

Central Asia in Geopolitics: The American Vector (1991-2008)

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CENTRAL ASIA has a rich history. At one time, it boasted the Great Silk Road, a major trade route between Europe and China. It was also an arena where Chinese, Mongolian, Persian, Turkish, and Arabian military commanders led their armies in brutal battles, prosperous towns were built and destroyed, and huge empires appeared and disappeared. So researchers have examined this region in the most diverse geographical configurations.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asia became an independent geopolitical entity comprised of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. This concept became firmly enconced in Russia (although during Soviet times, the region was defined as the Central Asian republics and Kazakhstan) and is adhered to by most experts in the West and the East. The OSCE also understands Central Asia as precisely these five former Soviet republics. There are also such projects as the “EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership” and the “Central Asia plus Japan” which are aimed at developing relations with the region’s states.

Without delving into the already distant past, let us take a closer look at some of the main milestones of the region’s debut in geopolitics.

Talk first turned to Central Asia in the 19th century when the Russian Empire began forming its southern boundaries. This task was to be solved on the basis of Russia’s relations with its Asian neighbors – the Qing Empire, Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey – and with the European powers. This primarily applies to the British Empire, which was trying to enlarge its colonial domains by means of the countries contiguous to India. The clash of interests between St. Petersburg and London in the Central Asian

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expanse during the second half and at the end of the 19th century and their search for mutually acceptable compromises for resolving the problems that arose was called the Great Game. ¹ This term is still used in the context of rivalry among the leading world players for influence in Central Asia.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the strategic importance of this region was acknowledged anew. Here we cannot help but recall the conceptual ideas of one of the classics of geopolitics, British geographer and historian Halford J. Mackinder. On January 25, 1904, he presented a paper called “The Geographical Pivot of History” at the Royal Geographical Society about geography’s interaction with history and politics. This paper is often considered to be the beginning of geopolitics as a field of study, although Mackinder did not use this term. When talking about the balance of forces between sea and land powers, Halford Mackinder presumed that after 1900, which was designated as the end of the era of great geographical discoveries (the Era of Columbus), this balance would tip in favor of the latter. In this case, Eurasia (designated in the paper as Euro-Asia) would come to the forefront, along with the northeast area rich in natural resources, surrounded by mountains and inaccessible to fleets, comprising of Central Asia and part of the Urals and Siberia, where a network of transcontinental railways would rapidly develop. The British scientist defined it as a “pivot area” in world politics, in which the dominating role would belong to Russia. ²

In 1919, in his later work *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, Mackinder replaces the “pivot region” with the concept “Heartland.” This was when his famous quote appeared: “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World Island (i.e. Eurasia and Africa); who rules the World Island commands the World.” ³

Mackinder’s views have been expressed in different variations in the works of several other well-known geostrategists, American Nicholas Spykman and German Karl Haushofer, for example. Their views are still popular in the West and continue, one way or another, to influence the strategy of Western states regarding the Central Asian region. ⁴

One of the creators of American foreign policy of the second half of the 20th century, Zbigniew Brzezinski, also paid tribute to these views. When talking about Eurasia’s place in the system of international relations in his book *The Grand Chessboard*, he recalls Mackinder’s Heartland conception. Admittedly, the former national security advisor to the American president corrects the British scientist to a certain extent by

ascertaining that “today, the geopolitical issue is no longer what geographic part of Eurasia is the point of departure for continental domination, nor whether land power is more significant than sea power. Geopolitics has moved from the regional to the global dimension, with preponderance over the entire Eurasian continent serving as the central basis for global primacy.”⁶

Meanwhile, the “Eurasian Balkans,” which, according to Zbigniew Brzezinski, comprises all five Central Asian republics, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, and Afghanistan, is described as the most important area of the Eurasian continent in terms of its

geostrategic position and enormous concentration of natural resources. The American politician emphasizes that the Eurasian landmass is the point of origin of all previous contenders for global power.⁷

Former British intelligence officer Peter Hopkirk also has something interesting to say about the situation in the region after the collapse of the U.S.S.R. He notes in particular, “For today a new struggle is underway in Central Asia as rival outside powers compete to fill the political and economic void left by Moscow’s abrupt departure. Already the political analysts and writers of lead articles are calling it ‘the new Great Game.’ For it is no secret that in Central Asia lies one of the great prizes of the twenty-first century – fabulous oil and natural gas reserves which dwarf even those of Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states. Add to this gold, silver, copper, zinc, lead, iron ore, coal and cotton, and it is easy to see why the new governments of Central Asia are being wooed so eagerly.”⁸

Today, the geopolitical map of the Central Asia region is distinguished by enviable diversity. It is in the center of attention of many influential world players.

