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## **A Critique of American Policies Toward Central Asia**

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### **Abstract**

While Central Asia has become an important military operation theater in the U.S. campaign against terrorism, the somewhat accidental American military presence in the region has aroused suspicion and anxiety about American intention and long-term goals toward Central Asia. As in the past years the Bush Administration has been widely criticized for being unilateral and militaristic in its foreign policy practices, this study will analyze American policies toward Central Asia, focusing on its tendency to allow security concerns and military thinking have precedence over other considerations. This unbalanced strategy has led to a narrow-minded militaristic approach which does not support the stated democratization goals of American foreign policies toward the region; instead it only appears designed to meet military expediency needs. A brief overview of the evolution of American policies toward the region is laid out first, and then the dilemmas encountered by the U.S. in seeking its best interests in the region are discussed. In recognizing the importance of Central Asia in U.S. national security strategy, this research indicates that the military component should play only a comparatively a small role in the overall American effort in dealing with the states in the region. If the military expediency, coupled with geopolitical considerations, is continuously favored, such practice will hurt U.S. long-term interests and the prospect of a stable regional development.

**Keywords:** Central Asia, American militarism, Geopolitics, American dominance.

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## **1. Introduction**

In the wake of the 911 incident the remote Central Asian states have become an important military operation theater for the United States. International relations and foreign policy commentators began to speculate whether Central Asia would be a new battle ground for world power rivalry or left to be developed under international sponsorship or cooperation. U.S. involvement around the world has been the focus of world politics studies ever since the end of World War II, but now more than ever its militaristic approaches are being questioned and criticized. Among the critics, the term “American militarism” has been used to describe the nature of American foreign policy. Needless to say, this criticism is especially directed to the George W. Bush presidency. This paper aims to discuss the shortcomings of the American policy toward Central Asia, which gives overemphasis to military and security concerns and has engulfed the region in its global war against terrorism. This policy stressed the importance of expanding an American military and strategic foothold in the region. The period covered will focus mainly-but not exclusively-on the Bush administration. Due to the scope and complexity of the problems involved in this study, this paper will deal primarily with the militaristic inclinations of American policies toward Central Asia, and does not intend to give an overall account of American policies toward the region.<sup>1</sup>

As most American people are dismayed by the magnitude of the 911 incident and fell prey to the ensuing anti-terrorism mentality, the tragic attack had not only raised U.S. security alertness to Cold War era levels, but also militarized American foreign policy practices. Long before the advent of 911, many pundits in the U.S. called for a “soft power” approach to defend American interests around the world, but the neoconservatives, who have been in control of George W. Bush’s government until recently, were determined to consolidate American dominance of the world by the unprecedented military preponderance the US has been enjoying since the fall of the former Soviet Union. This hardball approach certainly has produced gains for some American corporations, especially oil companies, but whether or not long term U.S.

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<sup>1</sup> In the currently and widely accepted definition, Central Asia comprises the five countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

interests have gained ground is less certain for most commentators.<sup>2</sup> Along with the rolling of the unilateral American foreign policy practices and in the midst of a raging anti-terrorism campaign, Central Asia has suddenly jumped from a peripheral and marginal place to the center of stage in the American foreign policy decision-making arena. Will this turnaround be only temporary and expedient for the sake of securing a military victory in Afghanistan, or something more permanent to achieve a scheme that extends the empire's borders and gains a strategic advantage in the heartland of its rivals' backyard? This question certainly will make the contending powers in the region to ponder and be concerned.

As commentators pointed out after the 9/11 attack, there had been a consensus among most American policy-makers that the U.S. should pursue objectives in Central Asia, such as democratization, the creation of free markets, trade and investment, integration with the West, and the development of responsible security policies.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Daniel Fried, American Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, once testified to Congress in 2005 that security, energy and regional economic cooperation, as well as freedom through reform, are the objectives of American foreign policy in Central Asia<sup>4</sup>. But his words were not supported by his agency's budget allocation. Despite U.S. State Department rhetoric, geopolitics has always been the core consideration in the minds of most policy advisors and

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<sup>2</sup> An exemplar article of this criticism toward Bush administration's policy, which has overlooked soft power and favored hard power, is Joseph Nye's "Soft Power and American Foreign Policy," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol.119, No.2, pp.255-270. Nye is the scholar who first proposes the idea of "soft power," and defines it as the influence and attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies. As to the neoconservatives, many of them have taken government positions under Bush administration or served as think tank heavyweight analysts, they mainly believe that U.S. power is unmatched and should be used to promote democratic ideals abroad. For one exemplar analysis about the neoconservatives and their development, please see Francis Fukuyama, *American at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), chapter 2.

