

Working Paper:
Resisting the urge to compete:
Prospects for U.S.-Russian Cooperation in Central Asia¹

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Originally presented at the conference

US and Russia: Post-Elections Security Challenges

Institute for Strategic Studies, US Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA

March 6-7, 2008



¹ This working paper is a product of the research project “RUSSCASP - Russian and Caspian energy developments and their implications for Norway and Norwegian actors”, financed by the PETROSAM program of the Research Council of Norway. The project is carried out with the Fridtjof Nansen Institute, the Norwegian Institute for International Affairs and Econ Pöyry as consortium partners and also includes other institutions and researchers as participants

Oslo – May 2008

Introduction

The demonstratively cordial visit of Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov to Moscow in early February 2008 underscored the seemingly unstoppable growth of Russia's influence in Central Asia since mid-2005. The quality of this influence, however, gives ground for concern even among those Western experts who do not readily subscribe to the notion of Russia's inherent predilection to malignant imperialism. An illustration to these concerns could be seen in the fact that Karimov traveled to Moscow soon after orchestrating his own re-election for the third term and found it opportune to express regret that President Vladimir Putin had not taken his advice to do the same, opting instead for installing Dmitri Medvedev as successor.² Putin's regime might appear more 'enlightened' than Karimov's despotic rule but the fundamental compatibility between the two post-Soviet political systems is unmistakable, and the decision of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) not to send observers to the March 2008 presidential elections in Russia constitutes a clear testimony of that.

It is very easy to see a straight clash between this authoritarian *Entente Cordiale* and the US commitment to spreading democracy in the world, which includes a wholehearted support to the so-called 'colored revolutions'. It does not, however, follow from this empirical evidence that the US and Russian interests in Central Asia are strictly confrontational, as it is sometimes argued in Washington and very often – in Moscow.³

² For a sharp commentary see Andrei Kolesnikov, 'Islam Karimov refused to support Vladimir Putin in the choice of successor', *Kommersant*, 7 February 2008.

³ An argument for a closer US-Russian cooperation in Central Asia built by Dmitri Trenin back in early 2003 now reads like a voice in the wilderness; see Dmitri Trenin, 'Southern Watch: Russia's Policy in Central Asia', *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 56, no. 2, Spring 2003, pp. 119-131. The start of the Iraq war certainly made a big difference, as examined in Roy Allison, 'Strategic Reassertion in Russia's Central Asia Policy', *International Affairs*, vol. 80, no. 2, March 2004, pp. 277-93; for my analysis see Pavel Baev, 'Russia's Three Petty Games in Central Asia', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 17, no. 2, July 2004, pp. 269-283.

This paper aims at assessing the scope of unavoidable conflict and possible parallelism between these interests and will not shy away from challenging the key assumptions in the prevalent assessments, convincing and balanced as some of them are.

A useful point of departure could be a fairly traditional dis-aggregation of both the US and Russian interests into three broad categories: political/ideological; economic/energy; and security/military. As far as the US are concerned, this elementary analytical exercise immediately invites the question about the wide divergence and possibly even conflict between these groups of interests. Svante Cornell recently argued that: ‘An approach that treats U.S. interests in security, energy, and governance as contradictory is a self-fulfilling prophecy that in fact undermines each goal.’⁴ His bold proposition that ‘these contradictions are more imagined than real’ is somewhat weakened, however, by the plain geographic fact that US security interests are focused on Kabul and Manas, and energy interests – on Baku and Tengiz. This 1,000 miles gap across some very inhospitable territories does not necessarily imply a contradiction but does make it difficult to concentrate efforts and achieve synergy.⁵

As for Russia, it is fairly obvious that this categorization of interests, while useful, is not sufficient, since there is also a big and diverse group of interests that, following the EU lingo, could be called ‘neighborhood’, while common perceptions are perhaps better described by the term ‘backyard’. They include various cross-border interactions and spillovers, as well as complicated ethno-polical issues, including the grievances of Russian-speaking communities, first of all in Kazakhstan, semi-legal labor migrations from Central Asia, particularly from Tajikistan, and also various camaraderie ties between elites. These interests underpin the political fact that Russia and four Central Asian states (minus ever-neutral Turkmenistan) are security allies, which formally makes it imperative for Moscow to be ready to protect these countries against both external challenges and domestic instabilities. Generally it means that Russia’s interests in Central

⁴ See Svante E. Cornell, ‘Finding Balance: The Foreign Policies of Central Asian States’, pp. 267-298 in Ashley Tellis & Michael Wills, eds., *Strategic Asia 2007-08: Domestic Political Change and Grand Strategy*, Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2007; on p. 283.

⁵ For the Russian audience, I have argued this point in Pavel Baev, ‘Virtual Geopolitics in Central Asia: U.S.-Russian Cooperation vs. Conflict of Interests’, *Security Index*, No. 1, Spring 2008, pp. 29-36.

