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US Central Asia policy: Still American Mars versus European Venus?

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Policy brief

At a time when transatlantic commitments are widely focused on the Syrian crisis and the need for coordinated policies to counter the economic and debt crises, a reading of the European Strategy for Central Asia and equivalent US texts¹ reveal the limited coordination of Western policies in the region. This often is more a matter of a mutual ignorance than of disagreements on the motives of the US and European involvement. Meetings on Central Asia between senior European and US officials are rare, except for those between the EU Special Representative for Central Asia and the US Under Secretary for the region. Meanwhile, mutual knowledge of the actions of US and European governments and public administration in Central Asia is minimal. US policy toward Central Asia is handled by a diversity of actors – the Defense Department, the State Department, USAID, and Congress – which do not share necessarily the same priorities. To these institutions one can add a range of American private actors, corporate as well as civil society, which each have their own objectives in the region. Tensions between main civil society organisations (the Open Society Foundation, the National Endowment for Democracy, Human Rights Watch, etc.) and the State and Defense Departments are regular and the assessment of the security-democracy nexus is often at the core of their debate. In addition to this, the United States' influence is also expressed via transatlantic institutions, particularly NATO and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

The United States does not consider Eurasia as its main foreign policy focus and will continue to embed Central Asia within a more global agenda. Europe however, will remain more intimately linked to the Eurasian region through its own relations to Russia, Turkey, Eastern neighbours and the Mediterranean basin. In contrast to the European approach, the United States' new emphasis on its strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific region and the maintenance of the focus on a 'greater Middle-East', as defined in the new US Defense Strategic Review, confirms that the relationship to China and South Asia will be a key element in the American reading of Central Asia's future.² Beyond differences in the fields of trade orientation, power projection, and focus on hard or soft security; Europe and the United States share many values and seek a relatively similar future for the Central Asian region.

¹ European Council General Secretariat, The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership; The Joint EU Council and Commission Implementation Report of the EU Strategy for Central Asia, June 2009, http://www.eeas.europa.eu/central_asia/docs/2010_strategy_eu_centralasia_en.pdf, accessed August 2012. There is no equivalent official text from the U.S. side available as declassified, but the reader can refer to Robert O. Blake, Jr. speech at the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Forum, SAIS Washington, DC, January 25, 2012, and to S.F. Starr, and A.C. Kuchins, "The Key to Success in Afghanistan A Modern Silk Road Strategy," Silk Road Papers (Washington, D.C.: The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, 2010)..

² US Department of Defense, Sustaining US global leadership: Priorities for 21st century defense, January 2012.



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This policy brief discusses the strategy of the United States in Central Asia by analysing first the five main foreign policy objectives in the region. Secondly, the brief addresses country specific approaches and thirdly, the shared and divergent aspects of US and European policy in the region are discussed.

Ranking Priorities

The United States' strategic thinking divides the world into main areas of concerns. For two decades the place of Central Asia has been shifting from Eurasia (the former Soviet space) to either 'Greater Middle East' or 'South Asia'. Separating Central Asia from the rest of the post-Soviet space aims at reducing a traditional, Russia-centred focus and promotes a new logic of regionalisation. At the US Defense Department, Central Asia is since 1999 part of the Central Command (CentCom), which also includes the Middle East, North Africa, Afghanistan and Pakistan. At the State Department, Central Asia has been withdrawn from the Europe and Eurasia Bureau and moved into the new Central Asia and South Asia Bureau in 2006. These bureaucratic reshuffles are indicative of the US shifting attention from Europe to Asia.

In 2009 when the 'AfPak' concept was under development, the Obama administration also undertook a comprehensive review of US strategy in Central-Asia and laid out a road map with five goals: 'To maximize the cooperation of the states of the region with coalition counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan (particularly cooperation on hosting US and NATO airbases and on the transit of troops and supplies to Afghanistan along the 'Northern Distribution Network'); to increase the development and diversification of the region's energy resources and supply routes; to promote the eventual emergence of good governance and respect for human rights; to foster competitive market economies; and to increase the capacity of the states to govern themselves, and in particular to prevent state failure in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, including by enhancing food security assistance.'³

