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Ivan Safranchuk reports from Moscow:

U.S. STRATEGY FOR CENTRAL ASIA UNDER PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA -

VIEW FROM RUSSIA

ANNOTATION

When the Barack Obama administration came to power in 2009, it had yet to formulate its own strategy for Central Asia. In 2009-2012 it more or less stuck to the policies whose foundations were laid under George W. Bush. Under those policies, Afghanistan remained the top U.S. priority, and all the steps undertaken by Washington in Central Asia were informed by U.S. interests in Afghanistan. By 2013 it had become clear, however, that the Afghan-centric policy for Central Asia was failing. At the same time, the U.S. expert community had arrived at a general understanding that major change was afoot in Eurasia, and that the United States must be at the center of that change. So the U.S. expert community began to draw up a new strategy for the region, which was also supposed to take into account the progress made by various Russian and Chinese projects in Central Asia.

Ivan Safranchuk, associated professor at the World Political Processes department of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations and one of the leading Russian experts in Central Asian affairs, highlights the following key points of the new U.S. strategy in Central Asia proposed by experts close to Obama administration:

- *U.S. position on the integration projects spearheaded by Russia and Central Asia;*
- *U.S. attitude to Chinese policies in the region;*
- *U.S. choice of the main regional partner;*
- *Facilitating cooperation between the Central Asian states and setting up a new regional organization.*

In this paper Ivan Safranchuk offers an analysis of the expert debate in the United States and its implications for U.S. policies in the region. He also looks at the general evolution of the U.S. strategy in Central Asia in recent years.

THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION: OLD AND NEW SCENARIOS FOR CENTRAL ASIA

When the Barack Obama administration came to power in 2009, it had yet to formulate its own general strategy in Central Asia. For the first 12-18 months it followed the course set by the previous administration - including its confrontational policies.

For example, back in 2008 the then Kyrgyz president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, made the decision to shut down the U.S. airbase at Manas as part of his new cooperation agreement with Russia. But after coming under massive pressure from the new Obama administration, he agreed to let the Americans keep that base, although it was reclassified as an International Transit Center. Under Bakiyev's successor, Almazbek Atambayev, who also prioritized closer cooperation with Russia, Washington was also forced to constantly defend the Manas facility. Nevertheless, it was eventually closed in 2014. Tajikistan was also making slow but steady progress towards a closer political and defense relationship with Moscow. In 2013 the country's pro-U.S. foreign minister, Hamrohon Zarifi, was sacked. Meanwhile, Kazakhstan joined the Russian-led Customs Union (the only other member at the time was Belarus), much to America's anger. When Kyrgyzstan also entered into negotiations on joining the Customs Union in 2013, U.S. diplomats and experts stopped even trying to disguise their efforts to derail that process.

In other words, the Obama administration was following the track laid down by George W. Bush. It seemed unable to formulate a clear and consistent Central Asian strategy of its own, and merely kept trying to oppose every Russian step in the region. The predominant view among U.S. experts and political circles was that the U.S. was losing ground in Central Asia, while Russia and China were strengthening their presence in the region.

Geopolitically, the United States had pursued two successive overarching strategies in Central Asia. In the 1990s, during the Clinton administration, the region was mostly viewed in the United States as part of the Greater Europe. The idea was that geographically, Central Asia could be linked to Europe and the Trans-Atlantic community via the Trans-Caucasus. Washington saw the Caucasus and Central Asia as parts of the same region. In the 2000s, however, the George W. Bush administration pursued a different approach. It wanted Central Asia to "pivot" southwards and become the core of the new "Greater Central Asia", which would also include South Asia, with Afghanistan as the link. On the whole, the Obama administration stuck to the latter approach during its first 12 months in office. It continued to regard Afghanistan as the main U.S. priority in the region, and all the steps undertaken by Washington in Central Asia were informed by U.S. interests in Afghanistan.