Russia traditionally holds a strong position in it. China is gaining strength in the Central Asian expanse. The European Union is implementing its own New Partnership Strategy there. The “Central Asia plus Japan” dialogue functions in the region. Cooperation is actively develop-

The events in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan confirmed that the challenges to stability in the region do not come only from Islamic extremism and international terrorism, but also from the U.S., which was exporting democracy and directly supporting the Color Revolutions.

ing with regional states – Turkey, Iran, India, Pakistan, the Republic of Korea, and several Arab countries.

It stands to reason that such a powerful nation as the U.S. is also involved in this process. Washington is trying to expand its political and economic relations with the Central Asian countries and cooperate with them in maintaining security in the region. Cooperation aimed at resolving a whole set of problems related to the conflict in Afghanistan is acquiring particular importance today. Consequently, it would be expedient, in our opinion, to try and figure out what the American vector of regional geopolitics is all about.

When analyzing U.S. strategy in present-day Central Asia, experts usually try to identify the main stages in its evolution. They do this in different ways. Almost two decades have passed since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the appearance of the independent Central Asian states on the world map. During this time, George Bush, Sr., William Clinton, and George Bush, Jr. have served their presidential terms and a fourth master has appeared in the White House — Barack Obama. Serious changes have occurred on the international arena as a whole, in the Central Asian region itself, and in the area around it. The most important of them after 9/11 can be considered the beginning of the global struggle against terrorism. So, in our opinion, this date can be taken as the point of departure, and Washington's policy in Central Asia can be divided provisionally into "before" and "after" Al Qaeda's terrorist attacks on the U.S.

Collapse of the Soviet system, which was the U.S.'s cherished strategic aim, happened so quickly that the Americans, instantly deprived of their eternal rival in the bipolar world, were euphoric and bewildered at once. The post-Soviet expanse, which Zbigniew Brzezinski called a "black hole,"⁹ frightened American political scientists both in its dimensions and in the extreme diversity of the processes occurring in it, the development of which they were unable to predict. So it was decided to begin with Russia's "democratic restructuring" and put off all the rest, including Central Asia, until later. What is more, this was a little-known region for the U.S. and regarded as the backward peripheral part of the former Soviet empire where progress toward democracy and market reforms would be accompanied by much more serious difficulties than in Russia. However, after recognizing the new Central Asian countries, Washington announced its desire to help them move precisely along this development path, although the Americans did not demonstrate any par-

tical zeal to this end.

There were two main reasons for this. First, the economic value of Central Asia was not completely obvious to them, since although during the Soviet era the U.S. had heard something about the oil and gas resources of the Caspian, they had not been studied sufficiently. Second, the political instability in the region hindered its economic development. The civil war that began in Tajikistan in 1992 not only confirmed this, but also aroused fears in the U.S. that the whole of Central Asia might fall into the clutches of Islamic fundamentalists inspired by neighboring Iran. So the Americans concentrated on those problems which, in their opinion, were the main hindrances to ensuring unruffled calm in the region.

As Kazakh diplomat and politician Kasym-Zhomart Tokayev notes, the White House was mostly concerned about the fate of the Soviet nuclear arsenals in Kazakhstan. This topic was discussed during President Nursultan Nazarbayev's official visit to the U.S. in May 1992. The problem was that, after gaining its independence, Kazakhstan had de facto become a nuclear state. Most of the SS-18 missiles deployed there were targeted at the U.S. This prevented normal development of American-Kazakh political and economic relations. With this in mind, in May 1992, Kazakhstan signed the Lisbon Protocol to START-1 and acceded to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), pledging to remove all nuclear warheads from its territory. The U.S. rendered it practical assistance through the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program in the post-Soviet states. In December 1994, Russia, the U.S., and Great Britain, as the depositary states of the NPT, guaranteed Kazakhstan security in return for its consent to eliminate its nuclear weapons. A corresponding memorandum was signed by presidents Boris Yeltsin and Bill Clinton and Prime Minister John Major at an OSCE summit in Budapest. Later France and China gave similar guarantees.¹⁰ Soon thereafter the last nuclear warhead was removed from Kazakhstan.

