
Central Asia: responding to the multi-vectoring game

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‘America’s Eurasian policy is part of Washington’s much broader global strategy designed to perpetuate America’s domination in the world economic and financial system and its military-strategic superiority.’¹

– Murat Laumulin, senior research analyst, Kazakhstan
Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the
Republic of Kazakhstan, Almaty

‘In general, US aid and investment have been viewed as strengthening the independence of the Central Asian states and forestalling Russian, Chinese, Iranian or other efforts to subvert them.’²

– Jim Nichol, US government specialist on Russia and
Central Asia, Washington, DC

Formerly regarded as a regional backwater by US policy-making establishments, Central Asia³ saw its strategic importance for the United States dramatically raised by the terrorist attacks on America of 11 September 2001. These placed the region at the vanguard of the fight against terrorism, religious radicalism and arms-trafficking. In the aftermath of 9/11, all of the Central Asian states provided assistance in one form or another to US and coalition military forces in Afghanistan, as a result of which the United States greatly expanded its strategic presence in Central Asia.

If in 2002 the United States was poised to play the leading great-power role in Central Asia, by 2005 American influence and prestige in the region were experiencing a precipitous decline as individual states drew closer to Russia and China. Some Central Asian political elites have attributed this decline in prestige to misguided policies formulated in Washington, including – in the words of one leading Kazakhstani analyst – ‘the promotion of the idea of “managed democratization” of the post-Soviet regimes, unacceptable and unfounded political rhetoric in regard to the internal political processes of other countries and also the unpredictable and aggressive course of the US in the international arena as a whole’.⁴

America and a Changed World

Despite the limits to American power in the region, the Central Asian leaderships nonetheless continue to use relations with the United States to counterbalance Russia and, to a lesser degree, China. Perhaps the most salient example of this balancing has been the concessions by Russia and China to increase purchase prices for energy exports from Central Asia as a direct result of the interest shown by Western nations in diversifying export routes. Following Kazakhstan's lead, all Central Asian states have now explicitly or implicitly adopted a 'multi-vector' foreign policy approach in order to gain maximum manoeuvrability and bargaining power in their relations with Russia, China and the United States.

Nearly one year into the Barack Obama presidency, it is clear that his administration is confronted with Central Asian leaders who are not willing to take pointers on democracy and who retain a considerable degree of antipathy for a Western and, more specifically, American geopolitical agenda. Nonetheless, in so far as Obama's election victory demonstrated that citizen mobilization can lead to political change, the new US administration could enjoy an increased degree of credibility among Central Asians when advocating political reform in the region.

US POLICY IN CENTRAL ASIA

The Obama administration's policy priorities in Central Asia follow on consistently from those of the George W. Bush administration, concentrating on two main areas: the war on terror and energy interests. President Obama's revised strategy for Afghanistan is investing the United States more extensively in that country than at any time since the attacks of 9/11 in 2001. Since coming to office in January 2009, he has approved the deployment of an additional 30,000 troops to Afghanistan to address a growing insurgency – more than doubling the number present there at the time Bush left office. One consequence of the renewed focus on Afghanistan is the higher priority that the new US leadership is assigning to the Central Asian states in terms of military planning for this operation. In the energy sphere, the American government is likely to continue to assist US energy firms to explore for additional hydrocarbon reserves in Central Asia and to make headway in the struggle to secure pipeline routes that bypass Russia.

The 'Global War on Terror'

The most immediate interest of the United States in Central Asia has been gaining support for the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom and NATO's International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan,⁵ in that rooting out al-Qaeda and the Taliban remains a top priority on the American security agenda. Central Asian leaders were quick to show themselves as US allies in the Bush administration's 'global war on terror': Kyrgyzstan provided basing for US and coalition forces at its Manas airbase, Tajikistan hosted a small French force and

provided a refuelling facility near Dushanbe, and Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan provided overflight rights and other support.⁶ In a major display of solidarity, within one month of the 9/11 attacks Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov had signed a bilateral agreement with Washington permitting the US military to use its base at Karshi-Khanabad (K2), just 60 miles from Afghanistan.⁷