It is only by late 2010 that the Obama administration had finally formulated its own new strategy for Central Asia, that of the *New Silk Road*. The then secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, and assistant state secretary Robert Blake began to promote that concept in 2011. The concept itself, however, was not all that different from the *Greater Central Asia* approach pursued by the George W. Bush administration. In 2010 Frederick Starr, who formulated that approach, released a paper headlined "The Key to Success in Afghanistan", which was written in collaboration with Andrew Kuchins and published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a prominent think tank with close links to the Democratic Party. The central idea of that paper was that the United States must develop a non-military strategy for Afghanistan, and especially an economic development strategy. The authors envisaged Afghanistan as a regional transport and transit hub, crisscrossed by motorways, railroads, pipelines, and power lines going from west to east, and from north to south. Alas, the *New Silk Road* project got stuck at the stage of mere rhetoric. In 2011 its author, F. Starr, unleashed a torrent of criticism against the Obama administration, accusing it of trying to bail out of Afghanistan and of being unwilling to pursue a large-scale geopolitical transformation of Central and South Asia.

There is no arguing that America's grand geopolitical projects for Central Asia have failed. The most significant geopolitical initiative for the Trans-Caucasus - an initiative that could also engage the Central Asian states - was implemented in 2006, when the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline began pumping Azeri crude to the Turkish Black Sea

port of Ceyhan via Georgia. In 2008 Kazakhstan also began to supply relatively small amounts of oil for that pipeline; in 2010 it was joined by Turkmenistan. The geopolitical consequences of that project for Central Asia, however, have proved hard to discern. The new geopolitical idea of Central Asia's southward pivot (the *Greater Central Asia* idea of the Bush administration and the *New Silk Road* project of the Obama administration) remained little more than an impressive piece of rhetoric. Pro-Western forces have not come to power in any of the Central Asian states, despite all the NGO and civil society programs in these countries. As far as the practical struggle for influence in the region is concerned, Russia and China have clearly been more successful than the United States in recent years.

By 2013 the U.S. expert community was increasingly calling for a revision of the U.S. course in Central Asia. This expert debate is being greatly influenced by the debate about the future American policy in Afghanistan and the general outlook for the Afghan situation.

THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN AND THE REGIONAL ORDER IN CENTRAL ASIA

As far as assessing the situation in Afghanistan is concerned, there are two main camps in Washington: the so-called Afghan-optimists and Afghan-pessimists. The optimists believe that great progress has been made in Afghan development, and that the country must not be abandoned now. They call for a large military force to be left in Afghanistan, and for a continuation of large-scale assistance programs. The pessimists argue, however, that all the efforts and resources invested in Afghanistan have failed to produce the desired effect, so military presence there must be rapidly reduced, and other assistance must also be curtailed, albeit in a more deliberate fashion.

The present course of the Obama administration on Afghanistan and Central Asia seems to lean towards the position of the Afghan-pessimists. Advice from that camp has supported the position of the White House, the Department of State, and the Pentagon in recent years.

For all the differences between the two camps, however, a certain convergence of their positions had become obvious by late 2013. Both recognize the need to preserve a central government in Afghanistan and to continue providing economic assistance. Both also believe that a decentralization and regionalization of Afghanistan is inevitable, although they argue about the scale of that process. The optimists regard it as a *necessary evil*, and would like to minimize it. The pessimists think it is simply inevitable, and are ready to accept a large-scale decentralization.

Critics of the Obama administration warn that after reducing American military presence in Afghanistan, the administration must not treat the whole of Central Asia as a lost cause. Experts in Washington stress the importance of the region as a key part of Eurasia in which all the great and regional powers - including Russia, China, Pakistan, Iran, and others - want to increase their presence.

