

*Center for Strategic and International Studies
Russia and Eurasia Program*

“The United States and Central Asia after 2014”

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Speaker:

Dr. Jeffrey Mankoff, *Deputy Director and Fellow, CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program*

Discussant:

Thomas E. Graham, *Managing Director, Kissinger Associates, Inc.*

S. Frederick Starr, *Chairman, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Senior Research Professor, Johns Hopkins SAIS*

Moderated by:

Dr. Andrew Kuchins, *Director and Senior Fellow, CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program*

Dr. Mankoff began by describing the United States’ general policy towards Central Asia. He reiterated that, because of 9/11, most of the United States’ Central Asian foreign policy has focused on Afghanistan, and engagement with Central Asia has largely been an adjunct to the war effort. Consequently, most of the discussion in Washington has tended to focus on a post-war Afghanistan rather than a post-war Central Asia. Dr. Mankoff’s report, *The United States and Central Asia after 2014* attempts to address this problem by elaborating on the future of the entire Central Asian region.

Dr. Mankoff outlined three significant concerns about a post-war Central Asia:

- **Cross-border threats:** Many politicians and experts are worried about the stability of the Afghan government and even fear that it may collapse once U.S. forces have left the region. The resulting instability could lead to problems such as increased drug trafficking and Islamism spreading to neighboring countries. These threats are emphasized by many Central Asian officials, but while real, their impact on regional security should not be overstated.
- **Russia and China’s Role in Central Asia:** Many politicians and experts are concerned that Russia and China will expand their influence in Central Asia once U.S. forces have left the region. As neighboring powers with significant interests at stake, China and Russia will naturally seek a larger role once U.S. forces have drawn down. An enhanced

Russian/Chinese presence does not in itself constitute a threat to U.S. interests, and Washington should avoid the temptation to view it through an archaic Great Game lens.

- **Internal Stability within Central Asia:** Not only is Afghanistan's stability at risk once U.S. forces leave, but Central Asia's internal stability cannot be taken for granted either. Relations among several Central Asian states are poor, and the Central Asian regimes' capacity for effective governance is declining in the view of many analysts. Over the past decade, collaboration with the U.S. has actually helped many Central Asian governments maintain their leadership.

Central Asia's role in the war in Afghanistan:

- **Transit:** The U.S. has looked to Central Asia for alternative transit routes for military supplies to hedge against the unreliability of supply routes through Pakistan. As of mid-2011, 40 percent of total U.S. cargo going towards Afghanistan was transported through the Northern Distribution Network through Central Asia. In particular, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan's involvement with the NDN has enhanced their importance to U.S. interests in the region.
- **Development and Stability Building:** Part of the U.S. strategy for reconstruction in Afghanistan centers on reconnecting Afghanistan to Central Asia and promoting economic integration. Many Central Asian countries have benefitted from international loans which have gone towards development projects, such as new railroads, bridges, power grids, etc. These projects have helped Afghanistan become better integrated into Central Asia and thus improved the region's interdependence.

Problems facing Central Asia:

- **Transit:** Given the problems with the Pakistan, the Central Asian countries' importance for Afghan transit gives them significant leverage, which has left the U.S. wary of criticizing them.
- **Development and Corruption:** Though development and aid have improved the stability and cooperation within the region, U.S. and Central Asian development schemes have also contributed to the region's already serious corruption problem.
- **Sustaining Regional Cooperation:** Though regional development projects and aid to Afghanistan have promoted interconnectedness, this is in large part due to Western assistance. Without the U.S. active involvement in Central Asia, regional rivalries may replace the current cooperation.
- **The Domestic Situation within Central Asian countries:** As many Central Asian leaders approach old age, succession issues will be a common challenge. Additionally, the growth of corruption, drug trafficking, and Islamism all threaten medium-long term stability in the region.