To be sure, Washington's and Tashkent's interests in combating militant Islamist groups have converged in Afghanistan for well over a decade. President Karimov openly supported the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance – and the ethnic Uzbek warlord General Abdul Rashid Dostum in particular – during the 1990s,⁸ and he gave permission for a CIA unit to use his country's territory to hunt Osama bin Laden as early as 1999.⁹ Additionally, the outlawed Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), whose stated aims are to overthrow the Karimov government and establish an Islamic state embracing all of Central Asia, is on the US State Department's list of global terrorist groups. The IMU was particularly active in the Ferghana Valley region of Central Asia in the late 1990s before relocating to Afghanistan. After sustaining many casualties, it was driven out of Afghanistan in 2001–02 during Operation Enduring Freedom, subsequently regrouping in Waziristan in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas where it has maintained connections with the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Since 2001, the IMU's priorities are reported to have changed from overthrowing Uzbekistan's ruling regime to a broader, global jihadist agenda, in large part owing to the complex web of alliances IMU members have formed during the years they have been resident in Pakistan's tribal areas.

Despite initial hopes following the 9/11 attacks that the US would act as an external security guarantor for Central Asia and provide vast amounts of financial aid to regional governments, unmet expectations led to a deterioration in US–Central Asian relations from 2003. Following years of mounting tensions,¹⁰ a final blow was delivered to Washington's relations with the Karimov government in May 2005 when Uzbekistani government troops opened fire on a group of armed and unarmed protesters in the Ferghana Valley city of Andijon. The US government accused Uzbekistani ruling circles of using disproportionate force and called for an independent, international investigation of the matter. In contrast to the barrage of criticism put forth by many Western governments, Russian and Chinese leaders offered their full support and approval to President Karimov.

President Karimov interpreted the unrest in Andijon as a warning sign that the 'virus' underlying the sweep of so-called coloured revolutions through Georgia (November 2003), Ukraine (December 2004) and Kyrgyzstan (March 2005) was about to infect Uzbekistan. Regional media ascribed a sinister role to the United States by arguing that the active presence of US-supported NGOs involved in democracy promotion in all three countries was at the root of the regime overthrows.¹¹ As one senior analyst in Kazakhstan's leading government think-tank has put it, 'the NGOs are openly integrated into Washington's general strategy aimed at America's global domination.'¹² From 2005, Uzbekistan shut down more than 200 NGOs, many of them US-based or US-supported.

America and a Changed World

The opinion that President Karimov was the next target for American 'democracy promotion' was by no means confined to Uzbekistan. A Kyrgyzstani security expert surmised: "The film *Bringing Down a Dictator* (which documented the defeat of Slobodan Milosevic in 2000 by massive civil disobedience), the bible of "color revolutionaries", has already been translated into Uzbek."¹³ Russia and China actively supported this line of thought by disseminating the idea that the United States was the principal player behind the 'colour revolutions'.¹⁴ Unsurprisingly, as US influence declined in Central Asia, Russian and Chinese-led regional initiatives incorporating the Central Asian states were significantly strengthened.¹⁵

In the wake of Andijon, Tashkent informed Washington in July 2005 that it was terminating the agreement permitting the US military to use K2, giving the Pentagon 180 days to evacuate the base. The loss of the airbase was a significant blow for Washington, given that the US air group stationed there handled an average of 200 passengers and 100 tons of cargo a day in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. Following the expulsion of US troops from K2, the Manas airbase in Kyrgyzstan has provided the main staging area for US and coalition military activity in Afghanistan. Since the mid-2000s, the Manas airbase has been under attack in the Russian and local press, which succeeded to a large degree in shaping public sentiment against the presence of the United States in Kyrgyzstan. As late as April 2009, Russian television broadcast a documentary alleging that Manas was a cover for a large-scale US spying mission on Russia.¹⁶ To increase popular support for the base in the face of an anti-American backlash in Kyrgyzstan, US airmen have become involved in local volunteer work and community activities.¹⁷

