

## Report

# Searching for a Silk Road: The United States in Central Asia

*Jeffrey Mankoff\**

30 July 2015





[AlJazeera]

### Abstract

U.S. aims in Central Asia have remained broadly consistent since the Soviet collapse. Washington has supported stability, regional cooperation, and efforts to check the spread of violent extremism, as well as—intermittently—reform and democratization. The most important U.S. goal however has been to secure the Central Asian states' sovereignty in a complex geopolitical neighborhood. With the war in Afghanistan winding down, the U.S. is seeking to achieve that aim while promoting regional economic development through its promotion of a New Silk Road. Regional heavyweights China and Russia are pursuing their own schemes for Eurasian integration too, and while Washington believes the U.S. and Chinese schemes have much in common, the overall deterioration of both U.S.-Chinese and U.S.-Russian relations is pushing Beijing and Moscow together. At a time when its own resources for the region are diminishing, the U.S. needs to get back to basics, deepening its engagement with the states of Central Asia to focus on shared challenges, while taking advantage of Washington's distance from the region to reassure the Central Asians that it can ensure balance in the region.

### Introduction

Throughout the war in Afghanistan, Central Asia has played a critical, often underappreciated role in U.S.-led military operations. The allied military presence will remain beyond the end of 2014, when the Obama Administration initially hoped all foreign troops could depart, but Central Asia's role is already shifting. For Washington, the region is now less critical as a staging ground and transit route to Afghanistan.

Instead, the U.S. sees Central Asia as an important building block for its vision of a more connected and integrated Eurasia, a link in what the State Department calls its New Silk Road initiative.

The Silk Road metaphor is hardly new, and the United States is not the only outside power to invoke it on behalf of a long-term plan to connect Central Asia to the outside world. Located far away from the region and with comparatively few direct interests at stake, the U.S. faces an uphill battle to implement this current version, especially at a time when its relations with Russia and China, the other major powers seeking to shape Central Asia's future, are increasingly tense.

While the New Silk Road represents an alluring vision for the future, Washington needs to be realistic about its capabilities while pursuing more limited near-term goals. The main challenge will be reassuring the Central Asian states that Washington will remain engaged and not abandon them to the embrace of Beijing and Moscow. Supporting Central Asian sovereignty has been a longstanding U.S. aim, but in practice, U.S. engagement has always been based on Central Asia's ability to contribute to Washington's larger aims. Today, those aims include maintaining a fluid strategic balance in Eurasia at a time when Sino-Russian cooperation throughout the region is growing, an aim that the Central Asians themselves largely share.

### **U.S. Interests: Continuity and Change**

Washington's interest in Central Asia goes back to the first years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. During the 1990s, the Clinton Administration focused on helping the newly independent Central Asian states assert their sovereignty and become full-fledged members of the international community. It worried about instability within these states, as well as the potential for geopolitical conflicts over their territory and resources, analogous to the 19th century Great Game.<sup>(1)</sup>

In practice, much U.S. interest at the time focused on energy, specifically on opening up the oil and gas deposits of the Caspian Basin to foreign investment and creating pipeline infrastructure to bring Caspian energy to European markets. This policy achieved some successes, including major investments from ExxonMobil and Chevron in Kazakhstan's energy sector, and the laying of new pipelines such as Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline to bring Caspian oil and gas west.

Nonetheless, the Caspian proved a difficult operating environment for geological as well as political reasons, and never lived up to hopes that it would wean Europe off its dependence on Russian hydrocarbons. Nor did democracy and free markets gain much traction in the region. Of the five Central Asian states, only Kyrgyzstan made a genuine

attempt at democratization, and by the late 1990s, even these efforts were foundering in the face of widespread corruption and cronyism involving the president's family.

U.S. interest in Central Asia may well have faded if not for the shock of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the subsequent decision to send U.S. and allied troops to oust the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The subsequent conflict placed Central Asia on the front lines. Not only did the secular Central Asian governments detest the Taliban on ideological grounds, the Taliban provided shelter to militants from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan who had staged periodic raids into Central Asia.

