



**CENTRAL ASIA/CASPIAN SEA BASIN REGION  
AFTER THE WITHDRAWAL OF U.S. AND NATO TROOPS FROM AFGHANISTAN**

**ROUNDTABLE CONFERENCE HELD AT  
KENNAN INSTITUTE,  
WOODROW WILSON CENTER  
Washington, D.C.  
November 13–14, 2013**

**ROUNDTABLE REPORT**



December 2013

Dear Reader,

I am pleased to send the following report, *Central Asia/Caspian Sea Basin Region After Withdrawal of U.S. and NATO Troops from Afghanistan*, on the NCAFP Central Asia/Caspian Sea Basin Region Project's recent Roundtable Conference held at the Kennan Institute.

The Roundtable could not have met without the generosity of donors who have supported the NCAFP's Central Asia/Caspian Sea Basin Region Project over the past several years, including Mutual of America and a number of individuals and private foundations. We also thank Dr. Roger Kangas and the Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies (NESAS), Matthew Rojansky and his colleagues at the Kennan Institute, Michael Rywkin, NCAFP Central Asia/Caspian Sea Basin Region Project Director, Chenelle Bonavito, NCAFP Senior Program Coordinator, and all the presenters and participants for their hard work.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "George D. Schwab". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "G".

George D. Schwab  
President



## **BACKGROUND AND ROUNDTABLE OBJECTIVE**

The National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) Central Asia/Caspian Sea Basin Region Project was initiated in 2005 to focus on U.S. national interests in the five former Soviet Republics of Central Asia (i.e., Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) and to create a Track I½ and Track II framework to facilitate dialogue and advance such interests. NCAFP representatives have visited Kazakhstan three times as guests of the Kazakhstan government, while the NCAFP has hosted a number of Track I½ and Track II roundtables with civilian and military officials from the United States and Central Asian governments and has prepared reports on such activities with policy recommendations. In November 2010, the NCAFP hosted a Roundtable at The Kennan Institute—Central Asia: Strategic Context Twenty Years After Independence—resulting in a report with policy recommendations. Since then, NCAFP representatives have met a number of times with policy experts and representatives of the various governments involved to discuss developments in the region, strategic and tactical options, and policy responses. Concern has been growing that, in light of the major U.S. policy decision to withdraw from Afghanistan, U.S. interests and foreign policy in the region have been in danger of falling between the stools through a combination of shifting priorities, diminishing resources, and Central Asia “fatigue.”

As a result of such ongoing discussions and this concern, the NCAFP was encouraged to bring together academic experts and present and former civilian and military policymakers from the United States, Russia, China, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus to take a fresh look at the interests of the United States and the regional players and the challenges confronting the Central Asian and Caspian Region nations post-Afghanistan withdrawal. The NCAFP is indebted to Professor Roger Kangas and the Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies (NESAS) for his and their assistance and involvement in conceptualizing and designing the Roundtable program and convening the presenters and other participants.

The primary aim of the resulting Roundtable was to assess the situation in the region after the end of the American and NATO military presence on the ground, i.e., the withdrawal of combat troops from Afghanistan (except for support structures under the name “Resolute Support”) and the closing of transit supply routes to and from the region, including bases located in the countries neighboring Afghanistan. This, together with the generalized fatigue in the United States from long and costly military involvements in Afghanistan and Iraq, is bound to affect the degree of American interest in next-door Central Asia, leaving more room for Russian and Chinese activities, and to reduce the amount of support the states of the region can count on to maintain an optimum degree of independence from their powerful neighbors.

In light of these realities, the Roundtable addressed the following three questions:

- Why, specifically, is the region important to U.S. strategic interests?

- Why, specifically, is it necessary for the United States to maintain a presence in the region?
- What would be the consequences if the United States walks away?

The ultimate objective of the Roundtable was to inform the foreign policy debate through a report with analyses, conclusions, and policy recommendations emerging from off-the-record, not-for-attribution, discussions.