Russia and China's Role in Central Asia:

- **Russia:** Rather than an area of competition, Central Asia has largely been an area of cooperation between the U.S. and Russia since 9/11. Russia insists that U.S. forces leave the region once the conflict in Afghanistan is over, but has stopped advocating for an immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops. Russia shares many of the same concerns as the U.S. regarding Islamism, transnational threats, and regional instability. Russia is

currently attempting to address these issues through its Customs Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Though the U.S. has not taken an official position on the Customs Union or CSTO, it is generally mistrustful of these Russian-led multinational organizations (Hillary Clinton called them an attempt to “re-Sovietize” the region). Yet considering the extent to which U.S. and Russian interests overlap, Central Asia should be a topic for mutual discussion.

- **China:** In the last decade, the Chinese presence in Central Asia has grown immensely. China is now the largest trading partner of four out of the five Central Asian countries. Beijing is likely therefore to be the main avenue for Central Asia’s access to the world economy. The U.S. should not oppose this development. During the 1990s, the U.S. goal was to strengthen the sovereignty and independence of the Central Asian states; by lessening Central Asia’s dependence on Russia, China’s growing economic ties to the region are doing just that.

Dr. Mankoff concluded by offering some suggestions for improving U.S. policy towards Central Asia. The U.S. needs to stay involved and help stabilize Central Asia by providing sustained engagement and assistance for improving governance. The U.S. must also recognize that Russian and Chinese interests in the region will likely always be preeminent because of their shared borders with Central Asia. The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan will also result in the U.S. becoming less dependent on Central Asia, and consequently the U.S. will be in a stronger position to speak against corruption and poor governance in the region.

Additionally, the U.S. ought to be more transparent about its military presence in Central Asia and Afghanistan, which remains one of the primary concerns of Russia and China. If the U.S. is to have a continued security presence in the region, it must not “play favorites” and exacerbate the rivalries between Central Asian states. Dr. Mankoff also touched on the idea of the New Silk Road, arguing that its development is possible primarily thanks to China (which was not quite what the U.S. envisioned, but nevertheless achieves many of the same goals).

Overall, much depends on what will happen in Afghanistan. The U.S. should not turn its attention away from Central Asia even though the war in Afghanistan may be over. The U.S. should work with other nations to ensure that the region is secure. Realistically speaking, Central Asia will become less of a priority for the U.S. once its forces troops have left Afghanistan.

Mr. Graham began by expressing his agreement with Dr. Mankoff that U.S. interest in Central Asia will indeed diminish over time. This is evident in the lack of mention of Central Asia in the U.S. National Security Strategy. The U.S. should devote continued attention toward Central Asian regional stability. The U.S. and Russia can come together for discussions on this issue, but the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CTSO) could also be used to aid the stability of the region.

Mr. Graham challenged Dr. Mankoff’s claim that the U.S. and Russia should discuss Central Asian regional stability via the Bilateral Presidential Commission, since it is too bureaucratized and more importantly, too low level. Rather, the White House and Kremlin are the two proper “bargaining organizations.” This method might not work, in which case the U.S. will need an alternative plan to promote Central Asian stability without Russian cooperation.

Dr. Starr began by stating that Dr. Mankoff's argument failed to recognize the world as a multipolar environment. Dr. Starr elaborated that not only are China, Russia, and the U.S. interested in Central Asia, but so are Iran Turkey, India and Pakistan. Additionally, NATO was not mentioned in the report, despite the fact that it has been a vital component in establishing peace in the region.

Moreover, the interpretation of Central Asia with a heavy focus on the problems of Islamism, corruption, and drug trafficking, is too pessimistic. These issues are undoubtedly prevalent in the region, but much improvement has occurred in the past few years (e.g. the increase in development in the region). The U.S. should stop viewing Central Asian states only through the lens of China and Russia. The region's agreement for a nuclear-free zone and its collaboration with China to counteract some of Putin's policies serve as proof that Central Asia is not a passive region.