Central Asia provided a convenient jumping off point for U.S.-led military operations. Washington signed basing agreements with the governments of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan before the end of 2001, which allowed U.S. personnel access to airbases for moving troops and materiel into Afghanistan.<sup>(2)</sup> The governments in Bishkek and Tashkent offered up their facilities despite opposition from Russia, which feared the establishment of a permanent U.S. presence in the region (President Vladimir Putin eventually acquiesced to a temporary U.S. presence in the face of significant opposition from his own military). The Central Asian states provided other support too, including intelligence sharing and overflight rights for coalition planes.

Central Asia's importance increased when the deterioration of relations between the U.S. and Pakistan imperiled coalition supply lines. Facing attacks on its convoys crossing through Pakistan and periodic closures of the crossing points into Afghanistan, the U.S. and its allies sought to create alternative transportation corridors through Central Asia. The result was the establishment of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) in 2009. Running from ports in Europe through Russia, the Caucasus, and the Middle East, the NDN converged along the rail corridors running through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to the Afghan border.

At its peak, the NDN was carrying more than two-thirds of the coalition's (non-lethal) supplies heading for the Afghan theater, despite its longer distances and higher costs. The NDN's success, however, demonstrated the technical feasibility of plugging Central Asia and Afghanistan into a continent-wide network of trade and connectivity. This realization underpinned the New Silk Road vision that would emerge a few years later.<sup>(3)</sup>

With Central Asia increasingly important to U.S. logistics and military operations, Washington also downplayed its prewar emphasis on promoting liberalization and democracy in the region. This approach became untenable in the aftermath of the violence that broke out in the Uzbek city of Andijon in May 2005, when large numbers of protestors--some of them armed--were killed by security forces. With the U.S. Congress and State Department pushing for an international investigation, negotiations on

extending the U.S. lease on Karshi-Khanabad airbase broke down. As Moscow looked on with satisfaction, Tashkent and Washington failed to reach agreement, leading U.S. forces to depart in mid-2005. Uzbekistan then quickly signed up for the Russian-backed Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC).<sup>(4)</sup>

Similar problems plagued the U.S. presence in Kyrgyzstan, where U.S. forces at the Manas airbase (later renamed a transit center for political reasons) wound up purchasing fuel from a company controlled by relatives of then-president Kurmanbek Bakiyev. These contracts became a political liability when violent street protests drove Bakiyev from power in April 2010. In the fragile democracy that ensued following Bakiyev's ouster, the U.S. presence at Manas became a rallying point for nationalist forces, which the Russians encouraged in their own efforts to end the U.S. military presence in Central Asia. Unable to reach agreement on extending the lease and facing significant opposition within the country, the U.S. agreed to pull out of Manas in 2014.

Washington did not fight hard to maintain its access to Manas in part because it believed that the conflict in Afghanistan was winding down. As part of its transition strategy for Afghanistan, the U.S. sought to place the country on a stable economic footing that would promote development and wean the Afghan economy off its reliance on opium production. Given Afghanistan's location at what it came to call the "heart of Asia," the U.S. focused on making Afghanistan into a regional trade and transit hub, which in turn required enhancing connectivity with its Central Asian neighbors.

### **Toward the New Silk Road**

In announcing the New Silk Road vision in a speech in Chennai, India in July 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called for "stronger economic ties through South and Central Asia so that goods, capital, and people can flow more easily across borders," a vision that would require "building more rail lines, highways, [and] energy infrastructure."<sup>(5)</sup>

The decision to announce the New Silk Road initiative in Chennai was not accidental. While the immediate aim of this initiative was to provide a sustainable economic future for Afghanistan, underlying it were longstanding U.S. concerns about Central Asia's ability to maintain its sovereignty in a region dominated by Russian and, increasingly, Chinese power.

Seeking to reduce its own footprint in the region, Washington wanted to boost Central Asia's connectivity with India, a rapidly growing, democratic power that the Obama Administration was cultivating. Although India (not to mention Pakistan) remains a

rather marginal player in Central Asia per se, it has extensive interests in Afghanistan and could in the future potentially balance Russian and Chinese influence throughout the region and provide Central Asia an alternative outlet. The specific infrastructure projects that the Obama Administration has backed, including the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline, the CASA-1000 electricity transmission project, and the Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TUTAP) energy grid, all run from Central Asia through Afghanistan to the Indian subcontinent.<sup>(6)</sup>

Some U.S. officials also envisioned building new links all the way to Southeast Asia, where the opening up of Burma represented one of the Obama Administration's major foreign policy achievements. Of course, Washington's renewed interest in Central Asian geopolitics came just as Moscow and Beijing were also recalibrating their approach to the region, and as their relations with the U.S. were becoming increasingly strained.