In Washington's view, Central Asia is first and foremost in Afghanistan's neighbourhood. Since late 2001 operations in Afghanistan have become a driving force of US involvement in Central Asia, with military bases in Uzbekistan's Karshi-Khanabad (which closed in 2005) and Kyrgyzstan's Manas. This Afghanistan-driven prism was strengthened greatly with the establishment of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) in 2009. Assistant Secretary, Robert Blake has emphasised regularly that Central Asia plays 'a vital role' in US strategy in Afghanistan. Military-oriented and short term needs have taken clear precedence over other foreign policy considerations. Moreover, the deterioration of relations with former US ally Pakistan makes the northern route vital to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) for its withdrawal from Afghanistan.⁴ The Pentagon is therefore currently the primary player in US policy toward Central Asia, and its needs outweigh the interests of both the State Department and Congress; as seen with the temporary lifting of 2004 Congressional sanctions on the provision of military aid to Uzbekistan. This move has

had strong symbolic significance for Islam Karimov's regime, as the total allocated to Tashkent has been increased to \$1.5 million for next year.⁵

This view through an Afghan lens of Central Asia gives priority to a security-oriented interpretation of US involvement in the region. Narratives on Uzbekistan as a key strategic player, due to its location and demographic importance, have multiplied since the establishment of the NDN. Meanwhile regular oscillation concerning the future of the US transit centre at Manas dominates relations between Washington and Bishkek. Officially, the Manas transit centre will close in 2014, when ISAF terminates its mission. The rent of the base and technical assistance linked to it, however, provide substantial revenue to the Kyrgyz government, which amounted to \$150 million in 2011,⁶ and could be transformed into a civilian or paramilitary structure. In preparation for the post 2014 period Washington announced two major new assistance projects. The first is the construction of new training facilities in Batken and near Dushanbe, that would support the fight against drug trafficking and terrorism, although no US troops would be stationed at these facilities.⁷ The second assistance project is the launch of the Central Asia Counter-narcotics Initiative (CACI) in order to provide training and equipment to set up counter-narcotics task forces for the whole region.⁸

The second aspect of US policy aims to increase the development and diversification of the region's energy resources and supply routes. This priority is also linked closely to Afghanistan, but in a more forward-looking way. Since the 1990s, the United States has put forward the Silk Road narrative, arguing that the development of transcontinental trade between Asia and Europe would be a crucial element for long term stability in the region and moreover, a means to distance it from Russian domination. Two Silk Road Strategic Acts were enacted, in 1999 and 2006. In 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton promoted a vision for a New Silk Road, which was presented as a major US contribution to the post-2014 period. This vision was designed to direct public and private investment in such a way as to transform Afghanistan into a regional hub and to link South and Central Asia.⁹ Clearly US Silk Road thinking has evolved over the years: at the

³ J. Nichol, Central Asia: Regional Developments and Implications for US Interests (WashingtonDC: Congress Research Service, May 31, 2012), p. 3.

⁴ Majority Staff Report, Central Asia and the Transition in Afghanistan (Prepared for the Use of the Committee on Foreign Relations: United States Senate, December 19, 2011).

⁵ Department of State, Executive Budget Summary, Fiscal Year 2013, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/183755.pdf>.

⁶ J. Nichol, Op.cit, p.38.

⁷ D. Tynan, Pentagon Looks to Plant New Facilities in Central Asia, Eurasianet, 8 June 2010 <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/61241>, accessed August 2012.

⁸ State Department, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, Central-Asia Counternarcotics Initiative, 11 February 11 2012, <http://www.state.gov/j/inl/rls/fs/184295.htm>, accessed August 2012.

⁹ The Law on Parliamentary Election was revised in December 2011. See Mongolian Legal Unified Information System, <http://www.legalinfo.mn>.

beginning of the 1990s, it centred around linking Central Asia to the South Caucasus, and establishing Turkey's role as the region's crossroads. The 2011 Silk Road not only has a different regional focus but also is further presented as a 'strategic vision' and 'mind-set'; notwithstanding, it still lacks a policy document or specific budget allocation.¹⁰ This has attracted criticism of those who argue that the vision must be accompanied by real diplomatic and financial commitment in order to become a reality.¹¹

