

# THE HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE US RELATIONS WITH THE CENTRAL ASIAN STATES TAKING INTO CONSIDERATION OF THE RUSSIAN INTERESTS

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Since the collapse of the USSR and until the early 2000s, Moscow had observed gradually decline of its influence in Central Asian states, like in other post-Soviet countries. Russian strategists directly linked this with the United States, Turkey and the European countries' approach to Central Asia. Russian Federation took various diplomatic, economic and military efforts to restrain this trend – in order to contain the expanding influence of the US and its allies, to restriction of capability Central Asian countries to pursue an

independent foreign policy. In fact, Russia's both political and economic reintegration initiatives and projects were aimed to create a situation in which the United States and its allies would have to deal with Moscow first and then with the rest of the CIS countries, including Central Asia.

**Key words:** Central Asia, the USA, Russia, NATO, national interests

Many political analysts believe that Central Asia is a strategic important region for the USA because of its geographical border and proximity with the People's Republic of China, Russia, Iran, Afghanistan, two major Asian powers – India and Pakistan<sup>1</sup>. Frederick Starr pointed out one of his interview that, "the absolute importance of Central Asia is that the region as the only one on the earth surrounded by nuclear powers, such as India, China, Russia, Pakistan, potentially Iran and also one of the NATO alliance Turkey. The region where such a similar convergence of economic and geopolitical powers that maintains its special significance"<sup>2</sup>.

It is important to understand how the US geopolitical interests and engagement towards the region were perceived by Moscow and how Washington viewed Russia's interests and activities in Central Asia.

Stephen Blank, referring to the 1998 National Security Strategy of US, indicated that "the professed interest of the U.S. Government is to integrate the key areas of the CIS fully into Western economic and military-political structures. That integration entails these governments' growing democratization and development of open market economies. However, these objectives also call on us to break any Russian hope of monopolizing

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<sup>1</sup> Братерский М. Политика США в Центральной Азии и интересы России // Центральная Азия и Кавказ, 2007, № 4(52).

<sup>2</sup> Старр Ф. Центральная Азия. Девять вопросов одному эксперту / WashingtonProfile от 5 февраля 2009.

the economic-political-military life of these states. Such a Russian domination necessarily would diminish regional security by attempting to create, in the face of determined local opposition, an exclusive Russian sphere of influence, perhaps even a restored union, albeit not a Soviet reunion"<sup>3</sup>. This tough tension seems to be the result of Moscow's opposition to the US and its allies' attempts to open Caspian energy resources to world markets by passing Russian territory, and pull Central Asian states, the Caucasus and Eastern Europe into NATO's orbit.

In 2009, Stephen Blank spoke at the Subcommittee on Central Asia, Senate Foreign relations Committee and stated, "The US seeks to preclude the rebirth of any Eurasian empire and thus guarantee that Central Asian states retain their full sovereignty to choose their own path in world affairs without being subordinated to any one state"<sup>4</sup>.

Some change in rhetoric (the reference to "any Eurasian empire") is explained by fact that besides Russia, in the Eurasian arena emerged another power, China. At this stage, the growth of China's influence in the region was perceived by the United States as another instrument of weakening Russia's monopolistic positions in Central Asia. However, for the US, throughout the early 2000s Russia was main power, which tends to hold dominant (and even monopolistic) positions in Central Asia and Eurasia. In Russian Federation, there were very different estimates of growing Western presence in Central Asia throughout the 1990's and 2000's. These assessments ranged from alarmist, sometimes even chauvinistic (calling on all forces and means to

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<sup>3</sup> B.Stephen. U.S. Military Engagement with Transcaucasia and Central Asia // Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, June 2000.  
<http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB113.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Problems in Central Asian Security. Testimony of Dr. Stephen Blank to the Subcommittee on Central Asia, Senate Foreign Relations Committee. December 15, 2009.  
<http://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/BlankTestimony091215a1.pdf>  
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impede the advancement of the United States in the region), to individual attempts to justify the need for closer interaction with the US and the EU in the transformation of Central Asia and countering the threats emanating from the region.