### Regional Geopolitics

In late 2011, Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin laid out his vision of a new Eurasian Union as part of his campaign to return to the presidency the following year. Building on an existing customs union with Belarus and Kazakhstan, the planned Eurasian Union would be a "a powerful supranational association capable of becoming one of the poles in the modern world and serving as an efficient bridge between Europe and the dynamic Asia-Pacific region" eventually culminating in a "full economic union" among its members.<sup>(7)</sup> In other words, this union was to be a bloc of states bound economically to Russia and subject to the jurisdiction of supranational bodies largely controlled by Moscow. Coupled with the existing customs union, the Eurasian Union would limit its members' ability to forge economic and political connections with the outside world while reinforcing Putin's ambition to establish a Russian-dominated Eurasia as a geopolitical rival to the West. In addition to Belarus and Kazakhstan, the Eurasian Economic Union would come to include Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, with Tajikistan also considering eventual membership.<sup>(8)</sup>

China meanwhile was busy articulating its own vision of Eurasian integration, which President Xi Jinping first announced at a speech in Astana, Kazakhstan in September 2013.<sup>(9)</sup> China's Silk Road Economic Belt is an ambitious scheme to improve connectivity across the vast Eurasian landmass, creating an infrastructure network tying East and South Asia to Europe. Building new trade and transit infrastructure across Eurasia fits in with China's focus on economic development in its restive western regions, particularly Xinjiang. Beijing's approach to Central Asia is similar; concerned about the rise of extremism on its borders and the potential for instability when the current generation of strongmen passes from the scene, Beijing views its promotion of infrastructure and trade as an investment in security over the longer term.

Critically, Beijing has the resources to make its vision a reality. China has already invested more than \$50 billion in Central Asia, much of it on new road, rail, and pipeline infrastructure. In October 2014, Xi announced that China would establish a \$40 billion investment fund to build the infrastructure underpinning the Silk Road Economic Belt and the related Maritime Silk Road across Southeast Asia—what Beijing now collectively calls “One Belt One Road.”<sup>(10)</sup> Similarly, the new Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), whose \$100 billion initial capitalization includes nearly \$30 billion from China, will focus much of its lending on large-scale infrastructure projects.<sup>(11)</sup>

As their respective relations with the United States have grown more tense in recent years, Russia and China have begun exploring cooperation in Eurasia, even though Beijing’s vision of transcontinental trade has little in common with Russia’s plans for post-Soviet political and economic integration. This past May, Xi and Putin agreed to establish a dialogue forum through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) on combining the Eurasian Economic Union and Silk Road Economic Belt schemes. Under the plans being discussed, Moscow would be able to tap into Chinese investment capital, while Beijing would benefit from new transit opportunities and reduced customs controls between its own western border and Europe.<sup>(12)</sup>

### Managing Expectations

This growing cooperation between Russia and China testifies to the challenge the United States faces in implementing its own vision for Eurasia. As Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken noted in March, China’s “development of infrastructure in Central Asia can be fully complementary to our own efforts.”<sup>(13)</sup> He also suggested that the U.S. did not see the Chinese program as a competitor, and the Washington welcomed new trade and transit connections in all directions, not just to the south.

Indeed, though the geographic parameters of China’s Silk Road Economic Belt differ from those of the U.S. New Silk Road vision, the underlying logic of the two projects is similar: create new trade and transit linkages to better integrate Central Asia into the global economy.

While the basic aims of the U.S. and Chinese approaches are similar, the biggest obstacle to melding the two projects is politics. Meanwhile, Sino-Russia collaboration in Eurasia results more from both countries’ increasingly frosty relations with Washington than from any natural affinity. U.S. financial sanctions against Russia have raised concern in both Moscow and Beijing about Washington’s ability to isolate them from global markets and making efforts to create parallel institutions appear more urgent. Cooperation in Eurasia fits in with this broader imperative.