Democracy promotion ranks third. Officially, the State Department rejects critics who claim that US interest in the region's democracy situation is declining on behalf of security considerations. To this, Robert Blake said, "we do not see our engagement with Central Asia as an either/or choice between developing security relationships at the expense of core values like human rights. Progress on one issue can help reinforce, or create incentives for progress on other issues."¹² Currently US democracy promotion – which refers mainly to human rights and religious freedom – materialises through the Assistance to Europe, Eurasia, and Central Asia (AEECA) programmes, and the Annual Bilateral Consultation process that is organised with each of the five Central Asian states. This also includes however, discussions on scientific and technological collaboration, economic development, and defence cooperation. Representatives of US firms and the departments of commerce and energy are involved also, further expanding the range of thematic issues and thus marginalising value matters on the agenda. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has labelled Uzbekistan (since 2006), Turkmenistan (since 2000), and Tajikistan (since 2012) as 'Countries of Particular Concern' (CPC) for severe religious or other human rights violations. This does not result necessarily that sanctions will be taken against these states.¹³ Similarly to Europe, the United States lacks leverage to affect the reality on the ground, which is particularly the case when securing the exit of troops from Afghanistan is a priority.

Fourth, the US objective of promoting a market economy was central in the 1990s, but has been downgraded as a programming priority. Today, Washington limits its role in this domain to promoting Kazakhstan's, Uzbekistan's and Tajikistan's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO) and hoping for positive side effects of the New Silk Road policy on local trade, and therefore subsequently on business initiatives and the investment climate.

Ranking last on the top-five policy list is development assistance that is bolstered by the activities of USAID and for the rest, largely left to private and civil society initiatives. Still, USAID has been a substantial actor on development in Central Asia and works in all five states, with limited access to Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Its development axes are divided into the three broad categories of economic development, health, and 'governing democratically and justly' programmes.

Country Specific Approaches

Since the early 1990s, **Kyrgyzstan** benefitted from particular interest as the 'democratic laboratory' of Central Asia. US foreign policy has emphasised consistently Bishkek's political progress. The stakes became more complex with the presence of the Manas base, which has led Washington to support the corrupt and authoritarian tendencies of the Bakiyev family in the past. This has discredited the US in Kyrgyz public opinion after the second 'revolution' of April 2010. Moreover, US discourse on the democratic nature of Kyrgyzstan tends to ignore the failure of state structures in providing social welfare and does not take into account the sense of social injustice that citizens feel, regarding the absence of state protection of their basic rights.

Washington has long considered **Kazakhstan** to be overly close to Moscow and as the main driver of Russian influence in the region. In the first half of the 1990s the US has limited itself mostly to engagement on denuclearisation issues. Kazakhstan is the only country in the region however that has managed to implement a multi-vector foreign policy, remain faithful to such principles for two decades and avoid the geopolitical subterfuge and quick reversals that characterise its Uzbek neighbour. Today, Astana presents itself as one of Washington's loyal partners. The two countries have joint economic interests in the Caspian basin and growing bilateral trade and furthermore have consolidated the strategic partnership, which was mustered despite Russia's revived influence and China's growing role – especially related to Caspian security and cooperation in the framework of NATO.

As the most active in their attempts to escape the Russian fold, **Turkmenistan** and **Uzbekistan** appeared to be promising partners in the 1990s, however they did not align to the US agenda of democracy promotion and remain suspicious of US intentions vis-à-vis national sovereignty. Ashgabat and Tashkent courted Washington in order to weaken Moscow, but limited any attempt to build regional Central Asian unity, and never made any definitive overtures to the United States. Uzbekistan quickly established itself on the US radar by supporting the presence of American troops in the region and in its international policy, at least until the souring of relations in 2004-05. Since 2008-09, it has regained US interest via the NDN, even more so now with Tashkent leaving the Collective Security Treaty Organization

¹⁰ R.O. Blake, China's Evolving Role in Central Asia (Foreign Service Institute and State Department Bureau of South and Central-Asian Affairs: Washington DC, December 9, 2011).

¹¹ 'The US Military Involvement in Central-Asia and Its Impact on US-Central-Asia Relations: Four questions to Stephen Blank, Alexander Cooley, Joshua Kucera, and Andrew Kuchins', Central-Asia Policy Forum, no. 1, April 2012.

¹² R.O. Blake, Op.cit.

¹³ USCIRF Annual Report 2012 (Washington DC: USCIRF, 2012).

