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Recent Updates in US-Central Asia Relations: The Consequences of the US Withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Need for a New Strategy

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Abstract

This article discusses the current condition of relations between the United States and Central Asia. As a historically advantageous geostrategic region, Central Asia has long attracted major powers. The United States has its own reasons for being keen on this strategic chokepoint. Given its role in shaping the international system, the United States has a stake in every corner of the globe. The United States asserts that it was among the first states to recognize the independence of Central Asian states and has assisted these countries in establishing their sovereignty. Although the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan has caused some negative consequences for Central Asian countries, it does not mean that US interests in the region have ended. But the development of a new strategy by the United States for the Central Asian region is an important issue. Additionally, the United States must use its influence in Central Asia to counteract Russia's hegemony there and provide a barrier against China's massive inflows.

Keywords. The US, Russia, China, Central Asia, Taliban, regional interests, influence, balance of power, strategy, Afghanistan, , 'Heartland', "C5+1.

INTRODUCTION

The United States, as one of the world's superpowers and a major player in setting global geopolitical trends, has a particular interest in the region of Central Asia. At the same time, Central Asia is a stakeholder in US-CA relations. Today, Central Asia's image is growing in modern geopolitical processes, and as a result, the United States sees new promising benefits in Central Asia.

Greater cooperation with states like the US can provide developing Central Asian states with a wealth of opportunities. To avoid losing its influence in this crucial strategic region, the US

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must keep up positive relations with Central Asian states. That is to say, the US is not oblivious to the powerful impact of China and Russia, which are currently the US's principal adversaries. It is clear that there are shared interests at play in this relationship, and cooperation between the US and CA might be fruitful for both parties.

METHODS

Factor, event and comparative political analysis methods were used in this research. To ensure adequacy, the opinions of US, Central Asian, Russian and other scientists were analyzed equally. The opinions of politicians and experts from major think tanks were studied in detail to cover the topic more widely. The article presents an in-depth analysis of current issues together with their possible solutions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS.

Geopolitical features of Central Asia. Central Asia has traditionally been a focal point for major states due to its location in the center of the Eurasian continent and its status as "The Heartland." No one (Great actors) has ever been uninterested in Central Asia, not even the United States. The United States has regularly expressed its goals and values in this region. The US has been interested in Central Asia because of its advantageous geostrategic location and abundant natural resources. In addition, the Afghan problem demonstrates that the United States should give Central Asia more attention. Afghanistan is a significant issue for the US because it is already a part of Greater Central Asia.

The US's presence in Central Asia gives the countries of the region several advantages. The states that are part of the relevant geostrategic region have intricate foreign policies. Due to their incapacity to encourage regional integration, countries with weak economies find it unacceptable that there is just one power in the region. To this day, not only Russia`s, but also China`s influence has grown so much in CA that these countries, which appears to be official partners, are already on the path of stealth contention. Transferring Tajikistan's border land to China, increasing Kyrgyzstan's debt from China, and rapidly increasing China's influence in Kazakhstan, as well as protests on this country's territory against China's clout, may explain the essence of the situation. Russia`s classic policy of influence over the region: Moscow always attracts Central Asian countries, emphasizing that the region has always been influenced by Russia and, indeed, its influence on the region is so durable that it strives to exercise its political

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will. And it can be seen that some of these political intentions have been obtained by following the EAEU. In these circumstances, it is very essential and beneficial for the Central Asian states to have a third actor that maintains a balance of power.

US interests in the region. Although distant, the United States, with its stake in the maintenance of geopolitical pluralism in post-Soviet Eurasia, looms in the background as an increasingly important if indirect player, clearly interested not only in developing the region`s resources but also in preventing Russia from exclusively dominating the region`s geopolitical space (Brzezinski, 1997). The US is concerned about the sharp improvement in Russia's standing in CA. In addition, China's expanding influence in the region, particularly during the past ten years, has prompted the US to pursue a more assertive foreign policy in the area. As nations compete fiercely for energy resources today, the United States is becoming more interested in Central Asia as a location with an abundance of natural resources. However, in contemporary trends, American interests in Central Asia reflect geostrategic assets. Because it lacks a direct connection to the area, it has less access to the natural resources there. This suggests that the US ambitions in the area are all intended to improve its geopolitical position in Central Asia.