With increased Sino-Russian cooperation in Eurasia, the United States' traditional concern for securing the Central Asian states' sovereignty has new relevance. Regardless of the fate of its New Silk Road idea, the U.S. will continue to have interests in Central Asia, including stability, countering extremism. Succeeding on this admittedly limited set of aims may well require a more focused and less ambitious approach from Washington in the years to come. Rather than grand but under-resourced visions, the U.S. would do better to focus on increasing its presence and visibility within the region. That means more cooperation with some admittedly unsavory regimes, and more willingness to work bilaterally. Ideally, it would also mean devoting adequate resources to the region.

Unlike Russia and China, the U.S. is far away, and will never be in a position to dominate Central Asia politically or economically. Paradoxically perhaps, this distance makes the U.S. a welcome partner for many in Central Asia concerned about the prospects of Russian and Chinese dominance. At the same time, it reinforces the region's fears that the U.S. will seek to wash its hands of Central Asia once its troops are out of Afghanistan. Dispelling those concerns should be a primary focus of U.S. policy in the region. In a world where both Russia and China are looking to hem in U.S. power, Washington needs to be realistic, however, about both its interests and capabilities in a region it does not have the luxury of abandoning.

---

Copyright © 2015 Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, All rights reserved.

\***Jeffrey Mankoff** is Deputy Director and Fellow Russia and Eurasia Program Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

#### Endnotes

- (1) Strobe Talbott, "A Farewell to Flashman: American policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia," U.S. Department of State Dispatch, Jul 1997, 8(6): 10-14.
- (2) "United States Foreign Policy in the States of Central Asia," Brookings Institution, 12 Nov 2002, <http://www.brookings.edu/events/2002/11/12asia>.
- (3) Andrew C. Kuchins, et al., "The Northern Distribution Network and the Modern Silk Road: Planning for Afghanistan's Future," Center for Strategic and International Studies, Dec 2009, [http://csis.org/files/publication/091217\\_Kuchins\\_NorthernDistNet\\_Web.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/091217_Kuchins_NorthernDistNet_Web.pdf).
- (4) Uzbekistan suspended its membership in these organizations in 2012, and its current Foreign Policy Concept asserts that Tashkent will not join any military blocs or allow any foreign bases on its territory.
- (5) Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Remarks on India and the United States: A Vision for the 21st Century," U.S. Department of State, 21 Jul 2011, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/07/168840.htm>.
- (6) Lynne M. Tracy, "The United States and the New Silk Road," U.S. Department of State, 25 Oct 2013, <http://www.state.gov/p/sca/rls/rmks/2013/215906.htm>.



- (7) Vladimir Putin, "Article by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin 'A new integration project for Eurasia: The future in the making ('Izvestiya', 3 October 2011)," Russian Mission to the European Union, <http://www.russianmission.eu/en/news/article-prime-minister-vladimir-putin-new-integration-project-eurasia-future-making-izvestiya-3-#sthash.ftnRW03c.dpuf>.
- (8) While Putin initially spoke of the Eurasian Union, the non-Russian members were wary of any arrangement that would compromise their sovereignty, and Moscow eventually agreed to calling the bloc the Eurasian Economic Union.
- (9) "Xi suggests China, C. Asia build Silk Road economic belt," Xinhua, 7 Sep 2013, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-09/07/c\\_132700695.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-09/07/c_132700695.htm).
- (10) "China to establish \$40 billion Silk Road infrastructure fund," Reuters, 8 Nov 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/11/08/us-china-diplomacy-idUSKBN0ISOBQ20141108>.
- (11) Mark Magnier, "How China Plans to Run AIIB: Leaner, With Veto," Wall Street Journal, 8 Jun 2015.
- (12) Reid Standish, "China and Russia Lay Foundation for Massive Economic Cooperation," Foreign Policy, 10 Jul 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/10/china-russia-sco-ufa-summit-putin-xi-jinping-eurasian-union-silk-road/>.
- (13) Antony J. Blinken, "An Enduring Vision for Central Asia," U.S. Department of State, 31 Mar 2015, <http://www.state.gov/s/d/2015/240013.htm>.