Dr. Starr also elaborated on the New Silk Road idea, stating that the trade route has Russia feeling that it is being excluded from trade due to the primary role China plays in regional trade. Russia must understand that the New Silk Road does not only benefit one nation, but many. As a result of Russian, Iranian, Indian, Turkish, and Chinese interests in the region, future trade in Central Asia will come from all directions, not just from the east.

The U.S. must talk not only with Russia, but with China, India, and other key nations regarding Central Asia. Additionally, the U.S. needs to devote more attention to the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) with Central Asia and have high-level U.S. officials prioritize it. Overall, the U.S. should not favor policies that will result in Central Asia's dependence on foreign powers. Foreign powers should treat Central Asian states as subjects and not objects.

Dr. Mankoff then responded to the issues raised by discussants, Mr. Graham and Dr. Starr. Dr. Mankoff delved the issue of the competition versus cooperation between the U.S. and Russia in Central Asia. In the past decade the trend has tended to lean toward cooperation, but this may not continue considering that relations between the two nations have declined significantly since Putin began his third presidential term. Cold War mindsets in both the Russian and American bureaucracies have also damaged the relationship. Thus, attention from both governments must be devoted toward mutual agreement on the future of Central Asia.

Although it is true that *The U.S. and Central Asia after 2014* report primarily focuses on U.S.-Russian relations in Central Asia, this is not due to deliberate disregard of other powers, but rather the simple fact that in the immediate post-2014 future, Russia alone has the military capabilities and interest in acting as a regional security provider. States such as India, Turkey and China may well become more visible in Central Asia, but not right away, and especially not as security providers.

Self-reliance as opposed to foreign dependence is a good goal for Central Asia, but the U.S.'s most immediate concern should be preventing violence and the emergence of failed states; neighboring powers—above all Russia—have a stake in this outcome and should be encouraged to play a constructive role in bringing it about. Otherwise, Central Asia is unlikely reach its potential as a cross-roads of trade and transit in the longer term.

Discussion

The discussion opened with a comment on the fact that the Dr. Mankoff's diagnosis of threats to security and stability in Central Asia mostly fit into the economic and human rights baskets (in OSCE terms) and yet most of *The U.S. and Central Asia after 2014* report focuses on the hard security basket. Looking at the economic and human rights baskets, what potential redlines might there be for U.S. security assistance in the region?

Dr. Mankoff responded by stating that the report does indeed discuss all three OSCE baskets and that the policy tools for improving Central Asia must address issues within all three baskets. The first basket, hard security, is the most critical, however.

The U.S. should not focus on democratization in Central Asia in the immediate term. Instead, it should focus on improving Central Asia's governance, building institutional capacity, anti-corruption policies, and reforming police and security forces. The problem in Central Asia is largely the failure of governance. U.S. security assistance is important as a source of influence, which is needed if the U.S. is to press for improvement in the region's governance; unfortunately, there is no immediate solution to this problem.

Dr. Starr added that Central Asia does not know if the U.S. will advance the reform agenda. It's therefore vital that the U.S.'s agenda for Central Asia agree with that of the Central Asian states. A credible sustained strategic relationship between the U.S. and Central Asia is necessary. Dr. Starr added that this security assistance will not be permanent and the U.S. must be open about that.

Mr. Graham asserted that the U.S. has never had a long term strategic conception of Central Asia and thus needs to be more realistic and less abstract in terms of its goals for the region. The U.S. must also have something to persuade the Central Asian states that the U.S. will remain engaged in the area for a long period of time.

Dr. Kuchins added that strategic goals and strategy are two distinctly separate matters and that the two should not be substituted for one another when discussing the future of Central Asia.

The next comment claimed that the U.S. doesn't have any real interests in Central Asia aside from Afghanistan. There is also concern over the transfer of power in Afghanistan and the stability of the Karzai administration. Although the U.S. has limited resources, Central Asia has three choices for whom to turn to for foreign assistance: China, the Islamic world, or Russia. Central Asia will most likely choose Russia because Russia has grown stronger in the last decade and has more to offer Central Asian nations. Consequently, Central Asia wants Russian investment and assistance in the region.