Faced with a populist movement to close down Manas, the United States has managed to retain the use of the base primarily owing to the financial benefits it brings to the economy of Kyrgyzstan.¹⁸ In 2005, as anti-American sentiment grew in that country, the government demanded a major increase in lease payments from the US government for the use of Manas, at the same time reaffirming Russia's free use of a nearby base. According to US Central Commander General David Petraeus, Washington was contributing \$150 million annually to Kyrgyzstan's budget, \$63 million of which was directly related to the air base.¹⁹ Nonetheless, in February 2009, President Kurmanbek Bakiev signed a decree evicting the United States military from the base. Only after sustained diplomatic efforts, including appeals by Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai and Turkey's President Abdullah Gul, was it announced in June 2009 that the United States would be allowed to continue operations at Manas – at more than three times the previous rent. Under the new terms of the agreement, rental fees for the base have gone up from \$17.4 million to \$60 million, in addition to \$117 million that the United States will spend to upgrade airport facilities and combat drug-trafficking and terrorism.²⁰

US energy interests

A primary driver of US policy in Central Asia has been the effort to gain access for American firms to energy exploration, refining and marketing opportunities in the region's three energy-producing states: Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The US government also seeks to moderate global energy prices through the development of reserves in the region and to promote US and European energy security by pursuing the diversification of suppliers and export routes.²¹ Although not a second Persian Gulf, the Caspian Basin is one of only a handful of oil- and gas-producing regions with an interest in maximizing its exports.

Kazakhstan and its oil constitute the main focus of US energy interests in the region, particularly since American and Western firms have been relatively successful in gaining access to Kazakhstan's oil while they have had only limited success in making inroads into the less transparent and less investor-friendly regimes in the predominantly gas-producing states of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. While American strategists have seen some success in breaking Moscow's oil export monopoly with the construction of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline,²² which pumps nearly one million barrels of oil per day from Azerbaijan to Turkey and on to Europe, all gas exports to Europe from Central Asia flow through Russia.

Following the death in December 2006 of Saparmuat Niyazov, the long-time president of Turkmenistan, Washington used the opportunity provided by the regime change to lobby more intensively for the construction of a trans-Caspian gas pipeline. This pipeline would carry gas on the seabed from Turkmenistan to Azerbaijan and further to world markets through a Georgian–Turkish gas route parallel to the BTC oil pipeline, thereby weakening Moscow's control over gas exports from the region. To that end, in 2007 the US State Department created the post of Coordinator for Eurasian Energy Diplomacy (renamed the Special Envoy for Eurasian Energy in April 2009) in order to promote the development of hydrocarbons in the Caspian Basin and their transport to global markets. The new office is similar to the one that existed in 1998–2004 when, despite daunting obstacles, US pressure and diplomacy were instrumental in the construction of the BTC route. The key to US success at that time was the ability of American firms to secure access to energy reserves before putting in motion plans for transport routes.²³

In addition to a trans-Caspian pipeline, the United States has also staunchly supported a planned trans-Afghanistan pipeline (the TAPI), which would export some 30 billion cubic metres of gas from Turkmenistan's Dauletabad field across Afghanistan to Pakistan and India. The TAPI would not only weaken Russia's stronghold on Turkmenistan's gas but also undermine the prospects for a parallel Iran–Pakistan–India pipeline, which the United States opposes. In October 2008, the long-awaited results of a preliminary, independent audit of Turkmenistan's major oil and gas reserves carried out by a British consultancy firm indicated that the South Yoloten–Osman gas fields in the southeast of the

America and a Changed World

country contained enough gas to make it the world's fourth or fifth richest gas deposit in the world, potentially doubling Turkmenistan's export potential in the medium to long term and moving Turkmenistan ahead of Saudi Arabia in terms of proven gas reserves. The audit results were expected to lead to increased competition for Turkmenistan's uncommitted and undeveloped gas fields among Russia, Europe, China, the United States and South Asia.