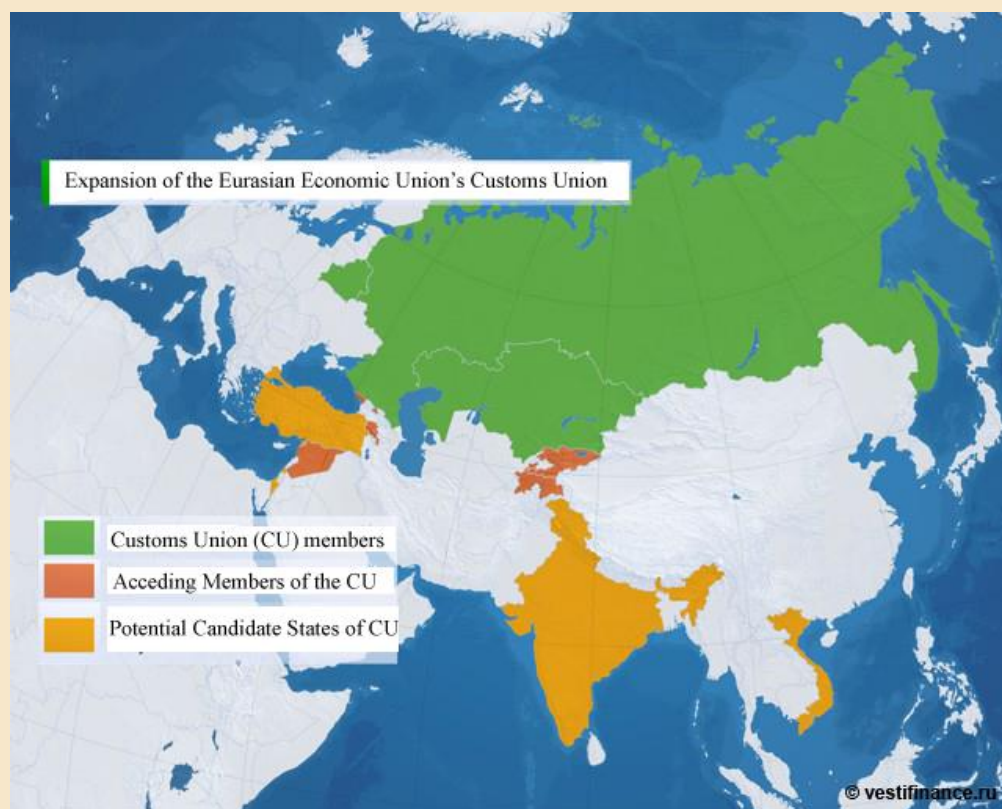
Interestingly, the geopolitically-minded U.S. experts who now criticize the Obama administration are the ones who developed the Greater Central Asia approach for the George W. Bush administration, under which Afghanistan was the key element of Central Asian regional policy. Now these experts insist that there must be no retreat from Central Asia even after the reduction of U.S. presence in Afghanistan. They also say that U.S. policy in the region must be adjusted. First, the region must no longer be viewed merely as a neighbor of Afghanistan. And second, Washington must prioritize those methods of preserving its influence in Central Asia that it can actually afford. The United States must not aspire for the role of the dominant power in Central Asia, or try to go it alone. It needs local allies and partners who can help it to form a new regional order that would serve U.S. interests.

In practical terms, U.S. experts are now focusing on the following issues:

- America's stance on Russian-led integration projects in Central Asia;
- America's stance on Chinese policy in the region;
- The choice of America's main regional partner;
- Facilitating cooperation between the Central Asian states and setting up a new regional organization.

U.S. experts are universally critical of Russian policy in Central Asia. They dismiss the Customs Union and the Single Economic Space as political gimmickry and an attempt at ` of Central Asia. The Ukrainian crisis has further reinforced such perceptions and Washington's determination to oppose Russian policy in the region. Of course, that strategy was adopted long ago; the crisis has merely added fervor to America's convictions.

One of America's central objectives is to derail the Customs Union and the Eurasian Economic Union. In 2014 U.S. foundations and NGOs took part in various events aimed at discrediting the Customs Union. Especially energetic efforts were undertaken last year in Kyrgyzstan in order to prevent the country from joining the Russian-led economic bloc. Even U.S. diplomats hardly bothered to disguise their involvement in the campaign to discredit the Customs Union.