(CSTO) structure. From Washington's point of view, Uzbekistan continues to be valued in classic geostrategic terms, which favours its central geographic location, demographic power, and strong state narrative. Turkmenistan meanwhile, has grown in importance since its second president Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov has pursued a more opened-up stance, mainly by giving reason for hope to some large US companies who wish to enter the Turkmen gas industry.

To a certain extent, **Tajikistan** is a largely forgotten figure in the US Central Asia policy. The Tajik state has no resources with which to attract the interest of US corporations; does not welcome foreign military bases; is limited by Russian military presence; has good neighbourhood relations with Tehran; and follows political patterns that are closer to Uzbekistan than Kyrgyzstan. A large part of the US involvement in Tajikistan is therefore linked to modest development assistance. Given its proximity to Afghanistan and Iran, the permeability of Tajik and Afghan societies and the internal weakness of the country, there is potential for an increase of American interest in Tajikistan. Washington plans for instance to double its military aid to Dushanbe for 2013 and be more involved in border control support.

American and European perceptions of Central Asia

Despite considerable common ground in terms of values promotion, European and American policies toward Central Asia differ on various points.

The European strategy is not built on the idea of an intimate connection between Central Asia and Afghanistan. It is neither based on the short term needs of ISAF withdrawal, nor on the idea that Afghanistan is a 'sixth state' in Central Asia. At the level of European bureaucracy, Central Asia is still part of the post-Soviet space and extension of the Eastern neighbourhood. Unlike the United States, the EU has no hard security edge, as it lacks Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions in the region and prefers to work through NATO, or leave hard security interests to member states with direct concerns, like Germany. Immediate issues linked to ISAF withdrawal are being managed directly by NATO or bilaterally by member states.

European policy is now increasingly being separated by country and this trend is expected to grow in the years to come. Although Kazakhstan could be brought closer to European neighbourhood policy, Tajikistan probably will be more closely associated with Afghanistan, at least in some aid and development programmes. European policy is becoming closer to American policy by accentuating the dissociation of its policies country by country, and in integrating Afghanistan into some of them. The recently published EU Central Asia Strategy review confirmed the growing emphasis placed on the threat from Afghanistan, even if this concern did not translate into a policy change and does not correspond with the fundamentals of European policy in the region, contrary to that of the United States.

For two decades, Washington has sought to alienate the Central Asian states from Russia both economically and strategically, in order to promote their autonomy from the former Soviet centre. The US position on the possible expansion of cooperation with Moscow in the post-2014 period is far from unanimous within decision-making and expert communities, and will probably be dictated by pragmatism rather than by ideological choices. Since Europe shares a continent with Russia, the EU does not seek to exclude Russia *per se* from the Central Asian security landscape, and will continue to perceive this region as partly linked to Moscow's evolutions.

Such differences can be clearly noted in the energy sector. The American desire to give the green light to the TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) gas pipeline, symbolic of the link between Central and South Asia, may contradict the hopes of developing a European Southern gas corridor with the Caspian Basin. Europe has no particular interest in promoting TAPI if it hinders negotiations with Ashgabat, and TAPI will not bring an end to the position of Russia as the main artery for most economic and energy exchanges between Europe and Central Asia. The United States' focus on linking Central and South Asia remains up for debate from the European perspective.

The decision of the United States to promote this South Asian axis, to the detriment of Central Asia's rapprochement with Europe and the Mediterranean Basin, seems contradictory to the transatlantic commitment, the privileged role attributed to Turkey, and the links with the South Caucasus. In Central Asia itself, this orientation is also unsettled, as elites do not look at a South Asian model of development and identify neither with Pakistan, nor India but rather with Europe, Russia and Turkey.

Conclusion

The conventional idea that there is a 'Mars oriented' America versus a 'Venus style' Europe holds some truth but eventually does not do justice to either. It remains a rather limited interpretation that reduces the role of the United States to a mere hard security actor motivated by global geopolitical games. This however is not representative of the reality of the United States' interests and actions in the region. Moreover, the post-2014 period is an unknown: Washington's role in the region may be reinforced around security issues, in which case it will go in the direction of a 'Mars oriented' strategy; but American interests in the region may also wane, and security circles turn away from the region toward other theatres, thus returning more space to civilian actors. In this case, a plurality of actions and actors on the American side will be maintained, even with the possibly of growth. The new European Union Special Representative for Central Asia, Patricia Flor, will thus have the mission of rethinking the modalities of transatlantic cooperation in the post-2014 era, among others.¹⁴

¹⁴ J. Boonstra et al, 'Ten tasks for the new EU Special Representative to Central-Asia,' EUCAM Policy Brief, 24 June 2012, http://www.fride.org/download/PB_24_Tasks_new_EUSR_Central_Asia.pdf, accessed August 2012.