The actions of the Russian Federation after the collapse of the USSR (the signing of the Belovezh agreements without the participation of the Central Asian countries, the beginning of radical economic reforms without any coordination with Central Asian states <sup>5</sup>, the orientation of Russian foreign policy exclusively to the West, etc.) demonstrated that Russian leaders of that time regarded Central Asia as not perspective region. The political and economic direction of Russian Federation back then was often accompanied by scornful and even racist rhetoric about Central Asian civilization as fundamentally unviable of economic and political transformation as Western models. Russian foreign policy fully ignored Central Asian countries<sup>6</sup>. Albeit the limited possibilities of influencing the situation, the approach and methods of the new leadership of Moscow conditioned by the historical legacy of hegemonic role in Central Asia.

It is worth noting that not all representatives of the Russian political leaders and experts shared similar views. For instance, Eugene Primakov indicated: "Geopolitical shifts after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia became less and less an actor in world affairs ... The West was clearly satisfied with the plight of Russia. Moreover, the socio-economic degradation of our state almost discredits the entire foreign policy of state in the first half

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<sup>5</sup> In particular, there was a unilateral decision by Russia to abolish the operation of Soviet rubles on its territory and introduce a new national currency, the Russian ruble. After this decision, a huge ruble mass poured into those CIS countries that still used the Soviet currency, which led to the unwinding of already high inflation.

<sup>6</sup> Лунев С.И. Независимые республики Центральной Азии и Россия. – Москва, Институт востоковедения РАН, 2001. <http://www.humanities.edu.ru/db/msg/28060>.

of the 1990s, entering the "civilized world" goal was complete disregard for the Russian national interests"<sup>7</sup>.

Moscow's attempts to control the region or compel to Central Asian states fulfill their requests resulted in growth of nationalist sentiments in the region. The governments of the Central Asian states tried to distance themselves from Russia and, quite commonly in that situation, perceived Moscow's approach as relapses of imperial policy. Russia constantly sought to prevent Western influence on the CIS, however, could not replace the West, not only from economic point, but also in terms of guarantees for the internal political security of elite in the CIS countries<sup>8</sup>. Such tensions in relations between Russia and Central Asian states led to advantage of interests of the West, especially from the second half of the 1990s', when the United States began active engagement with Central Asian countries in order to develop the oil and gas potential of the region.

At the same time, Central Asia states had always viewed that Russia's role as an important partner in resolving many issues in the CIS. Therefore, in 1993-1994 Russia began to search new formats and mechanisms of relations with the Central Asia states. In particular, in order to restore economic relations concluded multilateral and bilateral agreements, and sought ways to interact on other issues.

One of the examples demonstrating the common interests of Russia and the United States in the sphere of ensuring stability and sustainable development of the Central Asian states may be the research of the Russian expert Bratersky. Considering the differences and similarities in the

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<sup>7</sup> Примаков Е. Мир без России? К чему ведет политическая близорукость. – М.: ИИК «Российская газета», 2009. – С.8-9.

<sup>8</sup> Центральная Азия: геэкономика, геополитика, безопасность. / Редколл.: Р.М.Алимов, Ш.Р.Арифханов и др. – Ташкент: «Шарк», 2002. сс. 101-102.

approaches of the Russia and the US to the issue of the democratization of regimes in Central Asia, he came to the conclusion that "... from Washington's point of view, strengthening the influence of Moscow and Beijing in the region leads to the reproduction of an undemocratic socio-political model, which is precisely a root cause of problems in Central Asia. Russia and the China believe that the American model of democracy is unique and cannot be directly applied to other cultures"<sup>9</sup>. Batersky also argued that in many regional problems the national political interests of the United States and Russia are intertwined in one way to another, so that Russian foreign policy should develop an optimal line, however, taking into account the interests and motives of other parties.