Map 1. Expansion of the Eurasian Economic Union's Customs Union. Source: vestifinance.ru

Meanwhile, U.S. experts have produced the so-called *Open Integration* approach, which has been adopted by the Obama administration and is now being used to counter Russian integration initiatives. Under that approach, integration projects in Central Asia are to involve not only the five Central Asian states but also Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Turkey, and at some point in the future even Iran. All the countries in the region and all their neighbors are to participate in *open integration* - there are to be no exclusive clubs.

The key element of the "open integration" approach is to make the Central Asian region accessible to all the regional players and to all the interested external players as well. In practice this means, first, that economic integration is to be followed by political integration, and second, that participation of the region's countries in the Customs Union (and later in the Eurasian Union) is not to translate into any restrictions on economic ties with other partners. As part of this approach, U.S. experts argue for a more active use of the World Trade Organization and WTO rules in Central Asia. They call for facilitating the WTO accession of those countries in the region that still remain outside the organization. They also want any integration projects in the region to work in the framework of WTO rules, leaving their participants free to pursue close cooperation with other partners.

GOOD THINGS TO BE SAID ABOUT THE CHINESE EXPANSION

China's role in Central Asia became a cause of growing concern in the United States in the early 2000s. U.S. experts tended to regard the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a Chinese-led outfit, and throughout the 2000s they voiced concerns about "Chinese expansion in Central Asia using the SCO as a vehicle". Such misgivings about China's policy in Central Asia were well in line with the George W. Bush administration's general attitude to China. The Obama administration, however, appears to be far more sanguine about the Chinese. Maybe this change of perceptions explains why U.S. experts have become much more positive about China's strategy in Central Asia.

By 2014 the following views became prevalent among U.S. experts: China can bring investment and economic development to Central Asia, while the United States currently lacks the resources to do so. That is why China is welcome to help the region achieve greater economic development; in fact, America is even ready to help the Chinese in that endeavor. But Washington will keep a close eye on Beijing to make sure that China does not convert its economic projects into political dominance. Washington would not even mind if the Chinese were to set up a new overland route to Europe and the Middle East via Central Asia; that would be entirely acceptable to the Americans. But China will also have to accept the fact that the United States will continue to exercise political influence in the region.

As part of this overarching approach, the U.S. expert community regards the Silk Road Economic Belt project announced by the Chinese leader in September 2013 not as another stage of the Chinese expansion but as a genuine effort to promote economic development in the region. The reaction of U.S. experts has been fairly relaxed and even cautiously positive. Nevertheless, Obama's critics among the conservatives continue to voice concerns about Chinese expansionism and Beijing's rapidly growing influence on the political elites of the Central Asian states.

There is also another aspect of China's growing role in Central Asia that is being discussed by U.S. experts. The Americans expect that differences between Russia and China will break out into the open, and the two countries' commercial disputes will degenerate into political differences. U.S. experts expect that Moscow will try to oppose China's growing role in Central Asia, and that, for their part, the Chinese will come up with rival initiatives as Russian projects in the region begin to make progress. The expectations of a clash between Moscow and Beijing also serve to reinforce U.S. experts' positive view of China's growing role in Central Asia. It is quite telling that various American NGOs working in the region were hyping up the notion of growing differences over Central Asia between Russia and China in 2014.

LOOKING FOR A REGIONAL LEADER AND ALLY

For two decades now U.S. experts have been arguing over which of the Central Asian states should be chosen as America's main regional partner. Should Washington throw its weight behind Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan, which are both vying for regional leadership? Or should it perhaps stoke the two countries' rivalry instead?

The prevailing opinion in the American expert community at this time is that for the next several years, the United States should place its bets on Kazakhstan. Experts speak highly of Astana's determination to guard its sovereignty and of the country's relatively strong economy; right now America needs the kind of allies and partners who can pay for its geopolitical services rather than having to be bailed out by the U.S. taxpayer.

