The United States’ Goals in Central Asia

AUTHOR
Paulo DUARTE

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Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, "the United States recognized the independence of all Central Asian Republics and established diplomatic relations with each of them, in mid-March 1992" (Nichol, 2003: 3). What followed were commercial interests, as well as the adherence to international institutions and non-governmental organizations (Nichol, 2003: 3). Faced with a new situation that was gradually taking shape in the region, "the main objectives of U.S. policy towards Central Asia encompassed the promotion of stability, democratization, free market economies, denuclearization and adherence to International human rights standards" (Nichol, 2003).

According to Emerson et al, "The United States funded programs of development and support to civil society, as well as of aid to the transition to a market economy" (2010: 43). Alongside economic but also political and social aid, Washington also provided military assistance, fomenting "exchange programs between the U.S. and Central Asian military", aiming to "professionalize forces that had once been trained according to the Soviet model" (Giragosian, 2004: 47). The United States thus expected to improve the military capabilities of Central Asian Republics in combating transnational crime, in the management of border control or even, in limiting the abuses of which the Soviet military were often accused, among other aspects (Giragosian, 2004: 47). Washington’s support to these Republics covers therefore a diverse set of military, political and economic tools which could be understood as complementary and, simultaneous, as components of a comprehensive strategy to face the new challenges that have emerged in the region.

According to Zehra Akbar, the collapse of the Soviet Union led to "a power vacuum in the region", which could be to the strategic interests of Washington (2012: para. 9). Among the experts who warned of this fact, let us emphasize H. Kissinger, for whom "the control by a single power of any of the two major Eurasian spheres - Europe or Asia - represents a strategic threat to the United States ... Given that such a structure would have the ability to surpass the United States economically, and in the end, militarily. Such a threat must be fought, even if the dominant power is apparently benevolent ..." (1994: 813).

Zbigniew Brzezinski also drew attention to the geostrategic importance of Central Asia, having been inspired by the assumptions set out by Halford Mackinder. In order to prevent the emergence of a rival power and to avoid, on the other hand, that the planet plunged into a kind of global anarchy, Brzezinski recommended the following strategy (1997: 198):

"In the medium term (in the next five years or so) it is in the interest of the United States to consolidate and perpetuate the prevailing geopolitical pluralism on the map of Eurasia. This is intended to prevent the emergence of a hostile coalition that could eventually come to challenge the American hegemony, or even the remote possibility of any state, individually, endeavor to do so. In the medium term (up to 20
years or so), the United States should gradually appear more likely to accept the emergence of increasingly important partners, but strategically compatible, which, driven by the American leadership can contribute to bring more cooperation to the trans-Eurasian security system ... ".

Given that Eurasia is not a homogeneous block, Brzezinski chose to divide it into four regional areas, to better make recommendations for Washington’s strategy. Of the four areas, "the south is a politically anarchic, but energy-rich region, and potentially important for eastern and western Eurasian states" (Brzezinski, 1997: 19). If, as Brzezinski says, "the average space (Russia) may be attracted to the sphere of American influence (Europe), if the southern region (south of the Caucasus, Central Asia, Middle East, the range extending from the Turkey to India, which is practically equal to the entire Caspian region) is not subject to the control of a single power, and if the East (China, Japan, both Koreas) are not united, the United States will then tend to prevail" (1997: 34-35).

The recommendations of Brzezinski and Kissinger, as well as of other experts, regarding Central Asia, were crucial in helping the various U.S. Administrations to realize the importance of Central Asia. Alas, the receptivity on the part of U.S. politicians towards these suggestions has been in practice quite positive (Brzezinski, 1998). In 1993, commenting on the Clinton administration's strategy in the Middle East, Martin Indyk noted that "while in the periphery of the Middle East, the newly independent Central Asian Republics need to be taken into account in our [U.S.] strategy towards the region" (Indyk, 1993). The Clinton Administration, for example, was quite active in this respect, encouraging the construction of several pipelines, in order to break the Russian regional monopoly and reduce the economic and political influence of Moscow in the region. However, it would be simplistic to say that the main American interest was to encourage the construction of energy infrastructure in Central Asia. Strictly speaking, the perception in Washington was that such pipelines would be used to establish a sensitive political-economic context susceptible of strengthening cooperation and stability, as well as to encourage reforms during the coming decades (Mammadov, 2009).