However, despite American lobbying, natural gas pipeline projects that flow westward from Central Asia to Europe or southward through Afghanistan are beset by numerous obstacles, including political instability in Afghanistan, a lack of committed financing, the unresolved ownership dispute between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan over certain offshore fields in the Caspian and the impasse over the determination of the legal status of the Sea itself. Not least, the Georgian crisis of August 2008 highlighted the political risk surrounding both completed and planned energy export routes through the Caspian for producer and consumer states alike,²⁴ thereby further discouraging the Caspian littoral states from opting for pipelines that directly challenge Russian influence.

In contrast to Europe and the United States, China is constructing pipelines and making investment deals at a rate that the former two cannot even approximate. By adopting an integrated approach to exploration, production, transport and marketing, China's National Petroleum Company (CNPC) succeeded in winning the first onshore production-sharing agreement awarded to a foreign company by the Turkmenistani government. Construction is under way on a Chinese-funded pipeline that will eventually move 40 billion cubic metres of gas annually from Turkmenistan across Central Asia to China,²⁵ and, in May 2006, Kazakhstan began delivering oil to the Xinjiang region of China through a newly constructed pipeline that will eventually link to Kazakhstan's Caspian Sea coast.

The problem of opposing perceptions

Particularly since 2005, the gulf between the self-perceptions of American policy-makers and the perceptions of US actions by Central Asian leaders has widened perceptibly. A potent example of this 'opposing perceptions dilemma' is the idea of a Greater Central Asian Partnership, which was set out by a leading US expert on Central Asia in 2005²⁶ and later embraced by American policy-makers.²⁷ This concept promulgated the integration of Central Asia, Afghanistan and ultimately South Asia into a regional whole through the development of transport, communications and trade ties. Accordingly, the 2006 US National Security Strategy declared that 'increasingly, Afghanistan will assume its historical role as a land-bridge between South and Central Asia, connecting these two vital regions'.²⁸ To underscore this goal, in 2006 Central Asia was moved from the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs to the revamped Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs in a State Department reorganization. The Obama administration has continued this course by increasing the resources allocated in fiscal year 2009 for furthering the integration of the two regions, specifi-

cally affirming ‘the importance of linking Central to South Asia through energy, trade, education, and media initiatives’.²⁹

Despite a body of evidence to show that widening the definition of Central Asia would promote trade and support the integration of the region into the global economy,³⁰ many Central Asian leaders and political elites nonetheless interpreted the idea of a ‘Greater Central Asia’ as an American ploy ‘to detach the extended region from the monopoly influence of the other great powers (Russia and China)’ and ultimately ‘connect it to the so-called Greater Middle East controlled by the West’.³¹ They also viewed with suspicion America’s stated objectives in using the Central Asian region as a staging area for activity in Afghanistan. Although welcoming assistance to counter security threats emanating from Afghanistan, Central Asian leaders perceive that the United States brought its military might to the region for the purpose of containing the expansion of Russian and Chinese military and economic influence, while establishing Western hegemony in Central Asia and elsewhere, as evidenced by ‘NATO’s strategy of drawing as many countries as possible into Western geopolitics’.³² In the words of a Kazakh parliamentary official, the United States has used instability in Afghanistan ‘to justify NATO’s continued presence in Central Asia and its emergence outside the European zone’.³³ Some American policy-makers have argued that the United States should maintain military access to the region even when Afghanistan becomes more stable,³⁴ which has been interpreted in Central Asian circles as a clear sign that they would like to make its base there a permanent feature.