## **ROUNDTABLE PANELS**

The conference was divided into five panels with three or four short successive presentations followed by equal time for discussion among the entire group of presenters and panelists. It was conducted in a roundtable format, with participants expected to remain active during the entire event and moderators assuming the task of directing the discussion. In addition to American participants (with academic, government, business, and military backgrounds), experts and officials from Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Russia, China, and the European Union were in attendance.

The five panels covered the following subjects: (1) Changing U.S./NATO mission in Afghanistan after 2014, (2) Prospects for Regional Cooperation and Integration between the republics of Central Asia given the meager results obtained since 1991, (3) Ability of each Great Power to assert its interests in Central Asia under changing conditions, (4) U.S. Opportunities and Options under the new circumstances, and (5) Strategic Prognosis for the U.S. position in the region and available long-term options. The conference concentrated on Afghanistan and former Soviet Central Asia, the Caucasus being dealt with only marginally.

## **ASSUMPTIONS**

We took for granted the following:

- The withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan and the general fatigue with far-off expeditions will necessarily tend to diminish American willingness to sustain its strategic position in the region. Moreover, the post-withdrawal scenario in Afghanistan remains highly unpredictable.
- The current reality of viewing Central Asia as an area of secondary importance to the United States is shortsighted, given that both Russia and China (countries of primary importance to the United States) consider the region to be of primary importance.
- The United States tends to overlook the fact that, as the country of last political recourse for the Central Asian (and South-Caucasus) republics, it has the ability to pursue its strategic interests notwithstanding diminished resources.
- Without getting into the question of exact borders of Central Asia, we use that term for the five former Soviet republics—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—but not for Afghanistan, whose problems differ from those of its northern neighbors.

## **KEY ISSUES DISCUSSED**

### **Spheres of Influence**

The issue of the spheres of influence of the great powers in Central Asia was discussed at length both at

the panels and in “sidebar” discussions. Of particular interest for U.S. strategic thinkers were opposing arguments favoring U.S. support of Russian influence in the region, on the one hand, and of Chinese influence in the region on the other.

- The first argument went as follows: With the decrease of American presence, we can expect bolder attempts by both Russia and China to extend their influence in the region. A competition between them is inevitable, with China being the stronger party given its economic superiority and demographic weight—which can neutralize Russia’s historic ties with the region. Russian military superiority is countered by China’s progress in that sphere. The argument proceeds by saying that the United States, even if no longer able to play alone, would be wise to assist Russia in gaining dominance in the region—the result being the containment of Chinese ambitions, including possible expansion into Russian southern Siberia. Chinese domination of Central Asia would make Beijing much stronger in the conduct of its future relations with the United States.
- The second argument, in contrast, is based on the premise that China has nothing but peaceful intentions. The U.S.-Chinese trade is of primary importance for the world’s economy; in Central Asia, China is looking only for markets for its goods and for secure supplies of energy and raw materials—not for political influence. It is building railroads and pipelines in Central Asia that do not lead to Russia. Indeed it seeks to develop a new Silk Road rail-land bridge to connect East Asia with Europe. China is willing to assist the United States in post-2014 Afghanistan and has no expansionist ambitions in the region and rejects those of Russia by refusing to recognize the legitimacy of the separatist Abkhazia and South Ossetia—which Russia detached from Georgia by force. Under this argument, U.S. support of Chinese mercantile activities would help counter Russian pressure and support the sovereignty of the Central Asian states.

### **Efficacy of American Diplomacy**

This issue surfaced several times. The sense was that, in general, Washington has relied too much on military means, which, despite the performance of the U.S. military, could not replace long-term diplomatic solutions. Questions were raised about the basis of decision making in Washington on Afghanistan and Central Asian affairs and the adequacy of on-the-ground factual information in particular, something we could hardly judge from the outside. Possible problems with linguistic competence, familiarity with the region, knowledge of local cultures, traditions, and history were mentioned. That our interests in the region appear excessively self-serving (energy and raw materials, buffer zone) were discussed. Without assigning blame for policy errors, American mistakes were mentioned, especially in the U.S. way of promoting Western-style democracy in areas where the social, cultural, and political traditions are not congenial or receptive. This reflected the perception of Central Asian regimes that American promotion of human rights can undermine local sociopolitical stability and security and is ultimately aimed at regime change.