Asia are comparable with, and probably even surpass in intensity the US interests in Mexico. The following analysis will address each group of interests separately assuming that real policies are not necessarily stemming from or serving them but might have their own logic.

Energy realities, ambitions and delusions

Energy interests are supposed to be the most accurately measurable as the size of resources and the dynamics of production, the capacity of pipelines and the scale of investments are all matters for quantitative assessments that could be extrapolated with reasonable accuracy. Nevertheless, the breath-taking climb of oil prices since the late 1990s has strongly deformed the mainstream interpretations of these assessments, while some old cliché about the ‘black gold’ being the main driving force of world politics have not only gained new lease on life but become enriched with new misperceptions, phantasms and conspiracy theories.⁶

On the most basic level, the US energy interests consist in securing sufficient supply of domestic needs at the lowest possible prices. Own production can cover most of these needs with the crucially important exception of oil, and the immediate consequence is that US energy interests require reasonable stability on the world oil markets, so that the fundamentals of supply and demand are in balance at least for the immediate future. One important proposition here is that no such balance could be realistically constructed when the basic oil infrastructure in two major producers – Iran and Iraq – remains grossly underdeveloped and partially destroyed, which has been the main cause of the turmoil in the oil markets since the start of this decade.⁷ That inevitably boosts the role of the top

⁶ One of the earlier reflections on the theme of panic in the West caused by interruptions of oil supply can be found in Hegré, *Land of Black Gold (The Adventures of Tintin)*, London: Little & Brown, 1971. A comprehensive recent examination of the speculative spins on the energy topic is Leonardo Maugeri, *The Age of Oil: The Mythology, History, and Future of the World's Most Controversial Resource*. Westpoint, CT: Praeger, 2006.

⁷ The International Energy Agency (IEA) is cautious in evaluating the prospects for normalization on the market, predicting that oil production in the Middle East will increase from 24.1 million barrels per day in 2006 to 27.5 in 2010 and 31.8 in 2015. See *World Energy Outlook 2007*, OECD/IEA, Paris: 2007, p. 82.

exporter with significant reserve capacity – Saudi Arabia, but also elevates the importance of secondary producers far beyond their modest reserves.

This return to the basics helps to take a fresh look at the US energy interests in Central Asia and discover that they are entirely concentrated in North-Western Kazakhstan and are aimed at maximizing production at its oilfields, particularly off-shore, and securing safe and economical delivery of this oil to the world market. Diversification of supply has for decades been an important (even if somewhat academic) secondary element of US oil interests, but it would be impractical indeed to aim at organizing deliveries from Kazakhstan. One immediate conclusion from this most abbreviated analysis is that the flow of oil from Kazakhstan to China through the recently launched and currently expanded Atyrau (Guriev)-Atasu-Alashankou pipeline serves US interests perfectly well.⁸ Another conclusion, heretical as it may seem, is that the export of Kazakh oil to and via Iran, currently limited to swap deals and small-scale tanker traffic to the Neka oil port, is perfectly compatible with the US energy interests.⁹

The key question about the Kazakh oil is whether its transportation predominantly through Russia constitutes any kind of problem for the US energy interests. Dozens of analysis take an affirmative answer to this question as self-evident despite the evidence amassed since 2001, but an impartial examination of this ‘axiom’ would inevitably conclude that it does not hold water. Even in the period of scandalously low oil prices at the end of the previous decade, Russia was very reluctant to enter into an arrangement with the OPEC on production cuts.¹⁰ Since then, Moscow has been consistently trying to build a reputation of a reliable supplier that stays clear from the intrigues between

⁸ One clear examination is James Fishelson, ‘From the Silk Road to Chevron: The Geopolitics of Oil Pipelines in Central Asia’, *Vestnik*, No. 7, 12 December 2007 (http://www.sras.org/geopolitics_of_oil_pipelines_in_central_asia); see also Stephen Blank, ‘China’s recent energy gains in Central Asia: What do they portend’, *CACI Analyst*, 31 October 2007 (<http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4726>).

⁹ On Kazakhstan’s interest in constructing a pipeline from Neka to the Gulf, see Elena Butyrina, ‘Kazakhstan could partake in the Iranian pipeline project’, *Panorama*, 29 February 2008 (http://panorama.vkkz.com/index.php?option=com_wrapper&Itemid=66).