It is a widely held belief among ruling circles in Central Asia that the establishment of bases in Central Asia and Afghanistan is part of a larger American plan to carve out the foothold it needs to launch an attack on Iran. In Kyrgyzstan, in particular, the media and official sources have speculated on claims that the US intended to use Manas to launch air strikes against Iran. In 2007, the chairman of Kyrgyzstan’s parliamentary defence committee declared unequivocally that ‘I have no doubts that, if hostilities start, the United States will bomb Iran from the Manas airbase in Kyrgyzstan.’³⁵

As in the sphere of counterterrorism, the ‘opposing perceptions dilemma’ comes into play in the energy interests sphere. A senior analyst in Kazakhstan’s premier think-tank attached to the office of the president has asserted that ‘the American administration views energy resources in Central Asia and the Caspian purely as geopolitical instruments to be used against Russia and China for the purposes of weakening their influence on the states of the region and, in contrast to Moscow and Beijing, not as a source to safeguard its own energy security.’³⁶ On the other hand, a leading US government specialist on Central Asian affairs has argued that ‘Russia seeks to counter Western business and to gain substantial influence over energy resources through participation in joint ventures and by insisting that pipelines cross Russian territory.’³⁷

America and a Changed World

THE CAPACITY OF THE UNITED STATES TO EXERT INFLUENCE IN CENTRAL ASIA

Democracy rhetoric

As the United States has remained bogged down in protracted wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, it has lost much of its credibility in the eyes of Central Asians and, consequently, has conceded a significant part of its capacity to influence and promote positive change in their region. In the aftermath of the 'colour revolutions' of 2003–05 in particular, American attempts at democracy promotion engendered suspicion among the region's authoritarian leaders, who have come to regard them as an integral part of an overall US strategy of subversion.

American criticism over the extent and pace of democratic reform in Kazakhstan, which came to a head in 2007 when US officials resisted Kazakhstan's bid to chair the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), has been a source of irritation for Kazakhstan since the early days of independence. Regular criticism of Uzbekistan's human rights practices also played a role in that country's turn to Russia and its decision to join the very Russian-led cooperation structures that it had either ignored or expressly rejected in the late 1990s and early 2000s, such as the Eurasian Economic Community and the Collective Security Treaty Organization.³⁸ Even Turkmenistan's new president made it clear during his first months in office in 2007 that Turkmenistan–US relations should not be 'politicized'.³⁹

Nor do efforts by Western nations at democracy promotion in Central Asia appear to have been effective. Sanctions imposed on Uzbekistan by EU officials in the wake of the Andijon unrest failed entirely to influence domestic practices in Uzbekistan, in much the same way that the democratic reform pledges that the US extracted from Kazakhstan in connection with its impending chairmanship of the OSCE in 2010 remain unfulfilled.⁴⁰ On the contrary, a 2008 study by Freedom House, a US-based NGO, found that new wealth has been serving to intensify authoritarian practices in the post-Soviet 'petrostates' of the former Soviet Union (Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Russia and Turkmenistan), since democratic reform necessarily requires a greater degree of transparency and accountability than the petrostates' leaderships are prepared to tolerate.⁴¹

Although the United States has lost much of its superpower leverage in Central Asia in recent years, the states of the region still regard the US administration as having an important role to play in helping them to integrate into the Eurasian and world economies. Kazakhstan, the region's economic and political powerhouse, relies in particular on Western energy companies for the technology and foreign direct investment it requires to develop its oil fields. The United States is also still regarded as a partner of choice for professional training and technical innovation. Additionally, a number of small and medium-sized US businesses in a variety of sectors are active throughout the region. Even economically weak Tajikistan has been attempting to break out gradually of its role as a Russian protectorate by reclaiming control over its Afghan and Chinese borders and presenting itself as a candidate for Western development.⁴²

Indeed, the United States remains the top individual donor of humanitarian aid in Tajikistan, providing 64 per cent of the overall volume in 2007. Particularly since 2008, as the global financial crisis has dealt a blow to Russia's economy and diminished its value as an economic partner, the Central Asian states have turned more to China and, to a lesser extent, the United States to step into the economic breach.

A new opening for Washington?

