

U.S. Interests in Central Asia and the Challenges to Them

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Madam Chairwoman, Members of the Committee, it is a great honor to be invited once again to testify before you on U.S. interests in Central Asia and the challenges to them because Central Asia is an area whose importance to the United States is universally acknowledged to be growing. In 2004 Under Secretary of State Richard Armitage told Central Asians that "stability in the area is of paramount importance and vital national interest." Yet today American interests are under attack from three sides in Central Asia: Russia and China, the Taliban and their supporters, and the authoritarian misrule of Central Asian governments. While some of these attacks are or would have been unavoidable, others are due to shortcomings in our own policy. I hope to address these deficiencies in our policymaking in recommendations for extricating ourselves from the present unhappy situation confronting the United States there.

U.S. interests in Central Asia are primarily strategic. They derive first from the proximity of of this area to Russia, Iran, and China. Hence any U.S. presence in Central Asia is viewed by those states as a standing challenge, if not a threat, to their vital interests which in the Russian and Chinese cases are inherently imperial in nature and entail a diminution of the effective sovereignty of Central Asian states. Therefore it is not surprising that the paramount U.S. interest under both the Clinton and Bush Administrations has been to uphold the integrity, independence, sovereignty, and security of these countries against Russian and Chinese efforts to dominate them

and circumscribe their freedom. In other words, energy access, though important, is not and should not be the primary driver of U.S. policy here. This policy of defending the independence, integrity, and security of these states extends the long-established vital interest of the United States in forestalling the rise of any Eurasian empire in either continent which could challenge us. And there should be little doubt that imperial success in Central Asia would only whet the appetite of the rulers in Moscow and Beijing for further extensions of their hegemonic aspirations. Certainly they have long discerned that a great power rivalry or competition for influence is rising.

Since 9/11/2001 a second vital interest for the United States has appeared, namely defense of the United States and of Europe from Islamic terrorism personified by Bin Laden and expressed by the Taliban and their allies. Consequently victory in Afghanistan is an unconditional vital interest which must be achieved just as much if not more than as in Iraq. The other important interests of the United States apply first of all to what might be called an open door or equal access for U.S. firms in regard to energy exploration, refining, and marketing. To the extent that these states' large energy holdings are restricted to Russia due to the dearth of pipelines or oil and gas, they will not be able to exercise effective economic or foreign policy independence. Therefore energy access on equal terms to our own and other Western firms relates very strongly to the larger objective of safeguarding these states' independence, sovereignty, and prospects for secure development.

Not surprisingly, the leitmotif of U.S. energy policy has been to foster the development of multiple pipelines and multiple links to outside consumers and providers of energy, including more recently electricity, with regard to India. The energy producing states here recognize that their security and prosperity lies in diversification of pipelines so here our interests and theirs are in harmony. At the same time we have also sought to prevent a Russian pipeline or overall energy monopoly from forming with considerable success in the oil market, while we have been much less successful with regard to natural gas. And simultaneously we have also sought to isolate Iran from Central Asian energy by urging states to build pipelines that bypass Iran and enforcing sanctions upon those states and firms who are trading with Iran.

Examples of such pipelines that bypass Iran and Russia are the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan or BTC pipeline where we have urged Kazakstan to join it and to participate in the construction of a pipeline under the Caspian Sea; a projected Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan or TAP line which may or may not be extended to India, or alternatively a potential pipeline using newly discovered sizable Afghan energy resources to the Subcontinent; and the recent attempt to link up together Central Asian and South Asian electricity networks. Indeed, U.S. and Western firms have been relatively successful in gaining access to Kazakstan's oil fields in terms of contracts for exploration or refinery, and marketing. Finally we have a major interest in promoting domestic policies in all these states -- the five former Soviet

republics and Afghanistan -- that will lead them over time toward democratization, open markets, open societies, good governance, and eventually as a result, to their lasting security against both internal and external challengers.