<sup>3</sup> A concise account of this consensus on policy objectives can be found in Olga Oliker and David A. Shlapak, "U.S. Interests in Central Asia: Policy priorities and Military Roles," *RAND Corporation*, 2005, especially chapter 2 and 3, pp.5-52. < <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG338/>>

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Fried, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, "A Strategy for Central Asia," *The DISAM Journal* (Winter 2006), pp.99-105.

decision-makers. In fact, to date the U.S. policymakers have kept on consolidating American dominance throughout the world ever since the breakdown of the former Soviet Union and Central Asia happens to be an expedient stepping stone toward that goal. In the following, the writer will first lay out the evolution of U.S. policies and interests toward the region and, later, explain that this power play mentality persisted in the ruling circle and will inevitably hamper the proclaimed official goals of the American government. Only by forsaking the pursuit of imperial dominance can the U.S. establish a genuine and harmonic relationship with the parties involved in Central Asia.

## **2. The Evolution of U.S. Policy in Central Asia**

It is self-evident that the “war on terror” since September 11 has produced the sudden surge in the magnitude of U.S. engagement in Central Asia, but the region has long been considered as a pivotal point in global politics, a caldron of ethnic conflicts and great-power rivalries.<sup>5</sup> However, the region has somehow gradually gained importance in American foreign policy-making for various reasons. Initially (1992-4), the US established relations with the new states of the region right after their independence, and the immediate interests of the U.S. were to strengthen the sovereignty of the Central Asian states and make sure that the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction could be prevented. While busying with the Balkan vexation, the Clinton administration had shown little military interest in the region during this period.<sup>6</sup> At the time, the region was seen as peripheral to U.S. interests, especially when compared to the development of constructive relations with the Russian Federation. The Clinton administration believed that by aggressively engaging the newly independent Central Asian states, the U.S. would be considered taking advantage

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<sup>5</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, “A Geostrategy for Eurasia,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.76, No.5 (1997), pp.50-64.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Blank, “The United States and Central Asia,” in Roy Allison and Lena Jonson, eds., *Central Asian security: the new international context* (London: Royal Institute for International Affairs, 2001), p.127.

of Russian weakness and hurt the bilateral relations between the two nations.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, Central Asia is important for the U.S. in at least several other aspects. First, by engaging states in the region, the U.S. can keep Iran in check and force it to adopt more pro-Western policies. Another potential benefit is to defuse the violent and anti-Western Islamic fundamentalism through economic growth and shore up civil society throughout the region. And the last US interest-though certainly not the least-is that to ensure access to energy resources throughout the region. Around the mid-1990s, the U.S. government began to use the promise of huge Caspian oil reserves to attract American investors to the region. In fact, as the Clinton Administration entered its second term, U.S. policy-makers focused increasingly on Caspian oil and made it an economic security issue for the United States. Despite the fact that there were debates throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s among the policy and academic communities with regard to the energy wealth of the Caspian littoral region, many experts saw the region as a fairly small contributor to the global energy market.<sup>8</sup>

Although the energy reservation in the region does not have critical importance for the US in terms of energy supply and national security, the U.S. was unambiguous in its support for “multiple pipelines” for Caspian oil, so as to ensure that these exports would not be controlled by Russia or Iran and that US firms would play a significant role in Caspian development. In order to safeguard American companies’ ample share of the Caspian oil and gas and to secure regional stability, the Clinton administration fostered regional cooperation, relying on multilateral institutions such as NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) and the Central Asian Economic Community (CAEC).<sup>9</sup> The activation of PfP in Central Asia was in some respects a natural reflection of institutional developments in NATO. PfP was formed in 1994, and Tajikistan was the only absentee among the five Central Asian states. The formation of PfP was not aimed solely at peace or energy goals, it was also a response to Russian discontent with NATO’s expansion

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<sup>7</sup> Eugene Rumer, “Filling the Void: The United States in Central Asia,” *Foreign Service Journal*, Vol. 80, No.4 (April 2003), pp.48-51.

<sup>8</sup> Alec Rasizade, “Caspian Basin Oil: Just a Pipe Dream?” *Foreign Service Journal*, Vol. 80, No.4 (April 2003), pp. 43-47.

<sup>9</sup> Pauline Jones Luong and Erika Weinthal, “New Friends, New Fears in Central Asia,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 81, No.2 (2002), p.61.

toward Eastern Europe in 1994 and 1995.<sup>10</sup> While balance of power considerations have always featured in American perspectives toward Central Asia, the emergence of the energy and security agendas also reduced the previous declared emphasis on democratization and good governance. This deviation was exacerbated further when September 11 suddenly came into the scene.