The Bush Administration recognized the priority that Central Asia should occupy in the debate over U.S. energy security. Daniel Fried, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, said in 2005 to the U.S. Congress that security, energy and regional economic cooperation are the goals of U.S. foreign policy in Central Asia (The DISAM Journal, 2006). After the September 11 terrorist attacks, "the remote Central Asian countries have become an important theater of military operations to the United States" (Chi-Lin Yang, 2008: 334). Moreover, it should be noted that both President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney were particularly sensitive to the energy issue, largely due to their (strong) connection to the oil industry. In this
regard, Samantha Grossman explains that "Dick Cheney shares the taste of Bush for the great American West, warm relationships with the oil industry, and a similar conservative philosophy" (2012: para. 1).

In May 2001, the National Energy Policy Report that was delivered by President George W. Bush clearly valued the importance of Central Asia (although the Middle East continues to be seen as centerpiece, par excellence, in the energy sphere) as a new area of energy supply, able to mitigate the consequences of an interruption in the international markets supply (U.S. Department of Energy, 2001).¹ The National Energy Policy Development Group, which prepared the report mentioned above, advised the U.S. government to support the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, which would provide another route for the export of Kazakh oil. Moreover, the Government was still encouraged to intensify trade dialogue with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and other countries of the region, in order to favor the emergence of a stable and transparent environment for the realization of energy projects (U.S. Department of Energy, 2001). In short, the issue of energy security took, gradually, an extraordinarily relevant dimension in Washington’s strategy, in which Central Asia appeared as a relatively recent phenomenon and deserving of considerable attention (U.S. Department of Energy, 2001).

At the beginning of the new millennium, authors like Jason J. Churchill, alerted to the fact that "since 1990", the oil reserves of the United States have dropped "about 20%" (Oil Consumption in North America, 2000). This explains the difference between consumption and energy production in the country has been gradually replaced by the use of imported oil, although a study conducted by the International Energy Agency (IEA) predicts a radical change in present trends. In fact, according to the IEA, "around 2020", it is estimated that the United States become "the largest oil producer in the world (overtaking Saudi Arabia)", and begin to feel the impact of "new measures of fuel efficiency in transportation" (2012: 1). This trend accelerates the change of direction of international oil trade towards Asia, putting the focus on the security of strategic routes which carry oil from the Middle East to the Asian markets.

While the Clinton Administration stressed the "importance of an active policy in Central Asia", the energy plan from the Bush Administration warned, in turn, of the need to devote "a lot more effort to ensure an additional external energy supply", referring explicitly to the Caspian Sea basin (Klare, 2002: 100). However, at the beginning, Edward Chow² (2011) mentions, "the importance of Central Asia to Washington was primarily geostrategic and not energy related". It is

¹ Thinking about the centrality of energy security, and with the objective of facilitating the diversification of energy sources, the National Energy Policy Report, May 2001, already privileged the issue of obtaining access to oil sources abroad. The document focused, in this regard, the abolition of economic, political, logistical and legal barriers in African and Caspian countries, so as to encourage "a strong, transparent and stable business environment for energy and infrastructure projects related to them" (National Energy Policy Report 2001: 139).
necessary, according to this author, that we go back to the period of 'independence', resulting from the collapse of the Soviet Union (Chow, 2011). Chow (2011) acknowledges that it was in the United States' interest that the Republics in the region maintain their independence. However, to be politically independent, it is essential to have certain economic resources. Now, "oil and gas were some of the few assets that the Central Asian Republics had, and the rest of the world wanted, that gave them economic advantage to sustain such a recent political independence" (Chow, 2011). Thus in accordance with Edward Chow (2011), this was the manner in which the US interests were manifested in the 90’s. Chow (2011) makes an exception, admitting that "U.S. companies were naturally interested in exploring oil fields formerly not accessible to them". However, as the author adds, "this occurred not only in the case of U.S. oil companies, but also the other oil companies around the world that did not worry too much about what was Central Asia, or Africa, or South America: they seemed to be, instead, more interested in exploiting energy resources wherever they existed" (Chow, 2011).