On the whole, in the first half of the 1990s, Washington did not yet regard Central Asia as a zone of any clearly formulated American interests. It thought it could wait, particularly since Russia, which was engaged in its own problems, would steadily lose ground in the Central Asian region. But these expectations proved somewhat exaggerated.

U.S. policy toward Central Asia began changing around 1995. This was prompted by many different factors. Russian foreign policy began to gradually shift its priority away from developing relations with the West. On September 14, 1995, President Boris Yeltsin officially declared

Russia's Strategic Course with the member states of the Commonwealth of Independent States. In compliance with it, "Russia's fortification as the leading force in forming a new system of interstate, political, and economic relations in the post-Soviet expanse" was announced as the main prerogative of Russia's policy in the CIS.¹¹ The White House took this as a manifestation of "neo-imperial ambitions."

As a result, at the beginning of President Clinton's second term in 1997, "a new sphere of tension arose between Washington and Moscow — the former Soviet republics."¹² This can be pinpointed as the time when the American administration began competing with Russia for influence in Central Asia.

U.S. energy diplomacy underwent an upswing, whereby the Caspian region became the center of attention. Posing itself as "the only superpower," the U.S. simply could not allow the Caspian's enormous oil and gas resources to slip out of its control.¹³ By this time, America's Chevron Corporation was operating at the Tengiz oil field in the Kazakh section of the Caspian. In April 1993, it signed founding documents with the government of Kazakhstan on establishment of the Tengizchevroil joint venture, which marked the debut of American capital in the post-Soviet expanse.¹⁴ Then other major American energy companies, Mobile, Exxon, and Amoco, moved to the Kazakh market. The U.S. was the largest investor in Kazakhstan in terms of the development of bilateral cooperation in the oil industry.¹⁵

Additional surveys carried out by Western experts showed that there were indeed large supplies of oil and gas in the Caspian Sea. The State Department notified the U.S. Congress of these estimates in 1997. The Americans began regarding Caspian hydrocarbons as an important factor capable of reducing their dependence on the import of these resources from the Persian Gulf countries. This was when the Caspian region was included in the sphere of the U.S.'s strategic interests. Incidentally, all the Central Asian republics belonged to this sphere and not only the Caspian states, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. The State Department rendered active diplomatic support to the American oil and gas companies that had begun developing the region's hydrocarbon resources. In so doing, they solved both their own corporative tasks in the region and assisted the U.S. in achieving its foreign policy aims, which consisted of helping the Central Asian countries to strengthen their independence and move closer to the West by participating in the development of the oil and gas sector of their economies.¹⁶ So began a new phase in Washington's energy

policy, which Russian scholars S. Zhiltsov and I. Zonn have figuratively called “pursuit of the Caspian.”¹⁷ Within its framework, the U.S. has set itself the task of taking control not only of the exploration and development of Central Asian hydrocarbons, but also of their transportation to the external markets. In this context, the Americans have started drawing up projects for building pipelines along routes that bypass Russia.

During his time in the White House, Bill Clinton placed increasing emphasis on the democracy-building and human rights components of U.S. policy in Central Asia. The progress the region’s states made in these areas defined how much economic and financial assistance they received. And since this progress was usually evaluated as insufficient, the amount of actual American assistance was relatively small. So in those years the “values and interests” dilemma characteristic of Washington’s entire foreign policy strategy was frequently resolved in the Central Asian region in favor of universal values. This, keeping in mind the local specifics, decreased the appeal of American policy. Time showed that this dilemma would continue to have an impact on the development of the U.S.’s relations with the Central Asian countries, predetermining their frequent ebbs and flows.