¹⁰ It could be noted that in the debates during winter 2001/2002 it was *Yukos* led by Mikhail Khodorkovsky that was firmly against any deals of this sort, while *Lukoil* was more positively inclined; see Yuri Aleksandrov & Dmitry Orlov, ‘OPEC or Russia?’, *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 28 February 2002.

producers and consumers, and lifted any objections against the BTC project. The collapse of the Russia-US 'energy dialogue' has not changed this line that was drawn with particular emphasis during the year of Russia's chairmanship in the G8 in 2006.¹¹ Building ties with Saudi Arabia and Venezuela in 2007, Moscow demonstratively ignored invitations to join OPEC.¹²

Whatever desperate decisions might be taken in the Kremlin in the fairly possible situation of a new sharp drop in the oil prices, perhaps driven by a 'war' between producers, it is plain inconceivable that it might opt for interrupting the export from Kazakhstan. President Nursultan Nazarbaev, a true gross-master in playing the 'multiple-vectors' game, had measured every risk, cost and benefit before assuring Putin in May 2007 that he was 'absolutely committed to transporting most if not all of its hydrocarbons through Russian territory.'¹³ Indeed, Kazakhstan's key role in the transit of natural gas from Turkmenistan to Russia provides it an absolute security guarantee against any hypothetical surprises, like the closure of the Tengiz-Novorossiisk pipeline for an unscheduled repair. For that matter, the delays in development the giant off-shore Kashagan oil field in Kazakhstan – that are clearly against US interests – have been caused by the sharp conflict between Astana and the consortium of Western 'majors' led by Italian ENI – but that conflict was not triggered or in any way instigated by Moscow.¹⁴

Several important implications follow from the simple point that transportation of Kazakh oil through Russia does not constitute a challenge to US energy interests. One is that the channeling of this oil towards the Primorsk terminal might constitute a problem due to heavy tanker traffic in the congested Gulf of Finland, particularly in the decision

¹¹ Upbeat presentation of this dialogue can be found in 'US-Russia Commercial Energy Summit', *Baker Institute Study* No. 21, February 2003 (http://bakerinstitute.org/Pubs/study_21.pdf). On the 'Global Energy Security Action Plan' approved at the July 2006 G8 Strelina summit, see Dmitri Butrin, 'The three-mice summit', *Kommersant*, 18 July 2006.

¹² See Sergei Kulikov, 'We want a different OPEC', *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 6 March 2008.

¹³ See Arkady Dubnov, 'Where the Caspian Sea flows in', *Vremya novostei*, 11 May 2007; my comment is Pavel Baev, 'Putin's double triumph not yet in the bag', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 14 May 2007 (http://jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article_id=2372161).

¹⁴ See on that Sergei Smirnov, 'Kashagan's multiple dots', *Expert Kazakhstan*, 28 January 2008 (http://expert.ru/printissues/kazakhstan/2008/04/razrabotka_kashagana/).

on BTS-2 is taken by the new Putin government;¹⁵ to the contrary, the recently contracted construction of the Burgas-Alexandroupolis by-pass pipeline around the Bosphorus is perfectly fine, and the loudly voiced reservations against this project are simply manifestations of parochial ‘special interests’.¹⁶ Another implication is that Washington could find it useful to express support for constructing the second line of the Tengiz-Novorossiisk pipeline by the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC), much the same way as it did at the launch of the first line of this project back in 2001. The CPC is split by a protracted conflict between partners, and a bit of external help might make significant difference in widening this economically sensible route.¹⁷ Yet another point is that the much-debated option for transportation of the Kazakh oil via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline may be not that important after all, particularly since Azerbaijan now claims that it has enough oil to fill this ‘strategic’ pipe for up to ten years.¹⁸ Finally, it could be suggested that discussion of these matters, as well as prospects for developing the hydrocarbon resources of the Arctic, could shape a useful agenda for the revived US-Russian energy dialogue.

Moscow could be reluctant to debate in this potentially helpful framework problems and prospects for its natural gas import from Central Asia since that constitutes its truly vital energy interest, unlike oil where its interests are limited to securing transit profits and setting joint ventures for developing cross-border mixed jurisdiction fields. The stagnant production on the major Siberian gasfields controlled by *Gazprom* and the steady growth of internal demand create the situation of ‘gas crunch’, which is certain to continue for the near-term, so importing some 60-70 bcm from Turkmenistan and 10-15 bcm from

¹⁵ On the protracted clash of interest groups around the Baltic Pipeline System (BTS) see Dmitri Butrin, ‘Transneft cannot connect a pipe with a port’, *Kommersant*, 5 May 2008.

¹⁶ See for example, Vladimir Socor, ‘The first Russian-operated pipeline of European Union territory rears its head’, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 2 March 2007 (http://www.jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article_id=2371965).

¹⁷ Western companies who have stakes in CPC are also involved in the oil production in Tengiz, and so are interested in lowest possible tariffs, while *Transneft* that has a minority stake in CPC insists on raising them. Because of low tariffs, the CPC has never been able to make any operational profit and is burdened with heavy debt, which has to be restructured. See Lydmila Podobedova, ‘Chevron gives five years to the CPC’, *RBC Daily*, 22 April 2008; Dmitri Verhoturov, ‘The CPC is not ready for expansion’, *Expert-Kazakhstan*, 1 October 2007 (http://expert.ru/printissues/kazakhstan/2007/36/problemy_ktk/).