With the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States would have, henceforth, an opportunity to strengthen their energy security and business interests, being that during the Soviet era, the Central Asian Republics had remained closed to foreign investment (Chi-Lin Yang, 2008; Shishkin, 2012). In a context where the Central Asian leaders themselves encouraged foreign companies to invest in their countries, in order to obtain profits and strengthen their recent independence with regard to Russia, the United States realized that they could not waste the opportunity, and that the oil emerging markets in Central Asia (Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, for example), could help them to reduce their energy dependence [in relation to the Middle East]" (Shah, 2009: 37). As Lowell Dittmer (2007) mentions, so as not to conflict with European interests, the search for energy resources from Washington, fitted well in the principle - very honored at the time - that no power should monopolize regional resources. Hence, according to this author, the United States supported the construction of several pipelines in the region (Dittmer, 2007).

Some experts, among whom Gökay and Fouskas, argue that "the penetration and consolidation of U.S. presence in Eurasia is directly related to the desire to prevent any actual or potential competitors to challenge Washington's hegemony in the world" (2005: 29). In this sense, the authors argue that it is predictable that the United States try to establish "new spheres of influence, in order to eliminate any obstacles that might undermine their imperial power" (Gökay and Fouskas 2005: 29). This logic is not alas alien to the postulate of the 'Grand Strategy'. According to Paul Kennedy, "a true Grand Strategy is equally or more related to times of peace than with war"; such strategy relates "to the evolution and integration of policies that shall be maintained for decades or even centuries"; it "does not cease with the end of the war, nor begins with the onset of this" (1991: 168). In synthesis, Kennedy explains that "the Grand Strategy
represents a synthesis of the strategies adopted in times of war and peace, which, though distinct, are intertwined in many ways to serve the Grand Strategy" (1991: 168). The political support to the implementation of the (expensive) Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline exemplifies a strategy of peacetime, while the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are instructive of a strategy in wartime. In this perspective, and according to Emre Iseri, "the two strategies, although different, are complementary insofar as they serve the Grand Strategy of the United States in this new century" (2009: 44).

According to Andrew J. Bacevich, Washington is mainly interested in "establishing a secure global order in a context that enables the capitalist modes of production - controlled by the United States – to flourish in various parts of the world, without being subject to any interruptions" (2002: 6). It is certainly the case of the oil trade. As Leon Fuerth notes, "the 'Grand Strategy' of the United States assumes that they will never lose their ability to respond effectively to any threat to its oil imports" (2005: 411). Indeed, the security of energy supply is considered a vital issue in the context of U.S. interests, since in order to remain a superpower, the United States depends, among other aspects, on free access to energy sources (Grossman et al., 2012). As emphasized by Simon Bromley, "since the United States imports energy resources from international markets, any serious threat to this is a clear danger to American interests" (2005: 254).

It should be noticed that this awareness on the part of the American political circles about the importance of energy security is not new. In fact, the danger of the growing U.S. dependence on oil from countries with unstable regimes has proven to be a constant concern of the several U.S. Presidents, since the time of Richard Nixon (Bush, 2006; Nixon, 1973; Carter, 1979). According to the Carter Doctrine, introduced by President Jimmy Carter after the oil crisis of the 70s, "any effort on the part of a hostile power, to interrupt the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf to the United States, shall be perceived as an attack on U.S. vital interests, and repelled by any means, including the use of military force if necessary" (Luft and Korin, 2009: 147). History reveals, in this regard, that Washington has exercised the Carter Doctrine several times. Michael Klare (2007) indicates that since the last years of the twentieth century, due to the increased geographical diversification of oil supplies from the United States, the Carter doctrine went international, with military protection being currently granted to the new – though smaller – oil producing regions. Moreover, we shall highlight the outstanding efforts made by both the Clinton Administration, and then by the George W. Bush and the Obama Administrations, in the strengthening of ties with the emerging oil producing countries in Latin America, West Africa and Central Asia (Joskow, 2001; Clinton, 2012).

To get an idea of how important the issue of energy security is to Washington, we need to consider some facts. If we look, for example, to the transport sector, we find, as stated by the U.S. Energy Information Administration, that "the United States is the largest consumer of energy in the transport sector amongst the countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and
Development" (2012: para. 5). Also according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, in 2011, "the United States imported approximately 11.4 million barrels of oil per day, from about 80 countries" (2012: para. 5). The five major world suppliers of the United States in 2011 were "Canada, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, and Nigeria" (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2012: para. 6).

According to Allix et al, "it is estimated that the United States hold more than 60% [2 trillion barrels] of the world total [3.2 trillion barrels] of oil shale", which "could provide between 1.5 and 2.6 trillion barrels if the development technology proves to be feasible from an economic point of view" (2010: 7). The United States has 21 billion barrels of conventional oil and 187 trillion cubic meters of natural gas in the lands controlled by the Federal States, particularly in the western part of the country, as well as in Alaska (Allix et al, 2010: 7).