At the turn of the 20th-21st centuries, the U.S. set itself the following tasks in Central Asia:

- to prevent a situation in which one state or group of states, such as Russia and China, dominates in the region to an extent that excludes America’s presence there;
- to prevent Central Asia from becoming a base for extremist Islamic forces;
- to prevent the region from turning into a channel for illicit drug circulation;
- to provide American companies with access to Central Asia’s energy resources;
- to promote the development of a civil society, law-based state, and transparent market economy in the region’s states.¹⁸

However, by the beginning of the new millennium, American policy had not acquired any cohesion in Central Asia. And although Washington has managed to increase its influence in the region, it has still not been able to achieve any clear advantages over Moscow. Their relations can best be described as a “zero-sum game.”

The economic and trade relations between Russia and the Central Asian republics established back in Soviet times continued to develop.

Despite the fact that the Central Asian states began cooperating with NATO in 1994 within the framework of the Partnership for Peace program, they were still oriented in the defense sphere toward Russian weapons and military hardware.

Russia's position in ensuring regional security also looked relatively strong. It was Russia that activated all of its potential, including its high international prestige, to make an invaluable contribution to putting an end to the civil war in Tajikistan (1992-1996), which was fraught with unpredictable consequences for the entire Central Asian region. This essentially made it possible to preserve Tajikistan's territorial integrity and ensure political settlement of the conflict. After fighters of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) made inroads into the Batken and Chong-Alay districts of Kyrgyzstan in August-September 1999, Russia rendered it significant assistance in rebuffing these attacks.¹⁹

The events of 9/11 served as a powerful catalyst for riveting attention on the Central Asian region, which found itself on the front lines of the fight against terrorism. The terrorist acts led to Washington's reassessment of Central Asia's place in its foreign policy priorities due to the vital importance it had acquired for carrying out Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan.

Russia and the Central Asian countries, well aware of the serious threat posed by international terrorism, readily supported the collective efforts to combat this global threat.

Russia said it was willing to offer its air space for airplanes to deliver humanitarian aid to the antiterrorist operation zone. This offer was coordinated with its Central Asian allies, which were also willing to provide the use of their airfields.²⁰ However, it goes without saying that specific issues relating to cooperation with the participants of this operation were resolved by the Central Asian leaders independently.

Soon the aviation formed by the U.S. coalition acquired the opportunity to use Central Asian states' infrastructure to carry out logistical support of combat action against Al Qaeda. In most cases, the agreements reached with them envisaged transit flights and fuel fill-ups. Full-fledged American air bases were also deployed at the Manas international airport in Bishkek (Kirgizia) and at the airfield in Khanabad (Uzbekistan).

The appearance of U.S. and NATO servicemen in Central Asia in the context of the alliance's further enlargement to the East aroused an unequivocal reaction. Russia proved to have a whole slew of politicians who believed that this turn in events should not be allowed. Many experts

overseas, on the other hand, thought that this was merely a logistical result of Moscow's weaker influence in the region. Probably both groups had arguments in favor of such a viewpoint.

However, in our opinion, the main thing was that after the terrorist acts in the U.S., the Russian leadership had assumed a clear position in the political and moral respect. Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov mentioned in his article in one of the November 2010 issues of the magazine *Itogi*, that, when helping America out at a difficult time, Russia thought least of all about whether this was one of its alliance obligations to the U.S. It acted out of a conviction that the bloc approach in today's world is an anachronism that prevents taking advantage of the available opportunities for jointly strengthening common and indivisible security.²¹ It was largely this stance on Russia's part that enabled as broad a front of states as possible to be created at that time in the joint fight against terrorism.

After the terrorist acts of 9/11, President George Bush demanded, in the form of an ultimatum, that the Taliban movement in power in Afghanistan since September 1996 hand the leaders of Al Qaeda headed by Osama bin Laden over to America to be punished. After this demand was denied, the U.S. launched a military operation against the Taliban on October 7. The forces of the Northern Alliance also participated in it, whom Russia assisted by supplying weapons and military hardware. The mass air bombings that went on for a month forced the Taliban to leave Kabul on November 13 and Kunduz on November 25. Then, with the support of ground troops of the U.S. army, Kandagar was captured on December 7, 2010. The Taliban regime was eliminated. It turned out that the armed formations of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan that fought on its side and represented the most dangerous of the Central Asian extremist organizations were also destroyed. There can be no doubt that the achievements during the active phase of the antiterrorist operation led to a significant decrease in the threats to Central Asian security coming from neighboring Afghanistan. Correspondingly, the situation on Russia's southern borders became more stable.