U.S. approaches in respect of both the pipeline and military cooperation displayed a degree of ambivalence towards other regional powers. As indicated above, U.S. policy-makers did not want to irritate the Russians by meddling in their backyard, but American policies and statements of strong preference for diversion of Central Asian energy exports away from Russia certainly did not help matters. Starting from late 1990s, the U.S. Congress has passed bills that called for diversification of energy supplies from the Central Asia and Caspian region. And the Bush administration, not long after its assumption of office, had released an energy policy report indicating that the exploitation of Caspian energy resources could not only benefit the economies of the region, but also help mitigate possible world supply disruptions, a major U.S. security goal. This report also recommended that Bush ask U.S. agencies to support building the BTC pipeline and facilitate oil companies operating in Kazakhstan to use the pipeline.<sup>11</sup> Critics of Bush Administration policy questioned the economic viability and potential benefits of BTC and also challenged the wisdom of seeking these limited

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<sup>10</sup> The Partnership for Peace (PfP) is a program of practical bilateral cooperation between individual partner countries and NATO. It allows partner countries to build up an individual relationship with NATO, choosing their own priorities for cooperation. Based on a commitment to the democratic principles that underpin the Alliance itself, the purpose of the PfP is to increase stability, diminish threats to peace and build strengthened security relationship between individual partner countries and NATO, as well as among partner countries. At present, there are 24 countries taking part in this organization, including countries from Eastern Europe, Balkan, Caucasus, Central Asia, and a few non-NATO western nations.

<sup>11</sup> The BTC pipeline refers to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, is a crude oil pipeline that covers 1,768 kilometers (1,099 mi) from the Azeri-Chirag-Guneshli oil field in the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean Sea. It connects Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan; Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia; and Ceyhan, a port on the south-eastern Mediterranean coast of Turkey, hence its name. It is the second longest oil pipeline in the world after the Druzhiba pipeline. For the discussion of Bush Administration's energy policy report see Jim Nichol, "Central Asia's Security: Issues and Implications for US Interests," *CRS Reports for Congress*, updated April 26, 2007, pp.40-41. < <http://ftp.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL30294.pdf> >

energy supplies at the expense of alienating the other regional powers, which certainly would hurt U.S. long term security interests. Ariel Cohen, for instance, argues that the U.S. should seek a working relationship with other regional powers and focus on anti-terrorist goals and try not to control the energy resources.<sup>12</sup> However, with the subsequent allocation of American military forces and long-term forward base pretensions, the U.S. has created unwanted anxieties and tensions from regional powers such as Iran, China, and Russia.

Another important issue that shows the lack of US strategic insight is the formation and development of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).<sup>13</sup> Initially, the United States greeted the establishment of the SCO with indifference. The fundamental reason for this reaction was the assumption that the political and military interest between Russia and China could not be reconciled. That said, U.S. has, as always, ignored the impact of its own actions upon the region. By taking the role as the main economic donor and security manager in Central Asia, the United States has forced both Russia and China to think twice before uttering any grievances toward each other. For instance, when former Secretary of State Colin Powell visited the region in 2001, he remarked that U.S. interests in Central Asia far exceeded the conflict in Afghanistan. The statement was taken as an American confession of long-term strategic designs in Eurasia by both Moscow and Beijing.<sup>14</sup> For both China and Russia, it is inevitable to view the American moves as somewhat hegemonic.

It can be said that the growing U.S. interest in Central Asia is a by-product of the

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<sup>12</sup> Ariel Cohen, "U.S. Interests and Central Asia Energy Security," *The Heritage Foundation Backgrounder*, No.1984, November 15, 2006, pp.1-11.

<sup>13</sup> The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is an intergovernmental international organization founded in Shanghai on 15 June 2001, which comprises of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Originally, the SCO was called the Shanghai Five mechanism (without Uzbekistan), which was formed in 1996 largely to demilitarize the border between China and the former Soviet Union. In 2004, Mongolia won observer status, and Iran, Pakistan, and India also gained the same status in the following year. Basically, SCO is not a mutual defense pact like NATO. Its main goals are strengthening mutual confidence and good-neighborly relations among the member nations and promoting effective cooperation in a wide range of areas.

<sup>14</sup> Eugene Rumer, "The Powers in Central Asia," *Survival*, Vol.44, No.3 (2002a), pp.57-59.

anti-terrorism war. Up to the eve of September 11, the United States had adopted a lukewarm approach toward Central Asia and refused to get into a modern-day “great game” in that area. This position was somewhat reserving but in no way restraining U.S. grand strategy for global dominance. The single most important statement about U.S. policy in the region so far was made by then-Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, in a 1997 speech with a memorable title: “Farewell to Flashman.” Talbott said that the goal of U.S. policy in Central Asia would be not to dominate the region, but to make it free of other powers’ domination, thus making it possible for the five Central Asian states to become stable and peaceful.<sup>15</sup> In other words, the U.S. wanted the region to be a power-free zone, a statement which had little credit for either Russia or China. The United States soon filled in this Central Asian geopolitical vacuum with its military forces and substantial amount of aids in the aftermath of September 11.