It is important to demystify the perception, somewhat widespread, that the United States depends, par excellence, on the Middle East oil. In practice, this region (mainly Saudi Arabia) provides approximately 12.9% of the oil imported by the United States, while Latin America provides 19.6% (Mexico 7.5% and Venezuela 5.9%), Canada 15.1%, Africa 10.3%, while 38.8% of oil is produced domestically, by the United States, and 3.1% comes from other parts of the world (other than those already mentioned) (Flintoff, 2012). Canada is thus, as Corey Flintoff stresses, "unquestionably the largest supplier of oil to its southern neighbor, hitting a record of 2.2 million barrels per day in 2011, with market share growing 12%" (2012: 6). According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Canada had 173.6 billion barrels of proven oil reserves at the beginning of 2012" (2012: para. 5). It should be underlined that the Canadian tar sands in Alberta - corresponding to "approximately 170 billion barrels, or 98% of Canada's oil reserves" - occupy "the second place in the world in terms of proven oil reserves" (Lam, 2010: 1).

As for Mexico, the energy situation is opposite to that of Canada. That is, although Mexico is one of the world's 10 largest oil producers, the third largest in the Western Hemisphere, and an important partner in the North American energy trade, the amount of oil produced in Mexico has been decreasing since 2004 due to a decline in the production of Cantarell and other large offshore deposits (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2012). Additionally, "the Mexican oil industry suffers from an excessive governmental control, corruption, mismanagement and underinvestment" (Luft and Korin, 2009: 148). Regarding Venezuela, the main constraint here is due to the tension of the relationship between Washington and Caracas. As Jordan Fabian notes, "the death of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has eliminated one of the major Latin American geopolitical enemies of the United States, fueling hopes in Washington that the ensuing developments could lead to better relations in the region" (2013: para. 1). However, "this will not be easy" (Fabian, 2013: para. 1). In fact, according to Fabian, "the United States and Venezuela have shared a
relationship mined by animosity since Chavez was elected for the first time in 1998" (2013: para. 2). Chavez exasperated several U.S. Presidents, "by establishing ties with states like Cuba and Iran, hostile to Washington", and "by having fostered an anti-US feeling in other nations in the Western Hemisphere" (Fabian, 2013: para. 2). Moreover, the Chavez regime repeatedly accused Washington of plotting to overthrow its government, fueling mistrust between the two countries" (Fabian, 2013: para. 2). Although Venezuela is "one of the four largest oil suppliers to the United States", former President Hugo Chavez threatened on several occasions, to use oil as a geopolitical weapon if relations between the two countries continued to deteriorate, and to divert a large portion of the oil that is exported to the United States to China (U.S. Department of State, 2013). Given the above, Mark Sullivan states that "the death of Hugo Chavez, on March 5, 2013, after 14 years of populist governance has implications not only for the political future of Venezuela, but potentially for future relations between Caracas and Washington, "as oil plays a significant role, since it "dominates U.S. imports from Venezuela" (2013: 1).

Given the above, and, to be confirmed in practice, the forecast from the International Energy Agency that the United States may become the world's major oil producers in the space of a decade, the country has, meanwhile, complete interest in diversifying its energy sources (The Guardian, 2012). According to Gal Luft, "the frenetic pace of global oil demand may contribute to oil-exporting countries, such as Mexico, Russia and Norway, stopping being relevant actors on the world oil market within two decades" (2009: 150). This would ultimately give "more leeway to oil producers states in the Middle East (as they would still have abundant reserves of oil at reasonable prices) to manipulate the price of crude oil and increase their influence in U.S. foreign policy" (Luft, 2009: 150). In this context, Central Asia is important to the American Grand Strategy, due to its energy potential (non-OPEC). Moreover, as already mentioned, the struggle against terrorism that followed the attacks of September 11 brought more strategic value to the region, both in the support of military operations against the Taliban in Afghanistan as well as in the combat of rebel Islamic movements (Budzik, 2002). Washington's strategy in the region was looking for a "realignment in its defense posture", with the goal of gaining control over the so-called "arc of instability" stretching "from the Middle East to northern Asia", through an "increased military presence in these theaters" (Berman, 2004: 2).