Today all these interests are under attack and the U.S. policy in Central Asia is embattled and under siege. Moscow and Beijing, as well as to a lesser degree Tehran, view our political and strategic presence in Central Asia with unfeigned alarm. Despite their protestations of support for the U.S. war on terrorism, in fact they wish to exclude us from the area and fear that we mean to stay there militarily as well as in all other ways indefinitely. In this campaign Moscow has taken the lead with Chinese and Iranian support. Russia has sought with great success to establish a gas cartel under its leadership and prevent Central Asian states from selling natural gas on the open market, thus perpetuating their backwardness, dependence upon Russia, and slowing their economic growth. It also has brought considerable pressure to bear upon Kazakhstan, if not Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, to desist from supporting the BTC pipeline or the idea of constructing a pipeline under the Caspian Sea. Such policies also lead, in both Russia, and the local regimes, to the consolidation of authoritarian governments that rely on resource rents to keep themselves in power, i.e. they are petro-states. Indeed, arguably the Putin regime could not survive in its present structure if it did not dominate Central Asian gas and oil sectors. Therefore American success in opening up those

sectors has knock-on effects in Russia beyond the more directly observable consequences of such liberalization in Central Asia.

Russia has also waged a stubborn campaign to prevent Central Asian states from affiliating either with the U.S. or Western militaries. It seeks to gain exclusive control of the entire Caspian Sea and be the sole or supreme military power there while states like Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan rely upon Western, and especially American assistance to help them develop forces that could protect their coastlines, exploration rigs, and territories, from terrorists, proliferation operations, and contraband of all sorts. Second, Russia has formed the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to prevent local states from aligning with NATO or getting too involved with its Partnership for Peace (PfP) program. Another purpose of the CSTO is to create legal-political grounds for permanently stationing Russian forces and bases in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and possibly Uzbekistan ostensibly to defend these regimes against terrorism. And the CSTO, under Russian leadership is constantly seeking to augment the scope of its missions in Central Asia in order to cement a Russian dominated security equation there. So in reality these forces are there to defend Russian interests and/or keep the current authoritarian regimes in power. Despite Russia's relative military weakness and unbroken military decline in 1991-2000, Russia now has bases in 12 of the former Soviet republics and the expansion of its capability to project power into these areas if not beyond is one of the leading drives of current Russian military policy. Similarly another key drive of

Russian military policy is the effort to develop, sustain, and project the land, sea (Caspian), and air capabilities needed to prevent local governments from either receiving U.S. weapons and assistance or allowing U.S. military bases in their territories. For example this program is the driving force behind Russia's proposals for a Caspian Sea Force (CASFOR). The practical outcome of so exclusive a force made up only of littoral states would be to confirm the littoral states as dependencies of Russia, put Iran in a subordinate position in the Caspian, and exclude foreign military or energy presence there.

Simultaneously, Moscow and Beijing have also waged an unrelenting campaign beginning in 2002 to impose limits on the duration and scope of America's presence in Central Asian bases and more generally in the region. They succeeded in Uzbekistan thanks to our misconceived policies there and are constantly bringing enormous pressure on Kyrgyzstan to force us out of the base at Manas. Probably the combination of our deep pockets, high-level intervention by Secretaries Rice and Rumsfeld, and renewed fighting in Afghanistan has allowed us to stay at Manas on condition of paying ever higher rents for its use. Russia has also sought to forestall these states from buying Western equipment by selling them Russian weapons at subsidized prices. And in return for their debts it has sought to restore the Soviet defense industrial complex by buying equity in strategic defense firms located there. Russia and China have also engaged in training programs for Central Asian officers.

Most significantly Moscow and Beijing have utilized the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a platform for a collective security operation in Central Asia, sponsoring both bilateral and multilateral Russian and Chinese exercises with local regimes and with each other on an annual and expanding basis since 2003. The SCO's utility to Moscow and Beijing does not end here. While there are significant differences between Russia and China and among the other members and observers (India, Pakistan, Iran, Mongolia) as to what the SCO's primary purpose and function ought to be, i.e. whether its main function should be promotion of trade and economic development; or to be a provider of hard security and another energy forum that Russia would dominate; or to be a genuine basis for regional cooperation as Kazakhstan and the smaller states would prefer, it clearly has been envisioned by Beijing and Moscow as a basis for attempting to unite Central Asian governments in an anti-American regional security organization. There are also divisions among the members as to whether its membership should expand to include the new observer states of Iran, Pakistan, India, and Mongolia. Nevertheless, Beijing openly and consistently proclaims the SCO to be a model for what it is trying to do in regard to Asian security in Southeast Asia and beyond, i.e. replace the U.S.-led alliance system in Asia with one of its own creation that is attuned to its rather than to our and our allies' stated values and interests. Therefore we should take this organization and its development seriously as a template for China's and Russia's, if not Iran's broader foreign policy objectives.