It was said that since 2001, the United States has been interested primarily, if not exclusively, in the conduct of the war in Afghanistan and viewed former Soviet Central Asia in light of American war needs and ambitions. At the same time, Iran’s role in any post-2014 solution(s) has been brushed aside, with that country being seen almost exclusively from the point of view of nuclear proliferation and Middle-Eastern problems.

## **Lack of Cooperation Between Central Asian States**

Key problems demanding regional cooperation include common security interests, the need to strategize about and develop new thinking for the landlocked situation of the region, problems with water distribution, trans-border movement of goods and persons, as well as narcotics-trafficking from Afghanistan (of which 90% supposedly goes to Russia). It was argued that lack of unity is a major obstacle to handling problems and weakens the ability of the states of Central Asia to face pressures from the great powers. Not one organization unites all the former Soviet republics of the region without the presence of either Russia or China or both. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is led by China and Russia (formerly predominant). The Customs Union presently comprises Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, with Russia continuing its efforts to attract other former Soviet republic—including the other Central Asian republics. The Eurasian Union is a rebirth of the old CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States), with Russia in the center and non-Russian republics playing a subordinate role.

This lack of unity (which applies to the South Caucasus region as well) has historical roots dating to before the Russian conquest (1864–1874), when the Khanate of Khiva and the emirates of Bukhara and Kokand (with capitals in today's Uzbekistan) were unable to unite even in the face of common danger. The tsarist-time Turkestan General Governorship (which comprised the bulk of today's Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan) tried to keep local quarrels under control, but the issue of lack of unity came into the open during the Soviet period when Central Asia was divided into Union Republics that began to compete for Moscow's favors, including investment. After independence (1991), the once-foremost Uzbek Republic was left behind by Kazakhstan (Steppe Region during the tsars), which has more resources, has less population, and has better managed the transition from socialism to capitalism. The competition between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan for regional leadership probably remains the main factor blocking cooperation in the region as a whole.

## **Investment Climate**

To counterbalance the effects of the exit of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, the rationale for the West to increase its business presence in the region after 2014 was acknowledged by conference participants. The discussion was focused on issues of fragility of legal frameworks, the importance of personal relationships as against institutional ties, the still numerically small middle class, and ingrained nepotism. (Three negative C's were also acknowledged—too much control, corruption, and cooptation.) Energy (oil and gas) and pipelines, as well as uranium, remain the primary attractions for foreign investors, but industrial production has revived somewhat—for example, railway equipment production in Kazakhstan and industrial goods output in Uzbekistan.

It was stated that China has achieved the first place in commercial exchanges and investments in the region, with Russia falling behind and Western powers coming last. Principal Chinese projects involve railways, which bring Chinese goods to Europe overland, pipelines from Kazakhstan (oil) and Turkmenistan (gas) going into Sinkiang (Xinjiang), water projects in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, as well as local Central Asian markets selling Chinese goods.

The distribution networks (primarily the Northern Distribution Network) currently serving American needs in Afghanistan could possibly continue to operate, albeit in different form, after the U.S. withdrawal. This vision is connected with that of a new "Silk Road" turning the landlocked geographic reality of Central Asia into a plus by restoring the ancient land route from China to Europe, with railroads and

highways competing with current sea routes for shipments of goods. The desirability of a Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) natural gas pipeline was discussed, with concerns expressed that TAPI could encounter local cross-border and security problems and possibly suffer the fate of the NABUCCO project, which was undermined by Russia and by a combination of business and geopolitical factors. The proposed Central Asia-South Asia CASA-1000 Project, which would bring electricity from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to Afghanistan and Pakistan, was also discussed.

Economic progress was cited as the only way to reduce the current massive yearly inflow of *Gastarbeiters* (guest workers) from Central Asia (Kazakhstan excepted) to Russia. Their current remittances make up a substantial portion of the GDP in their countries of origin.

### **Afghanistan: Conflicting Perceptions**

Participants strongly disagreed about the reality of post-2014 Afghanistan. One version was that Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world, that no regime will be able to survive without substantial external support, and that the Afghan military is unprepared to carry on alone—accordingly, changes brought about by the decade of foreign presence will vanish into a “black hole.”