¹⁸ Sergei Mahnovsky argued that Tengiz is so important for this pipeline that it should be re-named TBTC, see Olga Oliker & Thomas Szayna (eds), *Faultlines of Conflict in Central Asia and the Caucasus*, RAND, Santa Monica CA: 2003, on p. 117.

Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan is absolutely necessary for delivering on Russia's export commitments. That fact of energy life cannot lead to the conclusion that the decisive 'victory' achieved by President Putin through the agreements with Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in May 2006 (detailed further in documents signed in December-January) signifies a 'defeat' for the US in the imaginary 'Great Caspian Energy Game'.¹⁹

There has never been any serious US interest involved with the phantasmagoric project for building a gas pipeline across Afghanistan and into Pakistan.²⁰ There is a hard-driven lobby in Washington that advocates the design for a Trans-Caspian gas pipeline seeking to replay the BTC success story; however, even their best efforts cannot establish an economic rationale for this project or connect it with US energy interests. The attempts to explain to the 'short-sighted' EU what are the risks and opportunities for its fledgling energy strategy resemble rather tellingly the US-European disagreements about importing Soviet gas in the early years of the Reagan era.²¹ Entertaining as it may be to spin such daring enterprises (and this author has taken part in quite a few of such brainstorm), it is essential to remember that they do constitute an assault on Russia's vital interests, which does not mean that they should be banned or censored but implies that the consequences should be fully taken into account. The 'cooperation-&-conflict' model performs poorly for an actor that is eager to challenge vital interests of the counter-part for the benefit of own peripheral interests – and then expects cooperation in the areas where own vital interests are at stake.

¹⁹ See Kirill Martynov, 'The price of the victory', *Kommersant*, 26 June 2007; on the appointment of a special energy ambassador in the US State Department, see Vladimir Skosyrev, 'A new US challenge to Russia', *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 15 February 2008.

²⁰ For a reasonable assessment of energy developments in South Asia see Stephen Blank, 'Caspian Basin: A look at the Southern factor in the regional energy equation', *Eurasia Insight*, 29 November 2007 (<http://eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav112907a.shtml>).

²¹ See, for instance, Zeyno Baran, 'EU Energy Security: Time to End Russian Leverage', *Washington Quarterly*, Autumn 2007, pp. 131-144; Vladimir Socor, 'Playing catch-up with Russia on Caspian energy transit', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 7 June 2007 (http://jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article_id=2372213).

Enjoying regime stability while it lasts

The ‘orange’ revolution in Ukraine in late 2004 did not impress the Central Asian ‘presidents-for-life’ as much as the Kremlin that was shell-shocked by the cheerful crowds on the *maidan*; the collapse of Askar Akaev’s regime in Kyrgyzstan in early 2005, however, brought them in much the same frame of mind. In retrospect, that small and suddenly successful street revolt looks very different from the democracy-inspired uprisings in Kiev, Tbilisi or, for that matter, Belgrade, and so hardly deserves the name of ‘Tulip revolution’.²² In the panic-stricken ranks of *kakistocracy* (as William Safire poignantly defined the post-Soviet elites), there was hardly any doubt, however, that it was yet another hit in the seemingly unstoppable chain reaction, particularly since the demonstration effect was quite evident. While Moscow was absorbed by introspection, the next test came up in Uzbekistan – and President Islam Karimov opted for a forceful response taking personal responsibility for the ‘shoot-to-kill’ order in Andijan.²³

That tragic event erected a clear-cut watershed in the Central Asian geopolitical dynamics. The US administration and the European governments were compelled to condemn the massacre – and that stance was taken by Karimov and every other ‘strong leader’, including perhaps even freshman Ilham Aliyev in Azerbaijan, not only as undue interference in internal affairs but also as evidence of involvement in pro-active destabilization policies aimed at staging a series of Georgia-type ‘regime changes’.²⁴ Russia took a diametrically opposite approach and instantly expressed unambiguous support for Karimov’s actions shielding him from international sanctions and providing credibility for his version of a ‘terrorist attack’. In just a few months time, an armed uprising in Nalchik, Kabardino-Balkaria was suppressed with the same resolute force,

²² One good analysis is Erika Marat, *The Tulip Revolution: Kyrgyzstan One Year After*, Washington DC: Jamestown Foundation, April 2006; the astonishing lack of self-defense is reflected in ‘Bloodless Coup a Real Letdown’, *The Onion*, 16 February 2005 (<http://www.theonion.com/content/node/30906>).