Finally both Moscow and Beijing have waged substantive, comprehensive, and systematic efforts to undermine our presence in Central Asia due to our support for democratic reform. By doing so they also consciously strive to foreclose even the possibility of such reforms in Central Asia. Thus they have become stalwart champions of the status quo which includes massive corruption, repression, and the promise of sweetheart deals, if not promises of support for the current dictator's chosen heir. Russia, China, and local governments have unceasingly advanced and disseminated the idea that the U.S. or the West in general were and are behind the so called color revolutions, and are attempting to overthrow local governments and replace them with supposedly more pro-American forces who have no domestic support. As local dictators tend to believe that they are irreplaceable, and that all opposition is external and terrorist in nature, this is an easy idea to sell. It is especially easy to sell this idea when it is backed up by a relentless state-run media campaign from Moscow, Beijing, and the local regime, and when there is no effective or coherent response, as was been the case with U.S. policy. Although there are reports that the U.S. has opened information centers in Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan and spent \$43.7 million to do so, it is clear that this effort is still too little too late. Indeed it may fairly be said that we had and apparently still do not have no discernible public information policy in Central Asia or that we even took the idea of rebutting these charges seriously.

Consequently we are now paying the price for our complacency and neglect.

Thus U.S. policies in regard to security, energy access, and democratization are all under attack in Central Asia from the local dictators, Presidents Putin, and Hu Jintao, and their governments. Adding to the difficulties are the facts that we face a resurgent Taliban, backed up with enormous drug revenues, Pakistani support, and an inconsistent international effort to rebuild Afghanistan while its government remains weak and unsure of itself. As a result, we have lost the base at Karshi Khanabad, face constant pressure in Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere, and are fighting a revived and strengthened Taliban under conditions that are in many ways less favorable than in 2001.

Uzbekistan evidently listens only to Moscow and Beijing and we are certainly not Kazakstan's priority partner even under the best of circumstances. Therefore the State Department's hope of relying upon Kazakstan as the strongest partner we have in Central Asia and as a potential leader for advancing the goals we wish to see there is fundamentally unsound and cannot serve as a basis for a successful U.S. policy in the future. Although Kazakstan has made numerous proposals for regional cooperation among the local governments and has occasionally stood up to Russia by selling gas to Georgia and joining the BTC pipeline, its calls for regional integration have gone nowhere and the limits upon it for independent action are quite clear. While it will continue to work with Washington on pipeline issues, accept foreign investment, continue to work bilaterally with Washington

to obtain equipment and training for its self-defense in and around the Caspian, and take part in the PFP, we cannot expect it to be a leader in Central Asia against Moscow and Beijing. Neither should we ignore opportunities for engagement with all the other states. Any U.S. Central Asian policy must take advantage of every opportunity to interact productively with all of the local governments.

Recommendations

In order to regain our footing here we must first understand where we have gone astray. Our mistakes consist in shortcomings in our own policy processes and equally, if not more importantly, in our policies as seen in Central Asia. We cannot recover our position in Central Asia without addressing both sets of issues quickly and decisively. First of all, our policy process including the inter-agency process, with regard to Central Asia and many other issues is broken. We saw this in the uncoordinated response to the Andizhan massacre in 2005. The Pentagon, rightly, I believe, emphasizes our strategic interests in the region while the State Department emphasizes democracy as its main priority and invokes President Bush's statements on the subject dating back to his second inaugural.