At the same time, however, U.S. experts agree that Washington must also watch very closely the developments in Uzbekistan, which has the potential to become an even better ally than Kazakhstan. They believe there is a high likelihood of new presidents coming to power in both countries. Once that power transition has taken place, U.S. will designate as its main regional ally the country where it will have secured a greater influence on the new government.

U.S. experts are also busily discussing the issue of a new intra-regional order in Central Asia. They worry that there is not enough trade and cooperation between the Central Asian states; they speak of the need to lower barriers to trade and the

movement of people (while also retaining full national sovereignty), and argue that there must be a policy of transparent borders with China, Afghanistan, and Iran.

Finally, since 2013 U.S. experts have mooted the idea of setting up a new regional organization that would only include the five Central Asian states, and none of the neighbors or external players (while at the same time maintaining good relations with those neighbors).

CONCLUSION. EVOLUTION OF AMERICA'S GEOPOLITICAL PROJECTS IN CENTRAL ASIA

America's policy in Central Asia was at a crossroads in 2013-2014. The prevailing mood in Washington is that relations with the Central Asian region will have to be altered following the change of America's course in Afghanistan.

In 2009-2012 the Obama administration clearly pursued the course towards the formation of a united Central and South Asia region. By 2013 it had become clear, however, that those efforts had failed, and the strategy itself no longer made much sense because of the growing uncertainty over the situation in Afghanistan. That is why the Obama administration, which had initially stuck to the New Silk Road rhetoric (with an emphasis on Afghanistan as the central element of a new greater region), soon altered its course. In 2013-2014 it carried on with that rhetoric in order to encourage Central Asian and South Asian states to provide assistance to Afghanistan. The actual idea of forming a new greater region, however, was no longer being taken seriously.

As a result, the American expert community began to develop a new concept for Central Asia. The Americans also needed to take into account the progress made by Russian and Chinese projects in the region, and to offer an alternative to these projects. Over the past 12-18 months, the U.S. expert community has come up with the following approach, which is increasingly being reflected in official U.S. policies:

The United States must promote the "open model" of integration in Central Asia. The region's main problem is insufficient connectivity. There is not enough trade and cooperation between the Central Asian states. Efforts must be made to lower the barriers to trade and the movement of people, with the eventual goal of making the internal borders within the region completely transparent (although the nation-states must retain their full sovereignty). The region must also have transparent economic borders with China, Afghanistan, and Iran. It must become an open region with active intra-regional trade, and with a much greater involvement in trade with South Asia, China, and the Middle East. Such a transit/transport vision of Central Asia's future is based on the region mainly exporting its own natural resources, importing industrial goods, and serving as a link between Europe and Asia, China and the Middle East, etc.

Ideally, the United States would like to become the guarantor of the Central Asian states' sovereignty and facilitator of their access to the global market. These states are surrounded by rapidly rising regional powers. Washington believes there is obvious demand in Central Asia for geopolitical services, to make sure that none of the regional players could take these states under its full control. In return, Washington expects to secure a greater say in regional affairs.

Having no real chance of achieving a dominant position in the region, and after the failure of its two big geopolitical projects for Central Asia over the past two decades, America is now trying to achieve a more manageable goal. Instead of trying to become the dominant power in the region, the United States is now merely trying to keep Russia and China from gaining too much influence in Central Asia. The essence of the *open integration* vision formulated by the U.S. expert community is that Central Asia must become (at least for a time) a neutral ground, an open geopolitical space that is accessible to all the large regional and global players.

At the same time, even though this approach proposed by the American expert community is being used by the Obama administration on the ground in Central Asia, the approach itself may well prove transient. It is quite possible that this is merely a temporary stopgap solution that enables various interest groups in Washington to achieve a compromise - but it may not live much longer than President Obama's remaining time in office. The next administration may well initiate a fresh revision of America's foreign-policy course, including the U.S. strategy in Central Asia.

The author of this paper is Dr. Ivan Safranchuk, associated professor at the World Political Processes department of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations

Editor: Julia Fetisova

(c) Trialogue Club International: trialogue@pircenter.org;
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