The policy changes started with the arrival of Bush administration in January 2001. Given the influence of U.S. energy firms over the Bush administration, the U.S. thus took a new perspective toward Middle East and the Eurasia region, and the September 11 attack was the unexpected and most smooth justification for the change. While America’s first main target in the anti-terror war was Afghanistan, terrorist network Al-Qaeda’s main base, the Bush administration had to seek cooperation from the Central Asia states in conceding base accession to support the Northern Alliance to unseat the Taliban. Bush’s appeal to other nations to join the U.S. in the war was quickly answered by the five states in the region. The five Central Asian states all declared, though cautiously, solidarity with Washington and offered, to a different degree, their land and air space for the American military to use in the anti-Taliban campaign. In fact, the Central Asian states regarded the American presence as their gain.<sup>16</sup> Foremost, none of the five states was content with the prospect of either Russia or China or Iran playing the role of the region’s hegemon. Good relations with all three were important, but none of the three was to be trusted. So the American insertion was welcomed.

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<sup>15</sup> Eugene Rumer, “Filling the Void: The United States in Central Asia,” p.48.

<sup>16</sup> Eugene Rumer, “Flashman’s Revenge: Central Asia after September 11,” *Strategic Forum*, No. 195 (December 2002b), Institute of National Strategic Studies, National Defense University.



The U.S. military's involvement in Central Asia, "Operation Enduring Freedom," has included: temporary forward basing in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan; access to airspace and restricted use of bases in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan; training and equip missions in Georgia; assistance for border security in Azerbaijan; and coalition-building by high-level visits to Central Asia, intelligence sharing, improved coordination within the U.S. Central Command, and increased assistance.<sup>17</sup> For the United States, the OEF in Afghanistan cast a new spotlight on the region and brought the Central Asian states to the front lines of the campaign in the anti-terror war. Furthermore, Central Asia was seen not merely as a platform for operations in neighboring countries, but as significant in its own right as a potential breeding ground for terrorism, a perception that was enhanced by the close ties between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and the latter's incursion from Afghanistan and Tajikistan into Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and 2000. The deepening of U.S. strategic engagement in Central Asia was accompanied by sizable increases in assistance to the region. Assistance to the region doubled from the fiscal year 2001 to 2002.<sup>18</sup> And in fiscal year 2005, the U.S. budgeted more than \$240 million in assistance to Central Asia.<sup>19</sup> However, the heavy American engagement has produced little result in terms of positive political order changes. The most salient reason for this failure is that the U.S. has attached too much emphasis on the military aspect of its relations with the Central Asian states and, consequently, overlooked the other declared goals such as freedom through reform or fostering energy and regional economic cooperation.

### **3. American Foreign Policy Dilemma in Central Asia**

After September 11, conservative politicians and pundits in the U.S. seized the occasion to sell the idea that the U.S. needed to take a more dominant role in world

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<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Wishnick, "Growing U.S. Security Interests in Central Asia," *Strategic Studies Institute*, U.S. Army War College, October 2002, p.13.

<<http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB110.pdf>>

<sup>18</sup> Charles William Maynes, "America Discovers America," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 82, No. 2 (2003), pp. 120-125.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel Fried, "A Strategy for Central Asia," p.99.

politics and the use of military power was essential and indispensable for pursuing American interests and safety. This mood was not confined to conservative elements alone but had spread to the general public.<sup>20</sup> Considering the United States as the only superpower left on earth, enjoying economic as well as military dominance over the world, neoconservatives in the U.S. believe that it should push for democratization in the Middle East so as to eradicate the terrorism problem once and for all. This aggressive unilateral course has brought more problems than it has solved to the United States itself, and Iraq is the very case at point. It is not unprecedented that the United States has relied on its power to impose a liberal world order, a system that benefits America the most.<sup>21</sup> In the past there were many cases of American intervention in the developing world in the name of fostering democracy, but it turned out to be a façade for enhancing American interests by sending the given nation into chaos. Paul Wolfowitz, a famous key figure in the camp of the American neoconservatives, once explained American policies without using such euphemism that "...a dominant consideration in US defense strategy should be to prevent any hostile power from dominating a region whose resources would, under consolidated control, be sufficient to generate global power."<sup>22</sup> This mentality has dwelled on the dealings of the anti-terrorism operations, and it generates conflicts between fostering democracy and consolidating American military dominance.

As the U.S. has realized that it should greatly enhance its relations with the five Central Asian countries to prevent them from becoming harbors for terrorism, the U.S. has adopted policies that are heavily loaded with military measures and given less attention to nurturing civil societies of these countries. Given America's fears and interests, U.S. involvement in Central Asia is likely to last longer than official statements suggest. If American dealings were tilted toward military engagements and full of expediency considerations, then the past failure experiences of the Cold War

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<sup>20</sup> Corey Robin, "Grand Design: How 9/11 Unified Conservatives in Pursuit of Empire," *Washington Post*, May 2, 2004, p.B1.