While such statements make powerful rhetoric; in Central Asia, according to expert observers, they are empty and irrelevant. Moreover, they contribute to the undermining of our security objectives because they feed the belief that we are seeking to unseat reigning rulers, and second, since they believe that the only real opposition is Islamic terrorists, our position

fuels their belief that we neither understand the region nor their interests. If democratization is our first priority here then we have given the region over to Russia and China for we have convinced local leaders that these aforementioned beliefs of theirs are correct whatever the real truth might be. And a Russian or Chinese dominated Central Asia is hardly compatible with any progress towards democratization.

Second, this contradiction within our government implies to local elites that we are not serious about democracy. Moreover, and third, since we have steadily cut back on economic assistance to Central Asia, including Afghanistan and seem to have no visible economic policy for the area, we have also stimulated the belief that we will not stay the course and that this region means less to us than our previous rhetoric would otherwise imply.

Fourth, our refusal until quite recently to address the issue of Afghanistan's drugs has led to an explosion of the scourge of narcotics across Central Asia and reinforced the belief that we are not sensitive to local states' real security interests and needs. Fifth, our utter lack of a viable information policy that is tailored to this region's mores, cultures, and special needs, has reinforced all those previous negative feelings while also leaving the Russians and Chinese to operate with total freedom in support of retrogressive rulers or corrupt dictators. Sixth, we have failed to foresee what might happen in states that are so misgoverned that violence is likely, either through economic distress, or through a succession crisis.

Thus our reactions have been uncoordinated and haphazard with resulting negative consequences for U.S. policy that we can all see today. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are likely to be failed states when the present rulers leave the scene and in Uzbekistan we have already seen, as has the Uzbek government, that it is vulnerable to both violent incitement and to outbreaks of public violence.

We lost our position in Uzbekistan, not because of our championing of human rights but because we neglected to take it seriously, address its real problems, pay off Islam Karimov, its President, as we were doing in Kyrgyzstan, and because of the accumulated outcomes that are traceable to the aforementioned defects of our policy process. In 2004 Assistant Secretary of State Lorne Craner testified that,

Central Asia has a major strategic importance for the United States and Uzbekistan inevitably plays a key role in our policy toward the region. It occupies, as we know, a core position in Central Asia. It has, by far, the largest population, and it is the guardian of a centuries long tradition of enlightened Islamic scholarship and culture. And it boasts the largest and most effective military among the five countries.

Yet today due to our policy failures we have little or no dialogue with this state and formerly pro-American politicians like former Defense Minister Golunov, languish in jail because of their ties to the United States. These trends take place even though the recent successful removal of nuclear materials from Uzbekistan shows that such dialogue can be sustained if the issue is sufficiently vital.

Seventh, NATO's continuing dilatoriness about sending troops to Afghanistan and giving them sufficiently robust rules of

engagement has slowed our ability to counter the Taliban resurgence, especially as we are reducing the number of troops there. Since it appears that more troops might be needed, this is again a wrong sign. Eighth, we have failed to press the international community sufficiently strongly to make good its pledges to Afghanistan, without which reconstruction there will be greatly prolonged if it even is successful.

A successful policy must learn from these mistakes and surmount them. Therefore we must undertake the following steps. First, we must repair our broken policy process. The Administration must decide what Central Asia's real importance is to the United States is and assign sufficient material and political resources to back up that investment. Toward this end the President and his cabinet members must impose policy discipline on the players after arriving at a consensus among themselves on these issues. They must establish clear and coordinated inter-departmental priorities for our emplacement in Central Asia and then proceed to implement them. In my opinion, the regional security and independence of these states must come first for otherwise no democratization is remotely conceivable. But this does not mean neglecting democratization as an issue. Rather we must engage both governments and civil society or opposition groups who are not terrorists. We must engage governments with the argument that they have signed international conventions upholding these practices and that we are not trying to supplant them, but rather ensure that their countries become both more secure and prosperous. Since their

interest is at stake in a violent overturn, this argument may have some resonance. But it must be backed up by increased assistance and real economic and other policies that address their needs.