At the same time, Russia did not counteract all initiatives and actions of the West in Central Asia. For instance, Russia supported the efforts of the United States and NATO in the field of nuclear arms control, supported the anti-terrorist operation after the events of September 11, 2001, including the deployment of the US and NATO military bases to support operations of the international coalition troops in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the competition between Moscow and Washington for influence in the region since the mid-1990s remained important, and after 2005 acquired great significance<sup>10</sup>.

The framework of political and diplomatic relations with Central Asian states evolved as American experts and political circles has increased awareness about the region and its significance for Washington's global interests. At the same time, it should be noted that the United States has never considered Central Asia as an object of its special economic interests,

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<sup>9</sup> Братерский М. Политика США в Центральной Азии и интересы России // Центральная Азия и Кавказ, 2007, № 4(52).

<sup>10</sup> Largely, there was a consequence of a series of "color revolutions" in a number of post-Soviet countries, which the US actively and openly supported.

even in the context of the use of energy resources of the Caspian basin<sup>11</sup>. In this regard, the political and diplomatic relations between America and Central Asian states were formed primarily in the sphere of security and stability in the region.

Before the tragic events of September 11, 2001, and at the beginning of the anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan, Washington established a political-diplomatic cooperation with the Central Asian countries in the field of regional security and assistance in strengthening their independence and sovereignty.

On one hand, the intensive contacts and cooperation of Moscow with Central Asian states, as well as with other CIS countries, had to promote change in Russia, placing it in a situation where it would be surrounded by democratic (Western-style) states with free market economies, oriented to economic and political interaction with the West than with Russia. On the other hand, Moscow in this situation would have no choice to join the community of democratic countries as an ordinary member. This would increase in the number of democratic states with a free market economy in the post-Soviet area and in the world fit into the concept of preserving the global leadership of the United States as a country that defends the interests of the entire "free world".

In early years of independence, the United States established contacts primarily with the countries of the region bilaterally. More specifically, the Freedom Support Act was adopted in October 30, 1992, which provided for

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<sup>11</sup> The energy resources of the Caspian Sea were of primary importance for ensuring the energy security of Europe, as well as for shaping the prerequisites for strengthening the economic positions of the countries of the Caspian basin and the Central Asian region. The US was interested primarily in the issue of Caspian energy resources from the point of view of increasing American influence on allies and partners, as well as reducing Russia's monopoly influence in the Caspian Sea and Central Asia region.

the provision of the US government assistance to the newly independent states (including the countries of Central Asia), directly and through the IMF.

More recently, the US began to focus on institutional format to support Central Asian countries, the development of interaction among region and between Central Asia and the Western community, primarily with the EU. In this regard, Aldubasheva noted that the united States rely on on the formation of a new regional structure, which new nations would have the opportunity to make their own choice in the *Wilsonian* spirit. It was assumed that this choice would be pro-Western<sup>12</sup>.

In this context, it should be regarded at least briefly a number of security projects and stimulate international cooperation in the region initiated and supported by the US. One of the first regional projects was the initiative on export control and non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), which allowed the US to solve complex issues where the primary task was to support the international legal framework to the efforts in reduction of the Soviet potential in WMD and to establish proper control over its remnants. However, the indirect effects were wider and, perhaps, much more important for the US strategically. They included:

- creation of legal barrier to the cooperation of Central Asian countries with Iran, which was under international sanctions in connection with suspicions of attempts to develop nuclear weapons and their delivery technologies;
- Establishment of a precedent for successful multilateral cooperation in the region led by the United States, which would demonstrate

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<sup>12</sup> Алдубашева Ж. Внешнеполитическая стратегия США в Центральной Азии // Казахский национальный университет имени аль-Фараби, Алматы, 2013.



the attractiveness of Washington as a potential partner in addressing other regional issues;

- Offered a platform for the development of dialogue and interaction with the military-political institutions of the Central Asian countries and the Caucasus on a broader spectrum of issues<sup>13</sup>.

The NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) program can be regarded as another institutional mechanism that involved Central Asian states<sup>14</sup>, as well as other post-Soviet countries, including Russia, in dialogue and interaction on a wide range of security issues. PfP served simultaneously as an important mechanism for training personnel for military and political structures, providing technical assistance in the reform of the national armed forces.

Until 2005, experts and political circles in the West thought that Russia might and should participate in NATO mechanisms aimed at strengthening overall security in Eurasia. In this regard, McDermott pointed out that if NATO planners can identify a window of opportunity, capitalize on Russia's long experience of dealing with the region, and move forward in a cooperative framework, based on openness and involving Moscow in the process, and then there are grounds for optimism. Such an approach would reassure the Central Asian states, reduce regional tension, eschew great power competition and rivalry and bring opportunities for joint confidence building measures<sup>15</sup>. However, the leadership of the United States and the member countries of NATO prevailed a different point of view, the essence of

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<sup>13</sup> Thus, in the framework of the export control and non-proliferation initiative, WMDs sponsored regular international export control forums. In 2002, the Sixth Forum was held in Tashkent with the participation of about 100 delegates from Central Asia, Transcaucasia, the United States and Europe.

<sup>14</sup> With the exception of Turkmenistan whose foreign policy based on "positive neutrality", Turkmenistan does not accept participation in international organization besides UN and its agencies.

<sup>15</sup> McDermott R. NATO Deepens its Partnership with Central Asia // CACI Analyst. November 17, 2004.

which was the need to more actively oppose Russia. The intensification of Moscow in the post-Soviet space, which began in 1999-2000, only strengthened the position of hardliners in relations with Russia<sup>16</sup>.

The US with the support of the governments of developed European countries and large Western transnational corporations and through initiatives and projects on development of the energy resources of the Caspian Sea, as well as many scientific and expert conferences and forums set the agenda for geo-economic and geopolitical development of Central Asian countries.

Despite all the ambitiousness and lack of economic feasibility, the Caspian pipeline projects, especially those connected with the laying of pipelines along the Caspian seabed to connect the Central Asian countries to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan branch, played a very important role in the development of "geopolitical pluralism" in the region. Discussions, disputes and even open confrontation allowed all the participants in this process (including, Russia) to reveal that Russia is a kind of non-alternative partner - both for the West and for the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia.

In connection with the Caspian, projects and efforts under the PfP of NATO should also be considered an initiative called GUAM (GUUAM)<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Many associate this with the arrival of Putin, Vladimir Putin, as prime minister and then Russian president

<sup>17</sup> The full name is the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development. The cooperation of Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova within the framework of GUAM was initiated at the meeting of the presidents of these countries on October 10, 1997 in Strasbourg during the summit of the Council of Europe. At the same time, an official communique was issued on the recognition of the GUAM alliance with the status of an "advisory forum". In April 1999, Uzbekistan joined the forum. This event was announced during the anniversary NATO summit in Washington, during which the heads of state already GUUAM adopted the Washington Declaration, which proclaimed the goal of integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures. In September 2000, during the Millennium Summit, the UN also adopted a memorandum that defined the goals of the creation and activities of GUAM. July 6-7, 2001 in Yalta the GUUAM summit was held, at which the heads of the participating states signed the Charter. As a result, the consultative forum received the status of an international regional organization

Formally, the US and the EU is not directly involved in this organization, but especially at the first stages, supported its work in every possible way and actively influenced the formation and setting up an agenda<sup>18</sup>. As demonstrated recently, the organization proved to be unsustainable. In 2002 Uzbekistan announced it's withdrawal from this organization. Officially, Uzbekistan left the organization in 2005 due to a significant change in its initially stated goals and objectives. Although the name of the organization spoke of its role as an institution designed to promote the deepening of democratic and economic reforms, to promote the economic development of member countries, in fact, the activities of the GUAM began to acquire an increasingly bloc character with a clearly anti-Russian orientation.