<sup>21</sup> Bob Catley, "Hegemonic America: the Arrogance of Power," *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International & Strategic Affairs*, Vol.21, No.2 (August 1999), pp.57-76.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Wolfowitz, "Remembering the Future," *The National Interest*, Spring 2000.  
<[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2751/is\\_2000\\_Spring/ai\\_61299040](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2751/is_2000_Spring/ai_61299040)>

period certainly will recur. It is worthy to caution that a sense of balance in approach, so as not to compromise one ideal in pursuit of another, would be prudent. This caution is voiced both by the way a war is fought against terror and the process of democratization promoted in selected partner countries by the U.S. If the expedient bargains of war simply validate unjust rule, the effectiveness of the alliances will diminish, and so will the international effort to secure Afghanistan and extirpate terrorism.

After the September 11 incident, the U.S. began to see the Central Asian states as a critical part of America's strategic defense interests in South Asia and the Middle East. While taking on Afghanistan was expected in the anti-terrorism campaign, to establish bases in the neighboring area became indispensable for American military operations in Afghanistan. In order to secure the support and the use of bases in the Central Asia region, the Bush Administration dramatically increased the security assistance to the five states. The security assistance provided by the U.S. amounted to \$994 million in cumulative budgeted funds through FY2005.<sup>23</sup> As Uzbekistan provided a base at Karshi-Khanabad (K2) for U.S. operations, it was the biggest recipient of the American security assistance. A US-Uzbek Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) was signed on October 7, 2001, and the air campaign against Afghanistan began an hour later. The SOFA provided for use of Uzbek airspace and for up to 1,500 U.S. troops to use a Soviet-era airbase (K2) 90 miles north of the Afghan border. In return, the US provided security guarantees and cooperation on fighting the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). In addition, the U.S. offered great amount of Foreign Military Financing (FMF) to Uzbekistan to obtain such deal. The Central Asian states received about \$6.9 million of FMA aid from the U.S. in FY2001, and the amount surged dramatically to \$55.7million in FY2002, of which over \$36 million went to Uzbekistan.<sup>24</sup>

By attaching great importance to security matters in Central Asia, the U.S. clearly curtailed the previous publicly stated American policy of promoting development and democracy; as a result, the Bush Administration has been criticized that in pursuing security objectives the U.S. has overlooked its human rights agenda.<sup>25</sup> As the Central

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<sup>23</sup> Jim Nichol, "Central Asia's Security: Issues and Implications for US Interests," pp.25-26.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.30.

<sup>25</sup> S. Neil MacGarlane, "The United States and Regionalism in Central Asia," *International Affairs*, Vol.80, No.3 (2004), pp.447-461.

Asian authoritarian leaders have been urging the U.S. to better understand the unique features of their local cultures and traditions and asked for a slower pace for political reforms, critics of the Bush administration still note that the U.S. has failed to address the democratization problem adequately and American policies toward Central Asia are more ad hoc than well planned in terms of long term US interests. In particular, American partnership with authoritarian regimes in the region reduces the local perception of the U.S. as a liberal-minded and benevolent superpower.<sup>26</sup> The prominent case at point is the American dealings with the regimes in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. It has been widely criticized that the U.S. aid given to these two countries has actually enhanced the monopoly of powers of its authoritarian leaders.<sup>27</sup> However, it is understood that the need for bases has forced the Americans to turn a blind eye to the dismal human rights records of the regimes in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

While still struggling with rampant corruption leftover from the communist era, Central Asian states have been facing common security challenges from crime, corruption, terrorism, and faltering commitments to economic and democratic reforms; any attempt at genuine reform would tend to undermine the personal political regimes of these nations' leaders, so they proved highly resistant to U.S. efforts to promote political and economic change. In carrying out the daunting task of promoting democracy in countries which have never experienced the rule of law and lacked the precedence of respecting people's will, it is essential that the U.S. have people who know the region, its culture and history, and not the people who knows geopolitics or military affairs alone. As one high-ranking American diplomat suggested, the U.S. needs to develop a comprehensive regional policy toward Central Asia and establish dialogues with the countries under discussion.<sup>28</sup> The somewhat regrettable experience

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<sup>26</sup> Jacquelyn K. Davis and Michael J. Sweeney, *Central Asia in U.S. Strategy and Operational Planning: Where do we go from here?* (Washington D.C.: The Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, 2004), pp.15-20.

<sup>27</sup> This view is presented in Enayatollah Yazdani, "US Democracy Promotion Policy in the Central Asian Republics: Myth or Reality," *International Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (2007), pp. 141-155.

<sup>28</sup> Ambassador James F. Collins made such remark, see "Russia, China, and the United States: From the Great Game to Cooperation in Central Asia," *The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 6, 2007. <<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/REPNewVisionEvent.pdf>>

of the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan is just one case in point. In 2005, due to hasty actions engineered by the U.S., Kyrgyzstan was pushed into a faltering state in which the country's political structure had been shaken and its rule of law had been undermined after the so-called Color Revolution.<sup>29</sup> Of course, we should not be too harsh toward American policy-makers, and it is fair to say that US policy options are quite limited and could involve tradeoffs between stability and commitment to democratic principles.