Bilateral relations: comparative-political analysis. The main goal of the United States can be understood if the general characteristics of US ties with the states of the region are reviewed. Uzbekistan, whose economic condition is better developed than that of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan as well, is the target of an impending US approach. It is also acknowledged to have Central Asia's strongest army at the same time. Uzbekistan's significance to the US grows as a result of its central location in the area, its capacity to act as a transit zone for all neighboring nations, and its border with Afghanistan. A number of economic reforms have been implemented by the current government since it took office in 2017. First and foremost, Uzbekistan's prominent position in US regional diplomacy will be ensured by the adoption of the "good neighbor" policy with other Central Asian states and by making Central Asia the main focus of the state's foreign policy. It should be underlined that without Uzbekistan's will and influence, regional integration will not occur. One of the crucial elements is that Uzbekistan lies in the middle of the area; as a result of its location and capacity, it can have an impact on other Central Asian countries. Furthermore, Central Asian integration processes have been sparked by open borders and cordial relations with neighbors in foreign policy. A vivid example of this is the fact that Uzbekistan became the initiator of the Consultative Meeting of Central Asian Heads of State. Also, the fact that Tashkent has become the center of meetings within the framework of the C5+1

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format and the Central Asia Investment Partnership, which is part of it, indicates that Uzbekistan is considered a reliable partner in the region for the United States.

Kazakhstan presently offers the best opportunity for US engagement. Kazakhstan has the vision, resources, and institutional capacity to play a greater leadership role and to help put Central Asia on a more positive trajectory. In its foreign and domestic policy, Kazakhstan has a number of important accomplishments to its credit, and, unlike other states in the region it has set out an ambitious agenda for the future.(Eugene et. Al) The United States seeks to strengthen its influence in the region by establishing close ties with Kazakhstan, the most economically developed country in CA. Having investor support from countries such as the United States is well deserved for Kazakhstan, which is a resource-rich country with high growth potential. Closer connections with Kazakhstan, Russia's closest economic and political partner in the region, can assist in minimizing Russia's regional influence. In light of the recent increase in China's prestige in Kazakhstan, US cooperation is an excellent way for Kazakhstan to balance its foreign policy.

The US is interested in Turkmenistan`s rich hydrocarbon reserves. Turkmenistan`s vast natural gas and oil resources continue to attract foreign companies to the country, but the Government of Turkmenistan has yet to implement reforms needed to create an inviting business climate where foreign investment and foreign investors are truly welcomed. (U.S. Relations With Turkmenistan). Until recently, China was the only major customer of Turkmen gas. But in April 2019 Russia also began to import Turkmen gas after a 3- year break. The United States is paying attention to the possibility that Turkmenistan will diversify its energy markets. And the US focus Turkmenistan`s proximity to Afghanistan and border security, and the potential for American commercial interests in Turkmenistan (What Are US Interests in Turkmenistan). Turkmenistan is the most interested actor and initiator of the TAPI project. Turkmenistan is looking for a partner to assist it implement the project because it lacks the funds to undertake it on its own. Despite being the most desirable investor in Turkmenistan for the project, the US has not yet demonstrated any sign of serious interest.

US-Tajik relations focus on US support for the country`s accession to the WTO, assistance to improve agriculture and the climate for foreign investment, and encouragement to respect human rights and the rule of law(Jim Nichol Tajikistan). Additionally, there are problems in the relationship with Tajikistan. Increasing regional, economic, and security linkages is the goal of the US policy in this nation. It is difficult for Tajikistan to have constructive relations with the United States because of its military links to Russia, which is that country's closest military ally in Central

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Asia. According to Dmitry Popov, a Russian analyst, "The US primarily supports Tajikistan in the areas of peace, security and humanitarian aid. The analysis of the American- Tajik relations shows that at the current stage the republic is not among the main foreign policy priorities of the U.S. in the post Soviet space. However, it does not mean that Tajikistan is completely out of the Central Asian strategy of the U.S. Keeping it in the focus of attention of the American foreign policy will be the aspiration of Washington to maintain access to Afghanistan and to constrain development of geopolitical competitors such as Moscow and Beijing".(Dmitry Popov)

To address its internal and economic issues, Kyrgyzstan, which is regarded as being relatively developed and adhering to democratic values, can expand its cooperation with the US. In order to prevent Kyrgyzstan from becoming totally reliant on China and Russia, it is also crucial for the US to preserve its connection with the country. In comparison to other Central Asian nations, the US has supported Kyrgyzstan's democratic transition more. However, the military ties between the US and Kyrgyzstan broke down once the US military base in Manas was shut down in 2014. If Kyrgyzstan can create favorable conditions, the US is eager to collaborate with it. However, since Kyrgyzstan is already impacted by China and Russia, bilateral relations are currently suffering. Kyrgyzstan is increasingly moving away from the United States at the expense of Russia and China.

