What Window of Opportunity does the United States Want to Seize for itself in Central Asia?

Central Asia is still a very important region for the world’s major players, in terms of geopolitics, geoeconomics, and from the point of view of its geostrategic location. This is the arena where global and regional powers compete against each other.

Almost all of today’s major players have their own long-term strategy worked out for Central Asia to suit their interests, and are busily gathering the tools they need in order to achieve their own objectives in the region. China has the bilateral ties it forged in its “One Belt One Road” initiative, which has proved quite successful from China’s point of view in promoting the country’s financial services as a lender, and it allows China to play an important role in regional geoeconomics.

Russia has the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Eurasian Economic Union, and its own bilateral ties. Russia, of course, still plays the dominant role in the region, with its strategic partnership with Kazakhstan and other former Soviet republics, and a number of CSTO military bases in the region, although strictly speaking, these are not formally Russian military bases.

Even the EU is trying to play a more active role in the region, but its efforts more or less boil down to fulfilling Washington’s political commands to encourage the region to break off its ties with Russia and China, by whatever forceful means necessary.

Central Asia is important for the United States now and for the foreseeable future, although the region is not the number-one priority for America in and of itself, it is only important for the US to use as a means of influencing the continental centers of power competing with them in Eurasia, which have far more interests and ties in the region. Apart from “containing” Russia, China and Iran, Washington will remain focused on Afghanistan, and America’s
desire to consolidate their influence in this country has not abated, which they see as a way of keeping channels open for influencing domestic politics. However, this is exactly the reason why the chances of American policy taking root in Central Asia are very fragile, as this completely depends on how events will unfold in Afghanistan, and we are already seeing changes taking place in this country today.

Overall, this means that Central Asia’s neighbors are far higher up on Washington’s agenda than the countries in the region itself. The US is aware of the reality in the region and is trying to adopt a strategy to be able to counterbalance its rivals from a distance, which involves using their leverage in the fields of politics and economics, defense partnerships and in security where necessary, in order to act as a selective partner in Central Asia and to make up for their lack of geopolitical weight in comparison to Russia and China. Some American analysts believe that this policy of counterbalancing from a distance is a way for the US to free itself from the burden of directly ensuring regional security, by delegating the task of maintaining the power balance in unstable regions to others. That is why this new revised strategy involves more sophisticated methods, which primarily means exploiting the complex situation in Central Asia to counter the influence of America’s main rivals, i.e. China and Russia.

The close geographical proximity of the Central Asian region to neighboring countries Russia and China is of paramount importance for the United States, yet this location means the region is largely “off-limits” for Washington, mainly due to the region’s extremely close cultural and historical ties with Russia.

In the past, the US conducted most of its regional operations with help from Turkey. Relations between Turkey and the United States have recently become more complicated, especially after Turkey purchased Russian S-400 missile systems, and with Moscow and Ankara building closer relations. Washington now prefers to communicate directly with Central Asian countries, looking for alternative options and updating its partnership pecking order. Washington has already made developing ties with Kazakhstan a priority, inviting Uzbekistan in particular to get involved in helping America develop its Afghan policy, as well as exploring opportunities and ways to counter Chinese influence. The United States has been impressed by Tashkent’s regional plans to improve relations with its neighbors and its efforts to promote the peace process in Afghanistan. Although the Taliban movement is still listed as an illegal terrorist group by many countries, Uzbekistan supports them, which is crucially important for Washington’s direct talks with them, which Uzbekistan also supports. In America’s revised regional strategy, the success of their attempts to end the war in Afghanistan will greatly depend on Uzbekistan. Washington’s broader objective is to subtly use the Afghan factor to push Central Asia into choosing a favorable foreign policy for the United States, or to use various incentives to ease the region’s dependence on Russia and China. This is exactly the reason why the United States has already offered $ 100 million to help increase cross-border trade and strengthen ties between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan.

Washington also sees significant potential for strengthening its influence in the region by increasing its diplomatic presence and continuing to cooperate with Central Asian countries in countering terrorism and extremism, which involves national security agencies and law enforcement agencies working together. The focal area of Washington’s work is clearly reflected in the résumés of the most recently recruited new US ambassadors posted to Central Asian countries, all of whom have previous professional expertise related to China and Asia in general, and have also worked together with US military structures. What is interesting is that a few years back, the diplomats Washington sent to this region were mainly Sovietologists or Kremlinologists, but not sinologists.

Washington has been forced to acknowledge the capabilities and contributions being made by other states in the region, including Russia and China, and has seen that it can benefit from using certain actions taken by Moscow and Beijing to serve their interests. However, the strategies Russia and China develop for the Central Asian are for a region that is on their doorstep, where they have a clear understanding that issues of regional security and stability are more important than anything else. The US does not share this understanding, because this region is just some far-flung place for them. They have no economic interests in the region, which is why they have to build some kind of structures, which has meant that their most successful operating principle has been the non-governmental sector: almost all US NGOs are present and actively working in Central Asia. Another area where the US is still working in the region is the C5+1 platform, which excludes Russia and China: although this platform is referred to as a form of wider cooperation, in many ways it essentially creates obstacles and contradictions to the regional integration projects led by Russia and China, i.e. the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the “One Belt One Road” initiative (OBOR).

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