²³ My reading of this controversial event is close to the findings of the report ‘Uzbekistan: The Andijan Uprising’, *Asia Briefing* No. 38, Brussels: International Crisis Group, 25 May 2005 (<http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=3469&l=1>).

²⁴ Sharp criticism of that ‘miscalculation’ by Washington is elaborated in John Daly, Kurt Meppen, Vladimir Socor, and Frederick Starr, *Anatomy of a Crisis: U.S.-Uzbekistan Relations, 2001-2005*, Silk Road paper, Washington: CACI & SRSP, Johns Hopkins-SAIS, February 2006.

cementing the newly-forged affinity between Russia and Uzbekistan.²⁵ Karimov certainly understood that Russia's embrace was far from charitable but he was so outraged by subversive Western demarche that burning political bridges did not seem a step too far – and the US Kharsi-Khanabad (K2) airbase was expelled.

Moscow saw that forced US withdrawal as a decisive success of its post-September 2001 policy of regaining the lost positions in Central Asia and proceeded with upgrading and reformatting of the overlapping multilateral structures, first of all the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).²⁶ One characteristic feature of these low-content organizations is the lack of any meaningful cooperation between the Central Asian states as all networking was centered on Moscow. Another feature is the rather advanced socializing of security elites for whom Russia continues to be the role model and norm-setter, while business elites tend to expand their horizons wider and cultivate ties with Turkey, China, and the EU that erode the attractiveness of the Russian model.

The sudden departure in the last days of 2006 of President Sapurmurat Niyazov, who had taken the principle of 'neutralism' to such extreme as reducing Turkmenistan's involvement in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to the status of 'observer', has made it possible for Russia to add a new and really functional dimension to its 'integrationist' policy. Instead of playing with such hollow shells as the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC), Moscow has focused on building an 'energy axis' connecting Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, with Uzbekistan as the significant other.²⁷ While there is still no formal framework for this 'gas alliance', the series of meetings between its 'founding fathers' in 2007-2008 has produced more tangible results (in terms of agreements on volumes and prices and pipeline deals) than great many high-level conferences on the stumbling and struggling EU energy policy.

²⁵ See Georgi Derluguian, 'Nalchik as the Russian Andijan', *Izvestia*, 18 October 2005.

²⁶ On the earlier guidelines of this policy, see Lena Jonson, *Vladimir Putin and Central Asia: The Shaping of Russian Foreign Policy*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2004.

²⁷ My 'road-map' for this process was sketched in Pavel K. Baev, 'Turning Counter-Terrorism into Counter-Revolution: Russia Focuses on Kazakhstan and Engages Turkmenistan', *European Security*, vol. 15, no.1, March 2006, pp. 3–22. For a current analysis, see Tatyana Stanovaya, 'Russian builds an Asian energy alliance', *Politcom.ru*, 14 May 2007 (<http://politcom.ru/article.php?id=4555>).

This string of successes that Russia has scored presents a difficult dilemma for the US that has to find a common denominator for its criticism of the consistent curtailing of democracy by President Putin (including the tight management of the succession process) and its readiness to cultivate relations with Central Asian leaders, despite their pronounced drift towards tougher authoritarianism. While the conflict with Karimov was beyond reconciliation for a couple of years after the K2 closure, it was President Nazarbaev who constituted the natural focus of US attention, first of all because of his key role in the shifting (and quite possibly, misconstrued) balances of power in energy geopolitics. The trip of US Vice President Dick Cheney in May 2006 illuminated that dilemma: In Vilnius, he delivered a powerful speech in support of democratic reforms and revolutions with a strong warning to Russia not to wander from the path of democratization, and then in Astana, he gave thumbs up to Nazarbaev and confirmed that as far as Washington was concerned his extermination of any political opposition was perfectly fine. As a result, the Russian leadership and most mainstream commentators interpreted the Vilnius speech as an exercise in hostile ideological politics, and even the *New York Times* felt obliged to emphasize in an editorial: ‘And however hypocritical Cheney might be in lecturing anyone about human rights - especially just before heading off to court President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan, hardly a paragon of civic virtue - that does not mean he was wrong.’²⁸

The new US line drawn with, as one sharp comment pointed out, an ‘increased awareness that its democracy project ran into the sand and was terribly counterproductive in Central Asia’, was more effectual in Kazakhstan, where Nazarbaev felt reassured that no revolutions were plotted against him.²⁹ More reassurances were provided during his visit to Washington in September 2006, but it was still impossible not to see that the US leadership expected to see changes in the regime character, if not a ‘regime change’, in

²⁸ See ‘Criticizing Russia with good reason’, *New York Times*, July 1-2, 2006. One typical sample in the avalanche of commentary in Moscow is Aleksandr Privalov, ‘On the speech of Vice President Cheney’, *Expert*, 8 May 2006.