The U.S. obtained a real opportunity at this time to step up cooperation with the Central Asian states. Martha Olcott, a leading U.S. expert on Central Asian affairs, notes that prior to September 11, energy policy dominated U.S. strategic engagement in the region. This helped in finding ways to maximize the role of U.S. companies in Caspian oil and gas development.²² Now it would seem that no one was stopping them from

making this cooperation more diverse.

The main question, however, was whether a balance of interests between the sides could be ensured, which sometimes coincided and other times seriously differed. Something else also seemed important. After the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom, the White House viewed the entire set of relations with the Central Asian republics mainly through the prism of its policy along the Afghan vector, which predetermined the emphasis on security issues.

The data on the assistance U.S. government organizations rendered the region within the framework of aid programs for the 2003 fiscal year (in millions of U.S. dollars) can serve as confirmation of this.

	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan
Democratic development programs	13.9	13.5	7.3	4.7	14.7
Economic and social reforms	24.4	19.9	14.3	2.4	18.2
Security and law and order	49.2	10.3	1.1	1.4	30.2
Humanitarian aid	0.5	9.1	21.8	0.5	18.5
Interbranch initiatives	5.0	3.8	4.5	2.1	4.5
Total	92	56.6	49	11.1	86.1

Source: Website of the U.S. State Department: <http://www.state.gov>

As can be seen from the table, the aid allotted was not that huge. It was mainly sent to those states that the U.S. considered the most important for ensuring its own energy and military security – Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. More than half of the total aid to Kazakhstan and more than a third of the funds allotted to Uzbekistan went to support their law-enforcement activity and strengthen security. In Kazakhstan, this aid was used to implement programs on the non-proliferation of WMD and to finance withdrawal of the atomic power plant in Aktau from operation, as well as to train the employees of law-enforcement structures and anti-drug services. In Uzbekistan, the funds were used mainly to strengthen border security, prevent the spread of biological weapons, and increase

the country's capabilities in fighting terrorism and drugs. In Kyrgyzstan, the emphasis was placed on educational programs, developing infrastructure and the public health system, and supporting small and medium business. In Tajikistan, almost half of the financial aid was used for humanitarian purposes, to provide medication, food, clothing, and housing, although attention also went to fortifying the borders for combating terrorism and drug trafficking.²³ This structure of American aid has been retained, with a number of different variations, in subsequent years too.

The military campaign to destroy terrorists in Afghanistan, the logistical support of which was carried out from Central Asia, prompted the U.S. to become seriously engaged in ensuring stability in the region. Without this, the American military facilities in the Central Asian countries could not have functioned normally. In 2002-2003, Washington actively developed cooperation with them in the defense sphere, while political relations (with the exception of Turkmenistan) also became enhanced.

It appears that this was when the period of relative alienation of the U.S. from Central Asian affairs ended. The White House's policy in the region became more forceful, which gave several American experts reason to define it as "aggressive realism." Central Asia was no longer perceived as Russia's "backyard" and acquired an independent value for Washington.

When assessing the situation in the region, the Americans proceeded from the fact that the attempts by Russia and China, both separately and jointly, to achieve stabilization in the region had not been a success. So the U.S. decided to take over responsibility for resolving this problem, which in its opinion largely met the interests of both Moscow and Beijing.²⁴ It is difficult to say what this supposition was based on, but soon it transpired that it was incorrect. Even taking into account the three powers' common positions regarding international terrorism, it was hard to imagine that Russia and China would relinquish their responsibility for the situation in Central Asia and hand it over to Washington. It goes without saying that they had their own view of America's military presence in the region. Nor can we forget that the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) had been established by June 2001. Its members included Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. It would eventually become an important factor of the entire policy in the Central Asian expanse. In May 2002, a decision was made to create the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), one of the key tasks of which was

to ensure stability in Central Asia. In addition to Russia, Belarus, and Armenia, its members include Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. In October 2003, a Russian military base opened in Kant in Kyrgyzstan, not far from Bishkek, where there was already an American air base.