In many areas, particularly in trade and geopolitics, US and European interests could continue to deviate, weakened by Asia's emergence on the world stage. Although in terms of values, they will remain close and require reinforcement of the transatlantic commitment. There are modalities for better coordination, leading to potential growing cooperation in Central Asia on values and security. An emphasis on good governance as a key element of stability and prosperity also comprises part of the shared agenda. In a time of fiscal rectitude, coordinating policies in matters of education (especially higher education), the training of younger generations to think critically and to carry out specialised technical training, or in civil society activism would be another field of potential coordination.

A three way relation between the countries of Central Asia, Europe and the United States through new platforms, or by the reshaping of some existing initiatives, would make it possible to reinforce the multiplying effects of these projects to limit the costs, and to give the Central Asians a clearer sense of the transatlantic relationship. NATO is a potential platform where upon EU-US cooperation and coordination on Central Asia could be enhanced further. Improvements could also be made to the sharing of responsibilities that sees the United States concentrate on hard security, and the Europeans on soft security. While the aid given to some sectors is far from

consensual (training of security agencies, donations of military material), or has not proven to be efficient (border security), disaster solutions (natural, industrial, and climate change related) is a key area of long term, everyday security in the region, and one where the US and Europe could use their knowhow to work together.

The disconnect between the United States and Europe in relation to geostrategic and commercial interests and theatres of operations is an unavoidable process that does not jeopardise the transatlantic commitment. The United States is a powerful force in Asia; Europe is not, and is therefore increasing legitimately its involvement in this area of the world. Over the last half century, US policy has espoused a global view while Europe has focused more on its neighbourhood - both southern and eastern - and will continue to do so, especially given the drastic changes in its environment linked to the Arab Spring. US and European different viewpoints of the world impact their respective involvement in Central Asia. The transatlantic commitment in relation to the region must therefore not be based on a kind of geopolitical reading, indeed upon which the US and Europe diverge, but on the value commitment that both share, and which can be translated in terms of governance improvement and human development.



Established in 2008 as a project seeking to monitor the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia, EUCAM has grown into a knowledge hub on broader Europe-Central Asia relations. Specifically, the project aims to:

- Scrutinise European policies towards Central Asia, paying specific attention to security, development and the promotion of democratic values within the context of Central Asia's position in world politics;
- Enhance knowledge of Europe's engagement with Central Asia through top-quality research and by raising awareness among European policy-makers and civil society representatives, as well as discuss European policies among Central Asian communities;
- Expand the network of experts and institutions from European countries and Central Asian states and provide a forum to debate on European-Central Asian relations.

Currently, the broader programme is coordinated by FRIDE, in partnership with the Karelian Institute and CEPS, with the support of the Open Society Foundations and the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The main outputs of the programme are a series of policy briefs and comprehensive reports on key issues facing the Europe-Central Asia relationship.

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FRIDE is a European think tank for global action, based in Madrid, which provides fresh and innovative thinking on Europe's role on the international stage. Our mission is to inform policy and practice in order to ensure that the EU plays a more effective role in supporting multilateralism, democratic values, security and sustainable development. We seek to engage in rigorous analysis of the difficult debates on democracy and human rights, Europe and the international system, conflict and security, and development cooperation. FRIDE benefits from political independence and the diversity of views and intellectual background of its international team.



Founded in 1971, the Karelian Institute is a unit of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Business Studies of the University of Eastern Finland. It engages in basic and applied multi-disciplinary research, supports the supervision of postgraduate studies and researcher training, and participates in teaching. It focuses mainly on three thematic priorities: Borders and Russia; Ethnicity and Culture; and Regional and Rural Studies.



The Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) in Brussels is among the most experienced and authoritative think tanks operating in the European Union today. It aims to carry out state-of-the-art policy research leading to solutions to the challenges facing Europe today and to achieve high standards of academic excellence and maintain unqualified independence. CEPS provides a forum for discussion among all stakeholders in the European policy process.