²⁹ See Stephen J. Blank, ‘America strikes back? Geopolitical rivalry in Central Asia and the Caucasus’, *CACI Analyst*, 17 May 2006 (http://cacianalyst.org/view_article.php?articleid=4233&SMSESSION=NO).

the direction that went strictly across Nazarbaev's preferences.³⁰ A confirmation of the continuing US moral support for political forces seen as intrinsically hostile by the Central Asian rulers was unmistakable in President Bush's address to the UN General Assembly in September 2007, and the point was not that he mixed up Kazakhstan with Kyrgyzstan – but that he 'saluted' the latter among other 'nations that have recently taken strides toward liberty', including Georgia and Ukraine, despite the clear authoritarian backsliding in Bishkek.³¹

The gap between the intention to pursue a pragmatic course in 'befriending' Nazarbaev and since 2007 Berdymuhammedov as well, and the desire to uphold a principled stance on promoting democracy can hardly be bridged in the US policy, while Russia capitalizes on the counter-revolutionary and anti-democratic coherence between its foreign and domestic policies. For that matter, Moscow saw no problem whatsoever supporting Kazakhstan's ambitious bid to assume the chairmanship in the OSCE, while the US and the key European states granted only conditional consent for the year 2010.³² Pleased as he was with the trip to Washington, Nazarbaev had a meeting with Putin immediately after it, where lucrative energy deals were penned, to be followed by more business conducted in the 'most favored' regime in May and December 2007.

Putin's success is secured not by his commitment to 'pragmatism' (that could perhaps be better described as 'opportunism') but by the increasingly pronounced preaching of a different ideology that is often labeled 'sovereignty' for the lack of a better term. Russia portrays itself as a model of economic success and social cohesion achieved without advancing democratic reforms and implanting Western values – and Central Asian leaders feel comfortable with this leadership. They have few doubts subscribing to the argument that support for democracy and human rights is just 'a veneer of clamorous rhetoric' covering up the 'attempts to impose unfair competition on us and secure access

³⁰ An insightful reflection on this high-profile visit is Marat Yermukanov, 'Nazarbaev's Washington trip wins him praise, mutes criticism at home', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 6 October 2006 (http://jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article_id=2371523).

³¹ On Bush's UN address see Andrei Terehov, 'Bush organized a democracy day', *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 26 September 2007.

³² See on that Vladimir Socor, 'Kazakhstan to chair the OSCE: Splitting the Russia-led bloc?', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 6 December 2007 (http://jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article_id=2372645).

to our resources,' as Putin asserted in the not-farewell speech in February 2008.³³ There is, nevertheless, a shaky premise and a serious flaw in this meeting of minds that are all set on the assumption that the ruling regimes could be made indefinitely stable. The premise is that Putin's scheme for stepping down from the summit of power without releasing the grasp on it would indeed work, and the flaw is that the minion-despots remain in denial of the plain fact that the 'suzerain' Russia has neither capacity nor intention to provide any meaningful security guarantees.

Security takes care of itself, but for how long?

It appears almost supernatural that in the three years since the Andijan uprising, Central Asia has not faced a single noteworthy big-impact security challenge. Tightly managed elections came and went with barely a ripple (protests in Kyrgyzstan after the parliamentary elections in December 2007 could qualify as one but only just), terrorist attacks were rare and inconsequential (like the explosion near the presidential palace in Dushanbe in November 2007 that claimed one life), and even the sudden death of President Niyazov in December 2006 did not trigger any violent clan struggle that had appeared very probable.³⁴ Strong economic growth has perhaps taken the edge from the most acute social problems, like poverty and unemployment, but most chronic problems, like the shortage of arable land and water, have not subsided, while new hardships, like the extremely cold winter 2008 in Tajikistan, appear all the time.

The on-going lull in conflict transformation is, therefore, not that easy to explain, and while it has certain parallelism with stabilization in the North Caucasus (partial and uncertain as it is), it stands in sharp contrast with the steady escalation of violence in Afghanistan. There is no space here to examine the trajectory of this ever-evolving multiple-actors civil war, but some of its fronts inevitably have – and perhaps could have

³³ My reflections on that address are in Pavel Baev, 'Putin warns against "immoral" Western interference in his "strategic" speech', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 11 February 2008 (http://jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article_id=2372792).

³⁴ For a perceptive analysis, see 'Cracks in the Marble: Turkmenistan's Failing Dictatorship', *Asia Briefing* 44, Brussels: International Crisis Group, January 2003 (<http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=1445&l=1>).

had far more – impact on the security situation in Central Asia. One impact that is significant in its absence is the broken connection with the Islamist/terrorist networks in the Fergana valley, as the revival of the Taliban has not so far brought any resurgence of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).³⁵ Neither has the regrouping of the Tajik tribal forces around the Panjshir valley generated any destabilizing cross-border spillover that could threaten to restart the civil war in Tajikistan that Russia with great effort helped to bring to an end back in 1996-1997.