While Kazakhstan has been able to maintain good relations with Russia, China and the United States throughout the entire independence period, Uzbekistan's foreign policy has been characterized by abrupt geopolitical shifts. If, after 9/11, Uzbekistan consolidated its unequivocal status as the United States' strategic partner in Central Asia, by 2005 that state had, in essence, eschewed relations with Washington altogether. Somewhat predictably, however, after a period of isolation from the West, Uzbekistani President Karimov was ready to make tentative moves at re-engagement, and, by 2007, both Washington and Tashkent were looking for ways to rebuild relations. Thus, when Commander of the US Central Command (CENTCOM) General David Petraeus visited Uzbekistan in February 2009, Karimov told him that 'we consider your visit to Uzbekistan as a visit of the first representative of the new administration of the United States, of President Obama, and as the United States' aspiration to establish closer, mutually beneficial relations with Uzbekistan.'⁴³

Karimov's campaign to restore bilateral ties with the United States is predicated on two primary motivations: Uzbekistan's increasingly tense relations with Russia, and its position as a frontline state on the border with an insurgent and militarized Afghanistan. Uzbekistan's leadership has asserted the view that continued destabilization in Afghanistan is largely in Moscow's interest, in so far as Russia has used the conflict there to justify an expansion of its military presence in Central Asia. Uzbekistan has strenuously objected to the opening of a new Russian military base in the city of Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan, which is to be a key component of the new Collective Operational Reaction Forces (CORF) under the auspices of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization. In June 2009, the Collective Security Treaty Organization formally created CORF as part of its ambition to create forces 'on a par with NATO forces'⁴⁴ and in view of the unstable situation in Afghanistan, despite the objections of member states Uzbekistan and Belarus. Both states refused to sign the agreement to form the forces owing to multiple misgivings, including the concern that the forces could be deployed during an internal conflict within a member state or between member states, rather than simply to repel foreign aggression.⁴⁵ Additionally, Uzbekistan is likely to view a Russian-led military presence in the volatile Ferghana Valley – regarded as Central Asia's heartland – as a factor impinging on its ability to continue to exert its hegemony on its smaller Central Asian neighbours.

To be sure, President Karimov has made it clear that 'we in Uzbekistan are

America and a Changed World

acutely aware that the decisive factor for security is the attainment of peace and stability in Afghanistan'.⁴⁶ Central Asia serves as a transit corridor for narcotics flows from Afghanistan north through Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to Russia, and west through Iran and Turkmenistan to Turkey and Europe. Furthermore, in spite of his misgivings regarding US motives in Central Asia, President Karimov values US-led efforts to curtail the activities of al-Qaeda and Taliban training camps in Pakistan's tribal areas, which contain militants believed by the Uzbekistani leadership to pose a threat to all of Central Asia and to Uzbekistan in particular. From early 2009, Obama administration officials began to refer to an 'AfPaK' strategy, according to which Afghanistan and Pakistan were considered an integrated theatre of operations against al-Qaeda and its Taliban allies. In line with this strategy, launching missile strikes against these targets using unmanned Predator aircraft, or drones, became the primary method of combating extremism in the tribal areas of northwestern Pakistan.

Although estimates of its number range vastly from a few hundred to 5,000, it has been reported that the ranks of the IMU have been expanding, primarily with new recruits from Uzbekistan's section of the Fergana Valley. At the same time as new recruits have been arriving from Central Asia, Pakistan's campaign to oust extremists in its Northwest Frontier Province and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas has prompted many IMU fighters to flee Pakistan and either to seek new sanctuaries in the north of Afghanistan or, in some cases, to filter back to their countries of origin. While the ability of the IMU and other Islamist groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan to stage guerrilla operations in Central Asia itself remains unclear, since May 2009 a number of attacks and clashes with security forces have taken place in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, all of which have been blamed on the IMU.