The next question focused on governance in Central Asia. The discussion previously mentioned that many Central Asian nations link assistance with improving governance and effective leadership. However, many of these same governments are authoritarian with large corrupt governments already. Thus, strengthening the capacity of these governments may give more power to already oppressive leadership. If the U.S. is intent on improving Central Asian governance, which areas is the U.S. planning on expanding or regulating, in particular?

Dr. Mankoff emphasized the distinction between regulation and governance. The U.S. should not help Central Asian governments impose new regulations, but instead make sure that these governments maintain effective control over their territories.

The following set of questions focused on the Chinese interest in Central Asia. An audience member raised the issue of why China was not included in the discussion, and how the U.S. would deal with Chinese interests in Central Asia, and if Russia ends up being deferential to China.

Dr. Mankoff noted that China is important in the discussion of Central Asia and that Russia is concerned about Chinese involvement in the region. Relations between the two states are improving somewhat, but are also complex. The Customs Union has challenged the dynamic of the Russo-Chinese relationship and is actually being used by Russia to limit Central Asia's economic relations with China. It remains to be seen how the Russo-Chinese rivalry will affect Central Asia. Mr. Graham reiterated that China is a key player in Central Asia and that the U.S. should have a discussion with all of the new world powers, see what their interests are and if there are grounds for mutual cooperation on the Central Asian issue.

The next question focused on the sensitive issue of Xinjiang and how it may affect Chinese interests in Central Asia, should ethnic tensions continue to rise. Dr. Kuchins stated that Chinese interests on the security and politics of Central Asia and Afghanistan could change if Xinjiang were to become an area of civil unrest. China could become involved to an even greater degree in Central Asia if civil unrest in Xinjiang were viewed to being affected by unrest and growing power of Islamist forces spreading from neighboring Central Asian countries.

The following question was on the potential for the "neo-colonization" of Central Asia by China, since in discussing the concept of the New Silk Road, the U.S. wants to prevent China from conducting neo-colonization in that area. Dr. Mankoff stated that Central Asia's growing dependence on the Chinese economy and the fact that many Chinese workers are implementing construction projects within Central Asia has many Central Asians worrying that the Chinese presence can become a form of neocolonial dependence. Though these concerns are somewhat excessive, it remains important that the U.S. and other outside powers remain engaged economically to ensure balanced development. Dr. Kuchins pointed out that the growing Chinese presence in Central Asia is not neocolonial, but simply that the Chinese economy is growing at such a profound rate that it is expanding in all directions.

The next question dealt with U.S. presence in Manas after 2014 and what interest, if any, there might be in keeping the base open following the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. Dr. Kuchins stated that the U.S. has spent hundreds of millions of dollars investing in military bases such as Manas. Thus, the U.S. is not going to quickly abandon Manas once troops have left Afghanistan, and certainly the U.S. military will want to maintain access to egress and regress in Afghanistan. Mr. Graham stated that he has no answer regarding the future of the Manas base, but that the U.S. will maintain some power, even limited, in the region after 2014.

The discussion closed with a question about the role of the Taliban in the future of Afghanistan. After 2014, the U.S.'s interest in Central Asia will decline a great deal. Therefore, if the Taliban does return to power in Afghanistan, would the U.S. have the same level of engagement as it did directly following the 9/11 attacks?

Dr. Kuchins remarked that the U.S. may or may not intervene in Afghanistan if the Taliban were to return to power. If the empowered Taliban regime were to harbor other radical jihadist groups, then the U.S. would most likely intervene in Afghanistan. However, if the Taliban were to remain isolated and not present a threat to U.S. security nor harbor jihadists, then the U.S. would most likely not intervene in the country. Dr. Mankoff added that, while the Central Asians oppose the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, they have relationships with groups in northern Afghanistan to hedge against that possibility.