Unfortunately, the first victories over the Taliban movement did not make it possible to pacify the situation in Afghanistan for long. The Taliban needed a little more than a year to recover its senses and launch a partisan war against the coalition forces. By that time, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), formed in compliance with Resolution 1386 of the UN Security Council of December 20, 2001, was engaged in its mission. NATO took command over it in August 2003. At first, only Kabul was part of its zone of responsibility, but in October 2003, a decision was made to extend this zone beyond the Afghan capital.

However, neither the U.S., nor the ISAF was able to break down the Taliban's resistance. Consequently, the seats of terrorism in Afghanistan were not eliminated, and drug production even grew. Central Asia just happened to serve as the main transit corridor for their delivery to the CIS countries, primarily Russia and on to Europe.

Before finishing the war in Afghanistan, the U.S. began a new one in March 2003 in Iraq. Combat action on two fronts at once required huge amounts of money, whereby most of it was allotted at that time to the Iraqi campaign. In these conditions, there was no point in counting on an increase of American aid to the Central Asian region, particularly for social and economic development needs.

The policy of "aggressive realism" again moved the "values and interests" dilemma to the forefront. According to Charles Ziegler, dean of the Political Science Department at the University of Louisville (U.S.), both during Clinton's and George Bush, Jr.'s presidencies, it was not easy for the U.S. government to combine efforts aimed at drawing the Central Asian states into security cooperation with putting pressure on them regarding human rights and economic and political reform issues. In so doing, the State Department and the Ministry of Defense had different approaches to resolving this contradiction. The diplomatic agency thought that assisting the development of democracy in the region was more important precisely while it was on the front line of the war against terrorism. The State Department's programs were aimed at supporting and financing political pluralism and independent media, as well as ensuring supremacy of the law and religious freedoms. In its human rights reports, the Central Asian countries were subjected to severe criti-

cism. The military, on the contrary, primarily paid attention to the advantages of cooperation in security and tried to dampen the critical statements of the diplomats. Charles Ziegler thought it very unlikely that the American administration, either Republican or Democratic, would be able to reconcile the contradictions in the U.S.'s foreign policy between the need to ensure security and the desire to follow the ideals of democracy and human rights, since this conflict had existed long before the war against terrorism began.²⁵

Meanwhile, in 2003-2005, the U.S. attempted to extricate itself from this situation in the following way. It presumed that the success of American policy in the region would depend primarily on how firmly democracy became entrenched there. So it was decided to speed up the democratic processes in the Central Asian republics. At the same time, it was asserted that this would strengthen regional security and raise the efficiency of the fight against the international terrorist network in Afghanistan.

Well-known Russian scholar G. Chufrin notes that, inspired by the Color Revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, the Western countries headed by the U.S. tried to take advantage of the discontent the broad population in Central Asia felt about their standard of living to replace the existing regimes with openly pro-Western democracies under the slogans of development.²⁶

Experienced political technologists from leading American governmental and public structures specializing in spreading democratic values in the world were involved in carrying out this task. These structures included the State Department Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, the United States Agency for International Development, the National Endowment for Democracy, and the Soros Fund Management. They were engaged in financing local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), publishing and distributing corresponding propagandistic literature, and supporting oppositional political forces oriented toward the West.

In March 2005, the Tulip Revolution resulted in the overthrow of President of Kyrgyzstan Askar Akaev, whom, incidentally, Washington considered a model liberal leader. Criminal and extremist groups took advantage of the revolutionary situation, which led to mass unrest and plundering.

This was followed almost immediately by an outbreak of unrest in May 2005 in Andizhan, in the Uzbek part of the Fergana Valley. The

rebels, who were associated with an Islamist organization called Akramiyya, seized weapons and hostages. The authorities had to use force to restore order.

The events in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan confirmed that the challenges to stability in the region do not come only from Islamic extremism and international terrorism, but also from the U.S., which was exporting democracy and directly supporting the Color Revolutions.²⁷ They aroused very justified anxiety among the ruling elites of the Central Asian states. Russia and China were also very concerned about them.

Soon thereafter, a scandalous campaign of accusations against the Uzbek authorities, and President Islam Karimov personally, unfolded in the West criticizing the “gross violations of human rights and disproportionate use of force against the peaceful population” during the Andizhan incident. The U.S. set the tone for this campaign, which resulted in the relations between Tashkent and Washington being severely spoiled for a long time.