Although regional organizations that bring together the Central Asian states and Russia (and China, in the case of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization) have become more active in recent years, those multilateral groupings have thus far been unwilling to become involved directly in stabilization and reconstruction operations in Afghanistan, preferring instead to 'let the Americans waste their money and troops'.⁴⁷ Consequently, as the limitations of such regional organizations have become more evident, the Central Asian states have displayed a renewed willingness to facilitate US and NATO efforts in that South Asian state. As one Tashkent-based analyst put it, 'Everyone likes throwing Americans out of their bases and gloating about their failures, but [the Central Asian governments] realize that if the Americans leave Afghanistan, it will be a serious blow to all Central Asian countries, Uzbekistan in the first place.'⁴⁸

During unprecedented appearances at a NATO summit in April 2008,⁴⁹ the presidents of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan offered logistical support for the ongoing battle in Afghanistan against a resurgent Taliban. Uzbekistan agreed to grant US military servicemen attached to NATO access to an air facility at Termez in southern Uzbekistan on a 'case-by-case basis' and also offered to sign an agreement with NATO on providing an overland transit corridor through its territory for the delivery of non-military cargo to Afghanistan, which

would significantly reduce the cost of reconstruction efforts there. The German magazine *Der Spiegel* reported in May 2008 that the number of NATO supply planes landing at a military air base in Turkmenistan on their way to Afghanistan had increased following talks between the Turkmenistani government and NATO in April that year.⁵⁰ In 2009, the US Department of Defense confirmed that Turkmenistan allowed transport planes carrying non-lethal supplies on their way to Afghanistan to land and refuel at Ashgabat airport; in addition, a small contingent of US service personnel is stationed in Turkmenistan to assist operations.⁵¹

It is estimated that the additional troops sent to Afghanistan under Obama will require at least a threefold increase in supplies in 2010–11 as compared with 2008. Along with the increase in troops, repeated attacks by the Taliban on NATO convoys using the Pakistan supply route through the Khyber Pass have compelled US policy-makers to establish alternative supply lines to Afghanistan. To this end, they have given priority to opening the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) for the purpose of transporting supplies from Western Europe and the Baltic States to Afghanistan via Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The establishment of the NDN has required the United States to conclude bilateral agreements with Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan for the transit of lethal and non-lethal supplies. Uzbekistan plays a key role in this process; as Afghanistan lacks railway infrastructure, goods must be delivered by road from the border town of Termez to final destinations. Extending its cooperation further, in May 2009 – nearly four years after expelling US forces from its K2 airbase – Uzbekistan offered the use of the country's cargo airport at Navoi, which was being renovated under a long-term lease by South Korea. The involvement of South Korea allowed the Karimov leadership a way to 'save face' when resuming strategic cooperation with the United States.

While the NDN is engaging the Central Asian states as economic transit partners, it is not without its disadvantages: in similar fashion to the main Khyber Pass route, the second route through Central Asia could become a natural target for violence by Islamist militant groups.⁵² Secondly, it is much more likely that Western payments related to the NDN will end up in the hands of ruling elites than trickle down to the broader population, thereby forming another source of corruption.⁵³

THE ROAD AHEAD: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE US ENGAGEMENT

The Obama administration has taken a pragmatic approach towards Central Asia that has de-emphasized democracy promotion in favour of securing the cooperation of the region's states as a crucial front for the war in Afghanistan. This task has been made easier by the willingness of Uzbekistan – a key transit state for US and coalition supplies to Afghanistan – to renew relations with Washington in part to counteract Russian influence in the region. However, should the Obama administration choose to re-emphasize political reform in

America and a Changed World

the near future in Central Asia, it is unlikely to be any more successful over the next decade than it was during the last one. Calls for greater democratization will continue to create suspicion among the region's authoritarian leaders that the United States is prepared to promote movements whose aim is to overthrow the incumbent regimes. Moreover, the promotion of a democracy agenda under the Bush administration inevitably led to charges of a double standard since, as Central Asian leaders have pointed out, it is impossible to apply such a policy consistently around the globe. For their part, most Central Asians pay little heed to democracy, regarding it by and large as an empty ideological framework, and preferring instead to concentrate on traditional networks and informal structures. Consequently, any democratization efforts must be part and parcel of a long-term plan to foster development in relatively apolitical areas, such as education, communications, agriculture and healthcare.