How the Afghanistan withdrawal will affect US policy in Central Asia? The U.S. withdrawal and the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan should force American policymakers to rethink America's position and goals in Central Asia. For years U.S. policy in Central Asia was subordinated to the goal of winning the war even though Washington never fashioned either a satisfactory definition of what winning meant or an Afghan government capable of standing on its own and acquiring the legitimacy and capacity it needed to survive. Despite a more regionally inclusive white paper by the Trump Administration, neither it nor its successor have been able to overcome the primacy of military factors in regional policy and the insufficiency of economic and political means to conduct a truly robust regional policy in Central Asia(Stephen Blank).

The most recent strategy developed for Central Asia in 2020 (United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025) no longer meets the requirements of the present. The United States should immediately adopt a new policy for Central Asia. Otherwise, Russia and China will continue to exert their influence in the area, making it impossible for the United States to later advance its interests in Central Asia.

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It should be noted, however, that the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan and the country's reluctance to develop a new strategy for Central Asia does not signify the end of US interests in the region. Even after withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan, the United States did not cease its regular official visits with foreign, defense, and other high-ranking officials of Central Asian states, nor did it abandon the C5+1 format. Also, the US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, Donald Lu, made two visits to Central Asian countries in 2022 alone, which proves that Central Asia has not left the scope of US interests (Catherine Putz).

The withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan was very worrying for the states of Central Asia. First of all, the regional countries were worried about the possibility of the existing terrorist groups in Afghanistan awakening and entering the borders of Central Asia against the background of the chaos that occurred in the country after the Taliban seized power. In particular, terrorist attacks carried out by the IS group on mosques in northern Afghanistan, rockets fired into the territory of Uzbekistan (Bruce Pannier) and increased tension on the border with Tajikistan proved that there is a real threat to security. Secondly, against the backdrop of the chaos that arose after the Taliban took power in Afghanistan, the plans of the Central Asian countries, especially Uzbekistan, to enter the South Asian trade routes through the transit of Afghanistan in recent years have been endangered. The future of the developed and expected transport corridors has been questioned. The struggle to get rid of Russia's transit, which has complicated consequences for the Central Asian countries, has been postponed again.

Based on the above, it can be said that security may be the main issue of the new US strategy in Central Asia. However, if the US wants to prevent the growing influence of Russia and China in Central Asia, it is very important to be able to offer projects that bring economic benefits to the countries of the region. In this, of course, it is essential to provide real assistance to the Central Asian countries to implement the corridors that provide access to the world's waters through the south.

CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, the following can be given. First, the US should develop a new strategy for Central Asia as soon as possible. The Taliban's takeover of the Afghan government, the repercussions of Russia's war in Ukraine on Central Asia's future, and China's expanding interests are all compelling reasons for the United States to formulate a new approach. Second, it's time for the US to go beyond security and geopolitical interests and work with Central Asian countries

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on major economic projects. Having the United States' backing can be crucial, especially when it comes to building transportation corridors that give countries in the region access to the ocean. If we take into account that such corridors will free the regional countries from Russian transit in exchange for pulling the trade routes to the south, it can be seen that the cooperation of the US in the issue of transport corridors is also in the interests of Washington. For the Central Asian countries, access to world waters through suitable transport corridors is a long-standing dream. Thirdly, the current pace of US relations with Central Asian countries is not acceptable for both sides. The United States may cede complete control of the region to Moscow and Beijing if current relations and focus persist. China has been acting in the region with an orderly and far-sighted plan for a long time. Therefore, Beijing's influence in Central Asia is likely to increase in the near and distant future. China has been acting in the region with an orderly and far-sighted plan for a long time. Therefore, Beijing's influence in Central Asia is likely to increase in the near and distant future. A warning to the United States could be interpreted from all this.

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