Another important feature inherent in the US policy in Central Asia is that the White House began to observe electoral cycles and a change of administrations (republican and democratic), as well as personalities responsible for the US foreign policy, including for relations with post-Soviet countries. Such tensions and shifts did not fundamentally affect the strategic attitudes of the United States in the world, particularly in Eurasia, but largely determined how the dialogue and interaction between Washington and Moscow developed. In addition, any US administration should take measures taking into consideration the Congress, large business and lobby groups.

An important tool of the US policy, including political and economic pressure, were various non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the significant part of them promote human rights. Such organizations were not necessarily directly linked to the US administration, but their reports and opinions on the situation in the countries of Central Asia (as well as

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<sup>18</sup> This was especially evident after the "color revolutions" in Ukraine and Georgia, when pro-American / pro-Western opposition forces came to power in these countries.

throughout the CIS) were actively used by the US State Department in a dialogue with the governments of the Central Asian countries. This was especially characteristic of the period of the Clinton administration, within the framework of the "global involvement" strategy, used human rights issues to promote democratic (and not only) reforms in the post-Soviet countries.

Many researchers and analysts state that the intensity of criticism by non-governmental organizations against individual nations has often been inversely related to the level of relations between Washington and the government of this country. This dependence was of twofold; on the one hand, Washington was inclined to muffle criticism if it was necessary to maintain close relations with a particular country on strategic discretion, on the other hand, the governments often made some concessions in favor of relations with the United States.

For instance, in the first half of the 1990s the US authorities expressed concern about the policy of Uzbekistan's leadership, often speaking with accusations of violations of human rights, especially political rights of the opposition. In turn, the leadership of Uzbekistan accused Americans violating their sovereignty and interfering in internal affairs. In particular, the first President of Uzbekistan Karimov criticized the US Embassy in Tashkent for contacts with the political opposition and tendentious assessments of domestic political processes in the country in August 1992. In the second half of the 1990s convergence of views of Uzbekistan and the United States on a number of regional and international issues, Washington's criticism of Tashkent on issues of human rights and other topics traditionally raised by various NGOs declined markedly. This was especially noticeable against the backdrop of the deployment of an anti-terrorist campaign in Afghanistan,

when Uzbekistan became an important partner in organizing logistics for the troops of the international coalition and provided access to a military airfield in Khanabad.

However, the US had ceased assistance to the government of Uzbekistan within the framework of Freedom Support Act unless the Secretary of State determines and reports that Uzbekistan is making substantial progress in meeting its Strategic Partnership Declaration commitments to democratize and respect human rights. Such reports the State Department has traditionally built on the basis of information from NGOs, international and local<sup>19</sup>. This shift of the Washington's policy toward Tashkent was aimed to accelerate political reforms in Uzbekistan and took the course that would suit the interests of US.

It can be argued that since the early 1990s' the US political-diplomatic efforts in the region introduced twofold objectives - reducing, and ideally eliminating Russia's influence in the region as well as simultaneously creating an environment with the exception of Russian Federation or other power unfriendly to the US that would support American interests in the region.

The engagement towards these twofold objectives required from the US an active presence in the region in a direct form (in the form of political and diplomatic contacts, American humanitarian programs and grants, etc.) or indirectly through allies and international organizations loyal to the interests of the West. Consequently, the US to some extent participated and sought to influence the processes in the foreign and domestic political, economic, social, humanitarian and other spheres of life of the countries of Central Asia.

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<sup>19</sup> Hsiang-tao Hsu. Challenges to the U.S.'s Strategic Interests in Central Asia. <http://www2.tku.edu.tw/~ti/Journal/9-2/924.pdf>  
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