At this time, many Central Asian politicians began having doubts about whether America’s military presence could really help to strengthen security in the region.

On July 5, 2005, a recommendation was adopted by consensus at the SCO summit in Astana to the countries of the international coalition involved in the antiterrorist operation in Afghanistan to define the time limits for their military contingents’ stay in the Central Asian states. On July 29, 2005, Uzbekistan warned the U.S. that it had six months to withdraw its air base from Khanabad.

On November 22, 2005, the base was officially closed.

This was when the leading American research centers came up with the concept of a “Greater Central Asia.” It was meant as a convenient way of denoting the larger cultural zone of Central and South Asia, comprised of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, as well as Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan. Its chief ideologist, Frederick Starr, formulated Washington’s objectives for this project as follows: 1) Advance the war against terrorism and terrorist groups, building U.S.-linked security infrastructures ... on a national and regional basis and beyond; 2) Enable Afghanistan and its neighbors to protect themselves against radical Islamist groups ... and also against the narcoindustry; 3) By enhancing security and long-term stability in the region, address the legitimate security concerns of the region’s neighbors, and in a way that assures that no single state or movement, external or internal, dominates

the region of which Afghanistan is a part; 4) Strengthen sovereignties by continuing to develop the Afghan and other economies and societies and by strengthening trade and other ties between Afghanistan and its neighbors in the region; 5) Foster open, participatory, and rights-based political systems that can serve as a new model for other countries with Muslim populations.²⁸

Much has already been said about this concept. Let us take a closer look at the viewpoint of the authors of a book called *Gody, kotorye izmenili Tsentralnuiu Aziuu* [The Years that Changed Central Asia] that came out in 2009. They believe that the U.S. needs Greater Central Asia not so much for taking care of the new shoots of democracy, as for single-handedly managing all the economic and political processes in the region without interference from other foreign policy players (Russia and China) or the structures headed by these players (the CSTO and SCO). Meanwhile, by placing the emphasis on Western-style democratization of Central Asia, as well as on the containment of Russia and China in the region, the George Bush administration foredoomed the results of its own policy there, which is currently characterized by a decrease in efficiency, since the needs of the transition economies of the region's states require other methods and approaches.²⁹

I will add that it is impossible to implement this ambitious project with all its economic pluses and military-political minuses without a major improvement in the situation in Afghanistan.

To sum up, by the beginning of the U.S. presidential elections in 2008, we believe the following key aspects had come to light.

Washington was unable to resolve the "values and interests" dilemma within the framework of the "aggressive realism" doctrine. The priorities of American policy in Central Asia were in constant flux, which made it impossible to establish their concise hierarchy. It was still not clear where the U.S. was placing the highest value: on energy resources or on its military presence and cooperation in regional security, or, perhaps, on transparent elections and freedom of the media. While discussions were going on overseas about Moscow as a weak player in the region,³⁰ it suddenly transpired that such integration alliances as the EurAsEC, CTSO, and SCO, in which Russia participates, had already put down substantial roots. The U.S. does not have a mechanism that ensures interaction with the Central Asian countries on a permanent basis. And another thing, the course toward accelerated democratization of the region's states failed not because the latter categorically refused to carry out democratic

reforms, but because this course did not take into account their world outlook and traditions. Eastern societies have always been inclined toward gradual and unhurried changes.

The new administration headed by Barack Obama inherited all of these problems. An attempt is now being made in the U.S. brain centers to reevaluate Washington's strategy in Central Asia and bring it closer to current geopolitical reality. It appears that this reality is calling for the region to become a zone of active international cooperation aimed at ensuring its security and sustainable economic development. The efforts underway to reset Russian-American relations are opening up a wide window of opportunity in this respect. There can be no doubt that Russia and the U.S. have common interests in Central Asia. Time will tell how successfully they can be realized. Russia is willing to work together.

NOTES

¹ See: Miasnikov V.S., Preface to A.V. Postnikov's book, *Stanovlenie rubezhei Rossii v Tsentralnoi i Srednei Azii (XVIII-XIX vv.)*, Moscow, 2007, pp. 4-5.

² Mackinder H.J., "The Geographical Pivot of History," *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Apr., 1904), pp. 421-437

³ Mackinder H.J., *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, N.Y.: Pelican Books, 1944, p. 113.

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