Apart from problems derived from the oligarchic nature of the Central Asian states, the U.S. also has to cope with geopolitical contentions with both Russia and China while promoting democracy in the region. Both Russia and China remain suspicious of U.S. intentions and both are interested in limiting U.S. influence, insofar as possible. Furthermore, both Russia and China share a tacit understanding over their respective roles in Central Asia, that is to say Beijing effectively concedes Russia's leading position and the two major powers have formed an alliance that goes against the U.S. playing an active role in the region.<sup>30</sup> For instance, Beijing officials have expressed that the U.S. presence in the region should be short-term and focused on economic development alone.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, the consolidation and development of the SCO has helped both Russia and China to strengthen their relations with Central Asian states and, to a certain degree, limited the ability of maneuver by the U.S. to pursue its goals of pressing the Central Asian states to engage in democratization. It is obvious that Russia and China have their own conflict of interests, but this is not the focus of

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<sup>29</sup> To put it briefly, the U.S. had supported a revolution to drag down Akayev, once an advocator of democracy, and helped Kurmanbek Bakiyev and Felix Kulov to take power. But the two new leaders didn't abide by the democratic rules after they won the election. And American-backed organizations tried hard to bring down Bakiyev and Kulov, but to no avail. See M.K. Bhadrakumar, "Kyrgyzstan caught in US-Russia squeeze," *Asia Times*, November 7, 2006. <[http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central\\_Asia/HK07Ag02.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/HK07Ag02.html)>

<sup>30</sup> For detail analysis see Robert Legvold, "Great Power Stakes in Central Asia," in Robert Legvold, ed., *Thinking Strategically: the major powers, Kazakhstan, and the Central Asian nexus* (Cambridge, MA and London: American Academy of Arts and Science/MIT Press, 2003) p.34.

<sup>31</sup> Rollie Lal, "Central Asia and Its Neighbors: Security and Commerce at the Cross Roads," *RAND Corporation*, 2006, pp. 9-10. <<http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG440/>>

this writing and will not be elaborated further here.

There is another aspect that requires further discussion: US security assistance and military-to-military contacts with the aim of promoting the development of professional military institutions in Central Asia. However, this is not bound to happen without external assistance and nurturing. Given their short histories of independence and statehood, as well as the long-standing Soviet practice of restricting the number of Muslim minorities in the officer corps, the Central Asian militaries are new, small, and have uncertain traditions, and all these traits don't bode well for the development of a professional army, which is supposed to be politically neutral, enjoy autonomy, and dedicated exclusively to defense and security missions. While it would be futile to transform the political conditions of the Central Asian states in a rush, and the U.S. will have to accept and deal with Central Asia as it is, it is desirable for the US to balance its commitments to promote freedom and democracy against operational expediency. Meanwhile, the U.S. should restrain itself from taking a grand strategy perspective and taking Central Asia as an important element in its global dominance design.

#### **4. The Danger of Militarizing American Foreign Policy**

As mentioned above, there was a policy consensus among commentators that the U.S. should pursue comprehensive and balanced goals toward Central Asian states, which include democratization as well as economic development. However, there are different views on the levels and types of US military involvement.<sup>32</sup> The key question being debated in the discussion of U.S. foreign policy toward Central Asia is the issue of whether American military forces are going to maintain a permanent presence in the region, and this benchmark policy indicates the degree and the manner of the American involvement in this region. As past experiences have shown, once American militaries are involved in an area, it is difficult to call their mission off. The military-industrial-complex interest group will try their best to influence U.S. policy

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<sup>32</sup> Olga Oliker and David Shlapak, for instance, have synthesized two reasons for the long-term American military presence in the region of Central Asia and four reasons not to do so. See "U.S. Interests in Central Asia: Policy priorities and Military Roles."

and keep the American military engaged for as long as possible. Central Asia will not be an exception in this regard.

As revealed in recent policy development, the Bush administration's deeds simply do not match its words. While the Bush Administration had made promises to end the military presences in Central Asia in due time, it also said that it is America's goal to eradicate the conditions that breed terrorism in the region.<sup>33</sup> This job certainly is formidable and would require a quasi-permanent US interests in the region and very likely a military presence as well. In fact, within the military circle, people have already started to think of ways to justify keeping American military presence in the region permanently. If this becomes the case, then it will cause a new round of power struggle among the major powers of the region as some commentators had argued.<sup>34</sup> While emphasizing the security aspect of American policies toward Central Asia and ignoring the fact that it requires delicacy and time to change a country's political culture from outside, advocates of larger U.S. military role in the region propose that the U.S. military forces and other government agencies "must devise a comprehensive strategy of security cooperation and regional state-building activities that foster this permanent engagement with local governments."<sup>35</sup> History has shown again and again that the U.S. has rarely succeeded in this task of state-building or regime change, and the current quagmire in Iraq serves a good example of this assertion.