A competing version is that support for the Taliban is less than 10 percent among the population, that cultural changes are substantive and irreversible, and that modernization (including the introduction of modern information technology and the consequent access to sources of news hitherto unavailable) continues apace throughout the nation. Some said that the Western press likes to report bloody incidents rather than signs of return to normalcy. This version sees the Afghan military as the largest and most experienced military in the region, with neighboring countries afraid of its strength. This version denies that the war in Afghanistan is a civil war and considers it to be a war of proxies.

With such totally opposite views on the table, no consensus was possible. Indeed, the same lack of consensus affects the ability of other states of the region to foster their common interests.

### **The Dilemma for the Central Asian Republics**

The general feeling was that the Central Asian countries are much concerned about the consequences of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, especially with the simultaneous lessening of American involvement in the region as a whole. American denials seem unconvincing, given the acknowledged fatigue in this country with the meager results obtained by the American intervention in that part of the world.

Central Asian concerns encompass following issues:

- Central Asia will have a harder time handling pressure from Russia and China
- The flow of narcotics across borders will increase
- Western investments in the region could diminish
- Cooperation within the region will suffer
- Widening of Islamist influence in the most vulnerable regions of Central Asia (Fergana Valley and Tajikistan) will occur
- Forthcoming presidential elections (successions) in both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan may

turn out to be more of an issue with the region undergoing a shift in the balance of power

The principle of a multi-vectoral foreign policy, first endorsed by Kazakhstan, has now been accepted by other Central Asian states as the expression of a desire to buttress sovereignty and independence by keeping equally good relations with each of the great powers, rather than giving clear preference to one and falling into its sphere of influence and the trap of overdependence.

Many at the conference noted with regret that the phrase “multi-vectoral policy,” while it was adopted in Tashkent as its own, has rarely been seen in the Kazakh press recently.

## **NCAFP POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following is a summary and list of NCAFP policy recommendations:

1. U.S. policymakers should focus on the importance of Central Asia to Russia, the growing importance of the region to China, and the consequent importance of the region to U.S. interests.
2. U.S. policymakers should be strong advocates for staying involved in the region and be prepared to inform those uninterested or opposed of the adverse consequences to U.S. strategic interests of walking away from the region.
3. The United States should adopt a long-term strategic plan that capitalizes on U.S. strengths for multifaceted engagement in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. Notwithstanding diminished fiscal resources and military disengagement in the region, the United States should optimize engagement through use of diplomatic tools and military assistance, support of educational and cultural exchanges, and promotion of U.S. commercial interests.
4. U.S. China policy, currently focused on China as a Pacific power, should evolve to take account of China's ambitions as a continental power with growing mercantile and geopolitical interests in Central Asia and the Russian Far East.
5. While values are an important part of U.S. foreign policy, the United States has a primary strategic interest in the Central Asian states being sovereign, stable, and secular. U.S. policymakers must be patient, allowing the evolution of civil societies in the region on their own terms.
6. U.S. policymakers should include in their strategic planning for the region the interests of Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, and India and integrate into their planning the opportunities for consultation and cooperation with these nations over time.
7. Notwithstanding the theoretical advantages of regional cooperation in Central Asia, U.S. policymakers must accept the realities and continue to deal bilaterally with each of the five Central Asia Republics on its own individual merits.
8. The United States and the nations of Europe have many common interests in the economic and political development of Central Asia; U.S. policymakers should focus their strategic thinking on how best to promote such interests, including WTO accession and assistance in infrastructure development.
9. While the jury is out on the viability of Afghanistan post-2014 under numerous possible scenarios, U.S. policymakers should anticipate various outcomes and be prepared in bilateral dealings with Central Asian states to offer security and technical assistance in such areas as border control, narco-trafficking, money laundering, etc.
10. U.S. policymakers should consider how best to work with the private sector and institutions such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank to promote infrastructure development, including the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Pipeline, the CASA-1000 and other hydroelectric projects in Tajikistan and elsewhere in Central Asia, and rail and road land bridge projects.

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