Whatever ideas about the threat of ‘geopolitical encirclement’ are fabricated and spun in Moscow, there are hardly any doubts in the Kremlin that for the US and for NATO as well the travail of the peace-enforcement/state-building operation in Afghanistan is a matter of top priority.³⁶ The Russian leadership may have a slightly exaggerated assessment of how crucial was the support provided to the US in autumn 2001 for achieving the swift and decisive victory over the Taliban, but its course towards reducing this support, including discontinuing the military aid to the Karzai government, to the point of non-involvement has not made much of a difference. It is clear that a serious Russian contribution to the efforts of the international coalition could have had a profound effect, but it is equally clear that such a contribution is not in the cards.

Moscow certainly does not want to be seen as a ‘spoiler’, and in principle it is not interested in a failure of the US-led intervention, heart-warming as such a prospect might seem for many neo-anti-Americanists. The consequences of such a defeat are too dangerous to contemplate, so the preferred option for the Kremlin is a protracted civil war that would keep NATO entangled in performing a resource-consuming but ultimately hopeless task. Working towards such an option, Russia is carefully cultivating ties with old and new allies in Afghanistan fostering the National Front that brings together regional political forces (first of all the Tajiks and the Uzbeks) and the remnants of the

³⁵ The complex structure of current conflict is examined in Antonio Guistozi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan*. London: Hurst, 2007.

³⁶ One sound analysis is Vladimir Ovchinsky, ‘Afghanistan without the coalition’, *Russia in Global Affairs*, January-February 2007 (<http://www.globalaffairs.ru/numbers/24/7042.html>).

Parcham and *Khalq* factions.³⁷ Gentle pressure is periodically applied on the Manas airbase in order to remind the US that the possibility of using this crucially important channel depends entirely on Moscow's goodwill. The April 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest provided for Putin an opportunity to emphasize the vulnerability of the coalition operation ('Can this be done effectively without Russia? No. '), while offering only limited help in supplying the Alliance's forces.³⁸

The spiraling destabilization of political situation in Pakistan provides evidence for the argument that the building of a functional state in Afghanistan requires in the mid-term a great increase of trade and other ties with its other neighbors, including those to the North. That might lead to a geopolitical reformatting of the whole Greater Central Asia region as suggested by several scholars who look for common-sense solutions beyond the current military impasse.³⁹ These ideas are not very popular in Moscow as they look suspiciously like provocations against its growing influence; what is more significant, they are not warmly welcomed in Central Asian capitals either. Odd as that might seem, Afghanistan in 2005-2006 was the most democratic state in the region, and for Messrs Karimov and Rakhmonov the propositions about open competition between political forces and reasonably free elections seemed far more dangerous than any Islamic propaganda mastered by the Taliban. The ties between Afghanistan and its northern neighbors have therefore been cut down as far as possible, and the very reserved attitude towards expanding relations with Iran (demonstrated even by Berdymuhammedov) adds to the fact that Central Asia remains essentially closed in the southern direction.

³⁷ See on that Dmitri Verhoturov, 'Another Afghanistan', *Expert*, (in Russian) 11 June 2007 (http://www.expert.ru/printissues/expert/2007/22/drugoy_afganistan/); Aleksandr Kots, 'Russia returns to Afghanistan?', *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 20-26 April 2007.

³⁸ Full text of Putin's press-conference is at (http://president.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2008/04/04/1949_type82915_163150.shtml). My short comment on the possibility of Russia's more substantial contribution generated a quite disproportional resonance; see Pavel Baev, 'Medvedev dares not venture into international arena', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 13 March 2008 (http://jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article_id=2372880); Arkady Dubnov, 'Shuravi have no clue', *Vremya novostei*, 19 March 2008.

³⁹ One good example is S. Frederick Starr, 'A Partnership for Central Asia', *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2005, pp. 164-178; see also S. Frederick Starr, ed., *The New Silk Roads: Transport and Trade in Greater Central Asia*, Washington: CACI & SRSP, June 2007 (<http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/inside/publications/GCA.html>).

There is, nevertheless, one important and hugely worrisome exception to that picture of sealed-off borders – drug-trafficking. It has been obvious for years that there is a great promise in constructive cooperation between Russia, the US and the EU aimed at reducing the opium production in Afghanistan and the heroin flow via Central Asia towards Russia and Europe. Yet it is also obvious that this cooperation has hit a dead-end.⁴⁰ NATO and the US are understandably concerned that a pro-active policy against poppy cultivation might endanger their current operations and so do only as little as absolutely necessary in checking the explosive growth of heroin production, essentially condemning the Afghan state-building project to failure. Russia, from its side, prefers to ignore the transformation of Tajikistan into a drug-trafficking state where law enforcement structures provide protection for smugglers, and takes no notice of the absence of any functioning central governance in Southern Kyrgyzstan that threatens to break the state apart.⁴¹ The scale of the drugs-related problems in Russia itself is typically denied, but the lack of attention to the fast-growing security challenges driven by the expanding heroin economy in the two states where its military bases are located is still astounding.