Commentators have indicated that the U.S. should not mix the mission of fighting terrorism with bolstering democracy because both tasks are related but not identical. Making things worse, what the Bush administration has been doing was focusing on the military aspect of the global war on terrorism and devoting less attention to understanding the complexities of the local political, societal, and cultural issues and problems. Even the retired General Anthony Zinni, once the Commander of the Central Command of the U.S. forces, noted, the U.S. was focusing mostly on the military

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<sup>33</sup> Mike Allen and Josh White, "President Outlines Overseas Troop Cut," *Washington Post*, August 17, 2004, p.1.

<sup>34</sup> Ahmed Rashid, "The New Struggle in Central Asia: A Primer for the Baffled," *World Policy Journal*, Vol.17, No.4 (Winter 2000/2001), pp.33-45.

<sup>35</sup> Stephen J. Blank, "After two wars: reflections on the American strategic revolution in Central Asia," *Strategic Study Institute*, US Army War College, July 2005.  
<<http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB614.pdf>>

operations and only winning tactical victories, which couldn't deal with the root causes of the terrorism problem. Without engaging in long-term and multilateral efforts, American actions would not be able to stop more young Muslim people from plunging into terrorist plots.<sup>36</sup> By believing heavily in the effectiveness of the unrivaled American military power, policy-makers in the Bush Administration mistakenly thought that military power alone would win respect and cooperation from the Islamic world. The mere fact of the unending quagmire in Iraq and Afghanistan clearly proves the contrary. Although the United States has mobilized significant international support for its campaign, the campaign itself has remained Washington-centric. The effort has proceeded principally on a unilateral and bilateral basis, not a multilateral one, with Washington assuming the role of the campaign's chief architect and engineer. Aspects of the campaign and American leadership have become matters of polarizing dispute between the United States and some of its partners, especially in the Arab and Muslim world. In more general terms: to the extent that the "war against terrorism" seems to serve exclusive national interests, it detracts from other legitimate international security concerns. In short, global cooperation has been undermined.

Let's take a closer look at specific U.S. military involvement in the Central Asia region. The U.S. military involvement in the region has expanded to include: forward basing in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan; access to airspace and restricted use of bases in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan; train and equip missions in Georgia; assistance for border security in Azerbaijan; coalition-building by high-level visits to the region, intelligence-sharing, and improved coordination within the American Central Command. But the Central Asian states are not all happy with the American military presence and actions have been taken with the purpose of either restricting or increasing the cost of American military activities. Uzbekistan has demanded that the U.S. should vacate K2 within six months on July 2005, and the US officially ceased operations to support Afghanistan at K2.<sup>37</sup> Kyrgyzstan, for instance, raised the overhead of using the Manas airbase in early 2006. At the same time, the Kyrgyz

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<sup>36</sup> General Zinni's comment is quoted from Najam Abbaas, "Bolstering Security and Boosting Democracy in South and Central Asia," *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, No.10 (January 2006), pp.327-350.

<sup>37</sup> Jim Nichol, "Central Asia's Security: Issues and Implications for US Interests," p.33.



government didn't charge the Russians for the use of a nearby base.<sup>38</sup> In the light of the energy resource and anti-terror campaign operation needs, the U.S. is unlikely to forsake influencing or controlling the Central Asian region in the near future. Meanwhile, in facing resistance against permanent American military presence, American military thinkers have tried to downplay the military presence factor by changing the term "permanent presence" to "permanent access". The logic behind this rhetoric is that the development of military technology and strategies has lowered the demand of a traditional use of military base. Thus, they suggest that the American government should try to establish agreements with local governments for a mutually acceptable form of permanent US military access as needed or requested.<sup>39</sup> The change of terms, however, does not reflect any modification of American global domination intentions, which will inevitably invite suspicions and counteractions from other regional powers.<sup>40</sup>

Aside from seeing Central Asia from a purely geopolitical perspective, another aspect of the perils of American foreign policy is that by focusing on the anti-terrorism campaign and its military operations, the U.S. is not giving a balanced consideration over the long-term prospect of Central Asia's development. Although the relationship that has developed between the Central Asian states and the U.S. is mutually welcomed, it is also increasingly distorted as the ruling elites in Central Asia are taking the anti-terror campaign as a convenient excuse to oppress domestic political opposition. If the U.S. and the Central Asian states can't genuinely agree on the common goals which would bring them together for a long time to come, and should the campaign against terror be perceived as the privileged instrument of a few states, the relationship between the two parties will go astray and invites resistance from other powers. While carrying out its anti-terror campaign, the U.S. must try its best to put away the thinking of

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<sup>38</sup> See Jim Nichol, "Uzbekistan's Closure of the Airbase at Karshi-Khanabad: context and Implications," *CRS Report for Congress*, October 2005.

<[http://digital.library.unt.edu/govdocs/crs/data/2005/upl-meta-crs-7519/RS22295\\_2005Oct07.pdf](http://digital.library.unt.edu/govdocs/crs/data/2005/upl-meta-crs-7519/RS22295_2005Oct07.pdf)>

<sup>39</sup> This view is presented in Stephen J. Blank, "After two wars: reflections on the American strategic revolution in Central Asia."