In this connection it is essential that we continue and upgrade the series of high-level visits by cabinet members and even Vice-President Cheney and reinforce those by visits by lower ranking officials on a regular basis to monitor policy implementation. It might also be useful to set up a governmental commission like the Gore-Chernomyrdin commission on Russia or subsequent commissions of this sort to ensure regular progress by both sides in mutually consultative process that addresses common needs and projects. Likewise it is very important to come up with alternatives for regional association to Russo-Chinese projects. Reports of a projected association to fight the drug trade are therefore to be welcomed, not just because Russian analysts fear they signify an anti-Shanghai Cooperation Organization ploy, but also because they show we mean business with regard to Central Asian states' real security threats.

Similarly in this connection it is imperative that we find ways to reestablish a viable policy dialogue with Uzbekistan even if only begins at a low level. As I stated above, U.S. policy cannot omit any local government that wishes to cooperate with us on a mutually beneficial basis. Our cCentral Asian policy, to be successful must not only be multi-dimensional, it must be all-inclusive, i.e. it must include even Uzbekistan. If this cooperation or dialogue are built on a solid foundation, even at

a low level, then they can enable us to talk to that regime on issues of shared concern and rebuild mutual confidence, for we know that President Islam Karimov fully understands the nature of whom he is dealing with in Beijing and Moscow. Even though he may wrongly feel he was betrayed by America, he cannot afford to become a total satellite of Moscow. Neither can we afford to let Uzbekistan fall into that trap especially as it might turn again to violence at the first sign of Karimov's weakness or when he leaves the scene.

Second, having decided upon our priorities and having begun to implement them we must also address NATO, the EU, and India, our new strategic partner in this area, to devise an agenda or agendas of common activities oriented to achieving the objectives that we all share and then work to fulfill those agendas whether it be in the five former Soviet republics or Afghanistan. This applies as much to the integration of energy and electricity links either to Europe or to India and Pakistan, as it does to sustaining the comprehensive recovery of Afghanistan and victory over the Taliban.

Third, it is absolutely essential that the U.S. government quickly develop and put into practice a viable public information program using all the media at its disposal for Central Asia. This program must address itself to the cultural framework of the region and present the truth about American and other policies. We must also endeavor to retain and even open up every outlet available to us like Radio Europe Radio Free Liberty in order to get the word out about events affecting this area. Under no

circumstances can we concede either to Moscow or Beijing, or to local dictators a total monopoly over the means of information.

Fourth, we must devise rewards and punishments for those who would use the SCO as a means to eject us from Central Asia. This also means upgraded bilateral relations with local governments to strengthen them against Russo-Chinese pressures. While we obviously have a wide-ranging agenda with Moscow and Beijing; we should not give away these states' interests in return for progress on other issues. For example, Washington and Moscow are about to negotiate on letting Moscow become a center for storing spent nuclear fuel and or for distributing it to states who wish to use it peacefully. While this can prove helpful with regard to Iran or even North Korea; behind it also lies Moscow's desire to dominate the entire field of energy in Central Asia and deprive those states of any independence access to use the energy buried in their own territories. Therefore we must be careful in how we approach those two larger states. And as a general rule we must engage the states round Russia or China as much as we do Russia and China in order to prevent a successful neo-imperial policy in Central Asia or elsewhere for that matter.

Fifth, we must continue to offer these states: Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakstan in particular the resources with which to defend their sovereignty and territory independently of Moscow and Beijing if they so choose. We cannot allow Russia and Iran to turn the Caspian Sea into a closed sea for their own exclusive benefit or allow the CSTO and SCO to be the only game in town when it comes to the provision of security. Strong bilateral

relations with local governments and their militaries as well as strengthened ties to NATO through the PfP are essential in this domain of their and our activity.

Sixth, as stated above, our economic activity here must go beyond ensuring equal energy access to helping these states move forward on their overall independence, economic, and political development by supporting diversification of energy connections; helping them build pipelines to the seas and oceans; and allowing them to bring all their products more easily to Asian and European markets. But that policy must also include trade, investment, and financial instruments as well and not be restricted to energy. This also includes supporting projects that would upgrade and integrate Central Asia's infrastructure so that economic ties among states and peoples can flourish more rapidly than would otherwise be the case. We are uniquely situated to do this given our strong economic position and ties to international economic institutions, a trump card in our hand relative to both Moscow and Beijing, let alone Iran. Consequently such efforts must be intensified.