Russia is not building any military capabilities that could be useful for deterring and countering security threats in Central Asia, in contrast to the developments in the North Caucasus, where the reduction of armed violence goes in parallel with deployment of new combat-capable units. Most of these units, including two newly-raised mountain brigades that were deployed in Dagestan and Karachaevo-Cherkessiya during 2007, have limited mobility and cannot be quickly transported to remote theaters like, for instance, Tajikistan. Doing as little as possible in building power-projection capabilities aimed at Central Asia, Moscow puts a lot of spin on the activities of security organizations, advertising the non-existent peacekeeping forces of the CSTO and persistently proposing it as the best possible partner for NATO in Afghanistan.⁴²

⁴⁰ A competent assessment is Svante E. Cornell, 'Drug smuggling in Central Eurasia', pp. 113-130 in Kimberley Thachuk, ed., *Transnational Threats: Smuggling and Trafficking in Arms, Drugs and Human Life*, New York: Praeger Security International, 2007.

⁴¹ See Stephen Blank, 'Regional rivalries center on Kyrgyzstan', *CACI Analyst*, 23 January 2008 (<http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4775>).

⁴² See Vitaly Mikhailov, 'Blue helmets of constant readiness', *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 8 February 2008.

The most celebrated structure is certainly the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which has attracted so much attention in the current commentary since staging the unprecedented Russian-Chinese military exercises in the Urals in August 2007 that there is hardly any need in adding one more opinion.⁴³ It may still be worth pointing out that the 'Peace Mission 2007' has revealed as many hidden tensions between China and Russia (including Moscow's concerns about Beijing's expressed readiness to partake in military exercises in Central Asia) as it has demonstrated unity and common purpose. The sharp contraction of Russian arms export to China adds to the evidence for the proposition that the bilateral military cooperation has peaked.

Overall, Russia has apparently developed a habit of presenting itself as a 'security guarantor' for Central Asia without investing any significant resources in building the necessary capabilities for this role. The underlying assumption could only be that the intensity of external and intra-regional security challenges would remain low, no matter what happens in Afghanistan, so the low-cost 'good-weather' arrangements would suffice. The 'economization' of Russia's security policy in Central Asia, with the prime attention on the energy-rich Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan and the secondary focus on Uzbekistan, may be a perfectly sound approach, but it leaves unaddressed the progressive deterioration of security in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which might result in a spectacular state failure.

Conclusion

The prospects for US-Russian interactions in Central Asia are in many ways dependent upon, if not determined by, the necessary revision of aims and priorities in the US policy towards Russia. Such a thorough review was in the cards at the start of George W. Bush's second presidential term but was apparently abandoned as too complicated or perhaps

⁴³ A concise evaluation is in Nicklas Norling & Niklas Swanström, 'Sino-Russian Relations in Central Asia and the SCO', *CACI Analyst*, 3 October 2007 (<http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4705>).

bothersome – and so would have to be done by the new president and her/his team.⁴⁴ The pattern of US-Russian relation has in the meanwhile de-facto shifted from ‘partnership’ (based on one fateful ‘look-in-the-eye’) to ‘cooperation-competition’. There are many good reasons for changing this pattern even further towards ‘cooperation-competition-confrontation’, where ‘competition’ would be the main working mode applied wherever possible, while ‘cooperation’ is maintained where useful, and ‘confrontation’ is carried through where necessary. The problem with such a change is that encroachments on Russia’s vital interests, entertaining as they might be, could generate such tensions that it would become problematic to preserve cooperation in areas where Washington finds it essential and desirable. A more promising and practical pattern could be ‘partnership-cooperation-competition-confrontation’, where ‘partnership’ is defined as ideal mode and cultivated where it is sustainable (for instance, in space exploration), while ‘cooperation’ is pursued where possible (prioritizing non-proliferation), ‘competition’ – where necessary, and ‘confrontation’ – where unavoidable. Nothing in this analysis suggests that Central Asia might fall in the latter category.

⁴⁴ A good point of departure for the aborted attempt was established by the report *Russia’s Wrong Direction: What the United States Can and Should Do* of an Independent Task Force on US policy towards Russia published in March 2006 by the Council on Foreign Relations, (<http://www.cfr.org/publication/9997/>). A fresh look is Andrew C. Kuchins, ‘Alternative Futures for Russia to 2017’, *CSIS Report*, Washington, November 2007.