<sup>40</sup> For discussion of a new kind of American militarism see Andrew J. Bacevich and Tom Engelhardt, "The New American Militarism," April 21, 2005.

<<http://www.antiwar.com/engelhardt/?articleid=5625>>

advancing its own exclusive interests or power position. The U.S. needs more than a military strategy in dealing with the Central Asian states; in addition to the anti-terror campaign, it should address the problem from its roots, such as bringing in a new economic system that could provide work opportunities and economic growth and thereby help the Central Asian states to have more contact with the modern world without losing their sense of cultural identities.<sup>41</sup> The tasks being put forth here to the U.S. are by no means easy ones, but the tight rope is created by the U.S. itself for being and wanting continuously to be a global dominant player in regional politics of all continents.

## **5. Conclusion**

The war against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan has greatly shaped the development of relations between the U.S. and the Central Asian states. In the desire to maintain solid and sustainable relations with the Central Asia states, experts in the United States wonder whether, where, and how to promote democracy; this has become a central question in U.S. policy debates. But the rise in profile of democracy as a policy matter has hardly led to producing a sound and easily achievable approach to the issue. While adhering to military expediency, the U.S. is bound to face the dilemma that its policies will strengthen the authoritarian Central Asian leaders rather than empower the people. Furthermore, the various forms of aid given to these nations are hardly the sort of tools that can be relied on to produce results in any short period of time. It is understandable that the U.S. faces two contradictory imperatives: on the one hand, the fight against terror tempts Washington to put aside its democratic ideals and considerations and seek closer ties with autocracies in the Central Asia. On the other hand, this approach and practice will inevitably invite criticism and suspicions from the other contending powers in the region. If U.S. policies keep evolving along a heavily strategic and self interest-loaded thinking, then the U.S. presence in Central Asia will

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<sup>41</sup> Central Asian leaders have been urging the US to better understand the specifics of local culture and traditions when they were pressed on human rights issues. See Rouben Azizian, "Central Asia and the United States 2004-2005: Moving Beyond Counter-Terrorism?" *Special Assessment: The Asia-Pacific and the United States*, Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, February 2005.

undoubtedly fuel dissatisfaction and counter actions from Moscow and Beijing, not to mention resistance from Central Asian states.

It is clear that the US has critical interests at stake in the Central Asian region; however, the approach that the U.S. must take should be based less on military considerations and bases and more on the advancement of political and economic reforms and coordination with other interested parties. The best way to ensure that the war on terrorism complements rather than contradicts worldwide democracy and to continue the strengthening of democracy abroad is to keep democracy promotion a fundamental element of U.S. foreign policies in the years ahead. Thus the U.S. must show its genuine interest in promoting stability and development and exercise pressures on the authoritarian regimes in the region to improve their human rights records. Merely paying lip service to democracy promotion and focusing on short-term military expediencies will only aggravate suspicions toward U.S. long-term intentions.

Having examined the development of American foreign policies toward Central Asia, this study has come to the suggestion that the U.S. should introduce multilateralism into its handling of policies toward the region. The primary reason is that the problems and actors being dealt with in the region are international and intertwined, and only coordinated efforts by the US, Russia, and China has a chance of success. If the U.S. keeps its policymaking based on a Cold-war or military dominated thinking, then long-term progressive prospects will be doomed. It is obvious that there are military roles to be played by the American militaries; nevertheless, military considerations and solutions are far from ideal to solve problems faced by the U.S., especially with regard to terrorism. The U.S. should come up with a truly regional approach to Central Asia; this refers to a set of policies and measures which can effectively encourage cooperation between and among the states of the region. Furthermore, Central Asia should not be taken as a bulwark against either Russia or China, and it deserves to be treated as an important region because its stability and development is important to the world.

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## 美國中亞政策之評論

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### 摘 要

隨著反恐戰爭的進行，中亞成爲美軍全球反恐作戰的一個重要戰區，但美軍的突然蒞臨也引起中亞國家對於美國的動機與長期目標的戒心。在最近幾年裡，美國布希總統的外交政策飽受批評爲單邊主義與軍事主義傾向，本文將分析美國的中亞政策，重點是指出美國過於注重戰略安全考量與軍事權宜措施的缺失。事實上，偏重軍事考量的失衡政策，導致布希總統一再宣示的民主推廣淪爲政治口號。本文首先將概述美國中亞政策的發展，進而指出美國在追求其利益與目標時所遭遇的困難。基於中亞在美國國家安全戰略中佔有一定程度的重要份量，本文認爲軍事考量在美國中亞政策制定過程中僅應扮演次要角色，如果美國持續過度偏重軍事與地緣政治思考，這樣的思維與政策將會爲美國的長期利益帶來傷害，也同時對中亞的區域穩定發展不利。

**關鍵詞：**中亞，美國軍事主義，地緣政治，美國優勢

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