Seventh, while doing all this we must also be upgrading our government's capability to act promptly in case of unforeseen contingencies. The State Department's office of Reconstruction and Stabilization, under Ambassador Herbst, must be directed, if it not already doing so, to begin planning for contingencies having to do with the real possibility of state failure in Central Asia, particularly Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. If and when that occurs it will usher in violent responses to that

condition of state failure. And we cannot allow this chaos to go on in uncontrolled fashion or to abdicate our real interests in the region. Adequate forecasting, and rapid response policies, not only military ones either, must be thought through and implemented so that we are ready to move here on a moment's notice if necessary.

For example, some Russian analysts are publicly forecasting that if Kyrgyzstan, a very fragile and crime-ridden oligarchy, undergoes political collapse, Russia and Kazakstan could impose some kind of protectorate until new elections and stability take hold. In this scenario Washington would welcome such an action because our resources are so overstretched that we could not act and we would prefer that Russia intervene rather than China. This is because China might use the threat of Uyghur separatism of its Muslim minorities as a pretext for sending troops into Kyrgyzstan and taking it over. Such scenarios underscore the growing importance of this region and the urgency of paying more attention to and being prepared to move rapidly into Central Asia if a major crisis ensues there.

With regard to Afghanistan we should undertake the following actions in order to maximize its chances for both victory and reconstruction under an enduring and legitimate government that is moving towards democratization. First, more pressure on Pakistan is needed to reduce if not terminate its support for the Taliban and other terrorists. If our good offices are requested and acceptable to both sides we should also use them with regard to the glacial but ongoing negotiations on Kashmir between India

and Pakistan. Second, we should promote India's overall ability to interact economically with Central Asia and Afghanistan, seek pipelines and electricity outlets, as we are doing now in order to strengthen the individual economies and polities of the region, but also to build a foundation for greater and more enduring regional economic integration through infrastructural links that open up these areas to greater development. And, we should also encourage Indian support for the Karzai regime in Afghanistan.

Fourth, we need to keep pushing NATO members to maintain, and if necessary expand their commitment to Afghanistan and to provide their forces with sufficiently robust rules of engagement to get the job done on the ground. Fifth, while doing so we must also pressure the international community to fulfill their pledges to the revival of Afghanistan and to join us in doing so in a way that strengthens the Afghan population's own capability to rule itself without external interference or tutelage. This also means a substantial offensive against the drug lords and the drug problem which is now the main financial pillar for the Taliban if not other terrorist groups. Success in this particular campaign requires a comprehensive approach to the problem and can only be undertaken if there is sufficiently strong political will among all the players in and out of Afghanistan. And throughout this process pressure must be kept on Pakistan to encourage it to terminate its policies of sheltering and supporting the Taliban and the terrorists who seek to operate in South Asia. As long as they have a safe haven they

will continue to destabilize both South and Central Asia, thereby negating our best efforts in both regions.

While none of these recommendations for Central Asia and Afghanistan represents a panacea, especially if undertaken in individual, or uncoordinated, or incomplete fashion; taken together they can provide a foundation from which we can move to repair our policy shortcomings and retrieve at least some, if not all of our past position here. If Central Asia is as important as Under-Secretary Armitage said it was, we must be prepared to demonstrate that importance in both word and deed and do so through a coordinated multidimensional strategy. This kind of strategy brings to bear all the instruments of policy, not just the military instrument, and does so in ways that leverages the superior ability of the United States and its allies to work for peace, security, liberty, and prosperity. Although this is going to be the work of years, if not decades and generations, it is incumbent upon us to begin doing so now because if we don't seize this day and those that follows, the crises that could engulf this region will more likely than not do so soon. Thus they will come more quickly and more violently than would otherwise have been the case. And then even all of our best efforts may not prove to be enough to avert those crises.