

US POLICY IN CENTRAL ASIA: WILL CHANGE OCCUR DURING THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION?

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On January 20, 2017, Donald John Trump was inaugurated as the 45th President of the United States. Since his surprise election on November 8, 2016, predictions about his foreign and domestic policies have become regular features of the think tank and media communities. Most are based on speculation and guesswork, given that he had no track record in politics and had surrounded himself with political neophytes, circumventing the usual foreign policy elite community of Washington, DC. Individuals such as Mike Flynn and Steven Bannon, who vocally advocated white nationalist and anti-Islamic views, were initially close to President Trump. Given their public declarations, it would be easy to assume that the Trump administration would follow a path hostile to Muslim countries. However, their sequential ousters from office suggest that these views might not be dominant in the White House. Similarly, a *Wall Street Journal* editorial by National Security Advisor LTG H.R. McMaster and economic advisor Gary Cohn outlined a bleak portrayal of the global community, emphasizing that the United States has no permanent allies or friends and would seek to protect its interests in whatever way possible.¹ This “neo-Hobbesian” view counters the traditional American approach of working to promote peace, democracy and free market economies throughout the world by being a leader in maintaining the rules of international order. Concepts such as “right to protect” or the “freedom agenda” have been discarded



for a more xenophobic “America First” mantra. With these initial assessments, it is no surprise that an evaluation of any future US policy toward Central Asia, *a region deemed of limited importance*, would be understandably pessimistic.

Well into the first year of the Trump administration, is such a prediction holding true? Traditionally, US policy toward Central Asia has been premised on four basic principles: the advocacy of democratic values and political transition toward democracy; human rights based on the UN Charter on Human Rights; economic development based on market reform; and regional security guaranteeing the sovereignty of the five states of Central Asia. These ideals were first articulated in a series of presentations in the summer of 1997 by then Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, entitled “A Farewell to Flashman,”² which underscored the most important objective: that the post-Soviet Central Asian states should stand on their own, away from the control of outside powers, *most notably Russia*. Through the administrations of G.H.W. Bush, William Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barrack Obama, these pillars remained in place. The prioritization has varied over the years. For example, after the 9/11 attack on the US and the subsequent military campaign in Afghanistan that began a month later, the “security” dimension became paramount. Indeed, the challenge for US policymakers has often been to find an

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effective way to maintain an Afghan-centric security focus while simultaneously engaging on political, human rights, and economic matters. While some critics suggested the US outright abandoned these tools of engagement, an analysis of budget figures, programs, and personnel responsibilities notes otherwise. Limitations exist, of course. “Soft power” efforts such as the Peace Corps are now reduced to a small presence in Kyrgyzstan. Likewise, American-based non-governmental organizations such as the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, Freedom House, and the Soros Foundation have been curtailed, with many of their local offices closed and office representatives unable to register and reside in the region.

A positive development did take place in the in the final years of the Obama administration regarding US engagement with Central Asia. Secretary of State John Kerry oversaw the creation of the C5+1 initiative in September 2015, which brought together the foreign ministers of the US and all five Central Asian countries. Through these high-level meetings, and subsequent working group sessions created to address key topics, the US seemed to be refocusing efforts on non-security relations.³ More importantly, these tracks primarily focus on modest, “workable” issues, such as smoothing out legal requirements on cross-border trade, or developing water and environmental standards, making the opportunities for cooperation and success more likely. This effort continues today, showing that engagement does not have to be high-profile to be successful.

Would the arrival of the Trump administration change these efforts in Central Asia? To date, no senior official from the administration has outlined a “new approach” to the region. Barring a declarative statement in the coming year, one will have to look at other indicators to assess what a Trump policy toward Central Asia might be. Before one passes judgement on the slow timing, it is important to note that this is not unusual. Central Asia has not held a high priority position in US foreign and security policy and it often takes time for actual policy initiatives to be articulated. It was not until the end of August 2017 that a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (DASD) for South and Central Asia was





nominated. The nominee, Dr. Colin Jackson, has a distinguished record in security studies and a solid background in Afghanistan. Combined with the Trump administration's declared policy toward Afghanistan, and by extension, Pakistan and India, announced until 21 August 2017⁴, it's evident that the US will most likely continue to view the Central Asian states as subordinate to the greater mission in Afghanistan.

Is this "more of the same?" To an extent, yes. First, the security relationship will continue, albeit in a limited capacity. As the US presence in Afghanistan is a fraction of what it was in the first decade of the Afghan War, the supply routes through Central Asia will not be as important. Nor do any US military bases exist in Central Asia, as they did previously.⁵ Second, economic and trade relations will continue to have some value, but will be kept primarily in the realm of the private sector. The American pavilion of the Astana 2017 Expo is a good representation of this effort: private companies seeking niche markets in the country. Third, the relationship with

President Putin of Russia could offer a "wild card" in US-Central Asian relations. Assuming President Trump's admiration for and deference to Vladimir Putin continues, expect that the US will support a continued Russian presence in the region. Indeed, some suggest that a partnership with Russia can limit the influence of China and help combat transnational terrorist groups like ISIS. Finally, the dynamic, unless otherwise articulated, will be transactional. This last point is generally seen from the perspective of the US: what does Central Asia have to offer the United States? However, transactions go both ways, and the reduced posture of the Americans will inevitably raise the important question: *what does the US have to offer each Central Asian country?* If trade and investment aren't forthcoming, one could find this dynamic to be negligible. Ultimately, this means that in the coming years, the US could be less of an actor in Central Asia than in the past – not as a specific policy choice, but because of decisions made in how the US presents itself overseas.

Endnotes

- 1 HR McMaster and Gary D. Cohn, "America First Doesn't Mean America Alone," *Wall Street Journal*, May 30, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/america-first-doesnt-mean-america-alone-1496187426>.
- 2 Strobe Talbott, "A Farewell to Flashman," *Johns Hopkins University SAIS Lecture*, July 21, 1997, <http://www.state.gov/www/regions/nis/970721talbott.html>.
- 3 "US-Central Asia (C5+1) Joint Projects Fact Sheet", *United States - Department of State*, August 5, 2016, <http://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/08/260805.htm>.
- 4 "Transcript on Trump's Speech on Afghanistan", *New York Times*, August 21, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/21/world/asia/trump-speech-afghanistan.html>.
- 5 The Manas Transit Center in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, which was the last US facility in Central Asia, closed in June 2014.