As long as its mission in Afghanistan continues, the United States will maintain its interest in Central Asia as a crucial military transit and supply hub. Yet the Obama administration should desist from increasing military assistance to the Central Asian states outside the NDN, since such assistance is invariably coupled with calls to aggressively promote short-term democratization measures in order to avoid the appearance of supporting authoritarian regimes. In turn, an increase in such measures leads to greater levels of distrust from Central Asian states in their bilateral relations with Washington, thereby laying the groundwork for a repeat of the post-2001 cycle.

American policy in Central Asia has been hampered in recent years by the breakdown in the inter-agency process whereby the Department of Defense has pursued an interests-based agenda while the Department of State has promoted a values-based agenda. The 2005 unrest in Andijon brought the lack of a consistent approach to the fore: while State Department officials argued that the United States must press for an international inquiry, officials at the Department of Defense concentrated on the security-related advantages associated with cooperation.⁵⁴ Ensuring a convergence of views within the new administration would enable it to speak to Central Asian leaders with a united voice.

The US government is likely to continue to assist American energy firms to explore for additional hydrocarbon reserves in Central Asia and to make headway in the struggle to secure pipeline routes that bypass Russia. However, despite the recognition by the Central Asian states that the diversification of pipeline routes is a prerequisite for their economic security, Russia has far outdistanced the United States in pipeline diplomacy, primarily owing to a lack of incentives for Central Asian energy producers to abandon long-term gas supply contracts with Russia and China. Additionally, the Russian-Georgian war has made export routes from Central Asia crossing the Caspian even less viable than they were before.

While gas reserves from Turkmenistan's major onshore deposits will not be flowing to Europe via the Caspian Sea any time soon, the United States needs to refocus its efforts in Turkmenistan on the development of offshore fields there and the use of a subsea tieback to connect them to existing Azerbaijani

infrastructure. These initiatives would enable the oil and gas that is produced to be carried by the BTC and Baku–Tbilisi–Erzerum pipelines to Europe.⁵⁵ To this end, the Obama administration should concentrate on facilitating negotiations between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan on disputed Caspian oil and gas fields, which in turn would improve the prospects for a resolution of the legal status of the Caspian Sea.

American policies should acknowledge the need of the Central Asian leaderships to strike a balance between Russian, Chinese and US interests in order to preserve their sovereignty and, in the case of Kazakhstan, its ability to exert influence within the region itself. It is tempting for US policy-makers to harbour illusions that Kazakhstan – Central Asia's clear economic leader – will ultimately ally itself with the United States if the material incentives are great enough, forsaking in the process the balanced approach it has assiduously cultivated throughout its independence. However, US officials need to bear in mind that Kazakhstan will continue to welcome American attention and investment, all the while maintaining Russia as its priority partner. Demonstrating its extraordinary political skill in manoeuvring between Russia and the United States, Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian state to have negotiated an Individual Partnership Plan with NATO, while at the same time resolutely rejecting any suggestion that it host a US military base – a move that would be sure to incur Russian and Chinese disapproval.

Particularly during the years following the US invasion of Iraq, Central Asian leaders have discovered what much of the world had already learnt: they do not need to take their marching orders from Washington or respond to US advice on democracy-building unless they deem it is in their interests to do so. All five states are now adept, albeit to varying degrees, at the game of multi-vectoring, in which leaders play the main international actors against each other in order to maximize strategic gains. Consequently, the Obama administration has little option but to set aside or, at least, tone down any messages in favour of democracy and to focus on common interests, while pursuing a long-term strategy in Central Asia aimed at furthering socio-economic development and increasing the citizenry's general understanding of democratic processes.

NOTES

- 1 Murat Laumulin, 'US Strategy and Policy in Central Asia', *Central Asia and the Caucasus* 4(46) (2007): 46.
- 2 Jim Nichol, 'Central Asia: Regional Developments and Implications for US Interests', US Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, CRS Report RL33458, September 2009, p. 2.
- 3 For the purposes of this chapter, 'Central Asia' comprises the five post-Soviet states of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan.
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America and a Changed World

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America and a Changed World

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