lack of inter-agency coordination and common perceptions tends to make Central Asia a set of loose countries,

6. Nisha Desai Biswal, “Central Asia in a Reconnecting Eurasia”, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, May 12th 2015, <www.state.gov/>.

7. Kuchins and Mankoff (2015), *Ibid*.

8 “U.S. Reassesses Central Asia Strategy”, *RFE/RL*, March 20th 2015, <www.rferl.org/>.

9. Under the framework of NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) represents a U.S.-led air, rail & road military and logistical transportation system supporting resupplying activities for Coalition operations in Afghanistan.

10. This policy so far focused on the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) natural gas pipeline and the Central Asia and South Asia electricity network (CASA-1000).

11. U.S. Support for the New Silk Road, State Department, <www.state.gov/>.

12. Richard Weitz, “U.S. New Silk Road Initiative Needs Urgent Renewal”, *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, March 2015.

13. Sebastien Peyrouse, “The New Silk Road Initiative: are its economic underpinnings sound?”, *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, No. 384, August 2015.

addressed on a bilateral approach and not a consistent region *per se*. Furthermore, U.S. foreign policy in the region is marked by diverging interests between governmental agencies, each having their own understanding of the objectives to retain and the scope of U.S. action. Accordingly, U.S. engagement in Central Asia suffers from tunnel vision as well as over politicization due to a perceived competition with Russia for ideological supremacy in the region. Due to a lack of means to achieve the ends of U.S. objectives in the region, Washington's engagement failed to produce expected results. This eventually caused the United States to push for democracy and Human Rights promotion as primary vectors of foreign policy, while excluding other aspects of cooperation.

External factors also account for the U.S. disengagement. In the context of the withdrawal from Afghanistan, Russia's continued presence, as well as the rise of China and other regional players such as India and Iran, there is now less room for U.S. engagement. In this, China's increasing reassertion in the region is somewhat discouraging for U.S. policy makers as Beijing is actually making the connecting Washington cannot do and cannot pay for. It is only after October 2013 and President Xi Jinping's visit to Central Asia – followed by the announcement of the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) project – that the U.S. started to include China in its Central Asian policy. Facing a tremendous challenge to match China's growing presence in the region, U.S. engagement can only become more pragmatic – and moreover offers a possible exit strategy for the NSRI by linking with the Chinese project.

Less U.S. involvement in Afghanistan in coming years will inevitably lead to less implication in Central Asian affairs, and to the probable abortion of the New Silk Road Initiative. The objective will be, however, to find a balance between complete abandonment and sufficient engagement to help the Republics avoid detrimental relationships with Russia.

The next administration will have to deal with the consequences of the breakdown of the relationship with Russia that may or may not be reversible under Putin's presidency. Regarding Central Asia, it might chose a "cheap and easy" solution, namely an exit strategy based on lesser financial support, some level of outreach with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and declaratory regional engagement on border security and anti-terrorism in the context of Afghanistan. It remains to be seen whether less U.S. intervention will be worse than too much intervention in Central Asia. As such, through a more realistic policy with modest and achievable objectives in the region, the U.S. could become an important outside balancer, or "third way", for Central Asian Republics, caught between Russia's geopolitical ambitions and China's economic might. Washington will therefore have to learn to cooperate with Russia and China, alongside emerging actors, rather than simply view the region as a zero-sum game through the prism of Afghanistan and Russian actions.