

US Strategy in Central Asia

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Inaugurating the Central Asian Institute at the John Hopkins School of Advanced Studies, Washington in October 1996, James F. Collins, Special Advisor to the Secretary for the New Independent States defined the US objectives in the Central Asian region as follows:

1. Support for the independence, sovereignty and security of each of the Central Asian states.
2. Assistance in the establishment of free market economies and democratic governments committed to equal opportunity and human rights for their citizens.
3. Integration of these states into the world community of political and financial institutions as well as their participation in the Euro-Atlantic security dialogues and co-operation programmes.
4. Encouragement of these states to pursue peaceful relations among themselves and with their neighbours for regional cooperation and to resolve local conflicts with international mediation.
5. Prevention of any trafficking in weapons of mass destruction or their elements across the region or the borders.
6. Enhancement of US commercial interest and the expansion and diversification of global energy supplies.

The highest American priority, however, was to denuclearize these Central Asian states in exchange for political, diplomatic and economic support. In this respect Washington cooperated with these states to dismantle and transport fissile material to the US. The departure of the last nuclear warhead from Kazakastan in 1995 was a significant achievement in support of non-proliferation.

The US appears to be taking keen interest in defining the interests, goals and strategies of Central Asian states. It roped in all the five republics into partnership for peace and organization for security and cooperation in Europe. By admitting the Central Asian states into the NATO membership and the conference on security and cooperation in Europe (CSCE) process, Washington is not only seeking to enlarge the European Security complex but also intends to provide fresh mechanisms to address Central Asian security concerns. Turkey has been pushed in this regard by Washington as an anchor to encourage the programme of cooperation and engagement with these states.

The promotion of democracy and free market are among the principal objectives of the Clinton Administration. According to Strobe Talbott, the Deputy Secretary of State, political and economic reforms in Central Asia would contribute to stability in a strategically vital region that borders China, Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan and that has growing economic and social ties with

Pakistan and India. It is increasingly in the US interest to encourage that development of stable, democratic systems and market economies in these new states and to minimize the social, ethnic, religious and other sources of conflict that could destabilize the region.

While numerous US programmes have had a beneficial impact, other initiatives have been criticised by locals as patronizing the very governmental structure, which are in need of reform. The US efforts have been subjected to criticism for viewing democratic and market reform as something to be imposed from the top. Despite the stated commitment of the US to expand the role of grass-root efforts, US-Central Asian partnerships in small non-governmental organization (NGOs) have played a relatively minor role in overall assistance programmes.

As US assistance networks are expanded there, they must be restructured to take account of population whose support for reform may be more complex and ambivalent than observers may have thought previously. The US efforts must be sensitive not only to the social safety nets, cultural values and traditions of Central Asia but also to the uniquely evolved mixture of Soviet and Middle Eastern political and economic systems in these new countries, which may be quite different from other parts of the world. Americans must understand that it is possible to encourage democracy in the Muslim world without establishing themselves as enemies of Islam. The fear of Islamic fundamentalism that seemed to drive so many of the US initial efforts in Central Asia has also been viewed as leaving a destructive legacy that may have only encouraged the growth of this fundamentalism.

Central Asia's enormous resources made the region increasingly attractive to the US business community. The region has been identified as one of the most promising unexplored oil-rich regions in the world. The \$20 billion Chevron oil venture with Kazakhstan and the western consortium to exploit the oil fields in the Caspian sea are among the world's largest and particularly most lucrative oil and gas ventures, and the number of other US companies seeking opportunity for entry into this field has grown exponentially in the past few years. Besides exploiting oil and gas deposits, the US companies are seeking influence in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, whose vast deposits of gold appear to be more lucrative than oil.

With these parameters, American's interests in Central Asia's stable development are vital. Domestic stability of all five states is a policy goal of the US. Conflict resolution is a prerequisite for any successful energy development plans to be executed there in the region. Any conflict there would have profound repercussion on the US commercial interests. However, with slashes in foreign aid, the scope for direct US governmental programmes aimed at supporting Central Asian states economically and politically is limited. Given the limits on its foreign aid, Washington will have to encourage its European and Asian partners to take leading roles.

The primary focus of the US should be on legal and technical assistance in tackling issues such as environmental protection, drug-control and weapons proliferation. The US can also channel its efforts through international organizations that provide social progress such as refugee relief, health-care and family planning. Particularly useful US roles might include providing technology and skills especially in dry land agricultural technologies such as drip-irrigation that could reduce water use and help farmers shift from cotton production to a more balanced agriculture. One of Central Asia's most crucial needs is to train experts who can play neutral roles in the transition to

market economies and democratic political systems. Unmatched US capacities in higher education could be especially useful.

To sum up, the US as the sole remaining super power has great stakes in Central Asia. The first challenge for a constructive US role in Central Asia is to bring American attention to the region. The responsibility and care that the US attention to Central Asia demands at the moment can only come from foreign policy experts and not from public forces driven by market mechanisms. It is absolutely necessary for the US policy makers to respond to the basic aspirations of all the Central Asians. An effective US policy must seek to address their aspirations as central goals, rather than suggesting that the Central Asia's main concern is to check the Iranian influence.

Last but not the least, the prevailing tendency to lump all the Central Asian states together as one entity should be discarded. All these states are anything but homogeneous. The fact that all of them once belonged to the same now-defunct-communist superpower is surely not reason enough to pretend that they are of equal importance to the US. Differentiation among them is a necessity. The US policy should be oriented towards each of the individual states and not to all of them as a whole. The real challenge to the US is to correctly assess the American interests in the region. The US has to formulate a policy towards the region, which should be based on quest for real solution.