According Malikov Khagani, "as a result of the war in Afghanistan, the United States could establish military ties with the countries of the region, rich in energy resources, and for the first time, physically penetrate the former Soviet space, involving itself in the security affairs of regional countries" (2007: 224). Moreover, as Khoderanok (2002) notes, "the military bases located in the region enabled the United States to be near three competing powers, namely China, Russia and Iran".
After September 11 and the launch by Washington of the 'Enduring Freedom' operation in Afghanistan, in October 2001, the U.S. strategy in the region induced and simultaneously was object of both qualitative and quantitative changes. From a qualitative point of view, there was a shift in focus - until then in the bet on democratization and human rights - to the issue of "security cooperation" and "assistance" (Oliker and Shlapak, 2005: 8). In this sense, Washington favored a bilateral relationship with each Central Asian Republic under the operation 'Enduring Freedom' (Oliker and Shlapak, 2005: 8). The Central Asian Republics showed up, despite some initial reluctance, receptivity towards the request for cooperation from Washington, although their reaction was cautious before the watchful eyes of Moscow (Nichol, 2003). The United States could rely on "the support of Central Asian secret services, gaining access to the region’s airspace, and authorization for emergency landings" (Dittmer, 2007: 17). In addition to this aid some regional states have decided to provide more specific support within the framework of U.S. strategy. Thus, "Uzbekistan, for example, allowed the use of a former Soviet air base in Karshi Khanabad" (Dittmer, 2007: 17). In turn, "Kyrgyzstan ceded Manas air base", while "Turkmenistan, despite assuming traditionally a policy of neutrality, facilitated supply operations to the Americans" (Dittmer, 2007: 17). In turn, "Tajikistan has allowed the United States to maintain a military presence of small scale in Dushanbe" (Dittmer, 2007: 17-18). Finally, "Kazakhstan also granted overflight rights and transshipment of goods intended to Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan" (Nichol, 2003: 22). Moreover, on July 10, 2002, the United States and Kazakhstan signed a "Memorandum of Understanding" regarding the "use of the Almaty airport for emergency landings" (Nichol, 2003: 22).

According to Johannes Linn, "the U.S. support for democratic norms and to principles of market liberalization is founded on the belief that these will bring economic benefits in the long term, and stability to the region" (although for Linn, "the Central Asian regimes, and China and Russia, tend to perceive such support as a desire to promote Western ideologies") (2007: 8). Also according to Linn, such interests are reflected in the American "Southern strategy", which aims to provide Central Asian energy producers with "access to South Asian ports, as well as to energy markets" (Linn, 2007: 8).

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3 At the quantitative level, the main change to be considered relates to "the intensification of security cooperation and help, having Uzbekistan, for example, been the principal beneficiary by receiving approximately 172 million dollars, i.e. almost 10 times more than the amount Washington paid to each of the other Central Asian countries" (Dittmer, 2007: 18).

4 Taking into account these economic and strategic interests, it is not surprising that Washington has established a close relationship with Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, despite the low rates in human rights and lack of transparency observed in these countries (Isori, 2009: 35-39). Such proximity does not prevent, however, that the leaders of the Central Asian Republics are suspicious of American interests in the region. On the other hand, this climate of mistrust explains, even if partially, the desire of Central Asian leaders to maintain a cordial understanding with the powerful neighbor Russia.
Michael Snowden (2011), U.S. consul in Almaty, explains that "Washington pursues several foreign policy objectives in the various corners of the world", being that "Central Asia is no exception". Snowden (2011) highlights the specific importance of Kazakhstan as an "engine of the regional economy", highlighting, in particular, "the remarkable economic growth that the country has been experiencing, particularly due to its energy resources". On the other hand, the American consul justifies "the coexistence of two diplomatic missions (an Embassy and a Consulate General of the United States, which is an exception in the region) in Kazakhstan, because this country plays a multifaceted role in Asia Central" (Snowden, 2011).

Besides the political and military fields, cooperation between the United States and Kazakhstan (mainly through the United States Agency for International Development - USAID) comprises, according to David Hoffman⁵ (2011) (attaché of the U.S. consulate in Almaty), three main sectors. They are "promoting economic growth and trade liberalization; health and education programs; and, finally, issues related to democracy and governance" (Hoffman, 2011). It is in this context that the issues of human rights, public administration reform, support and monitoring of electoral procedures are addressed (Hoffman, 2011). In the past, as David Hoffman mentions, if the United States made considerable efforts to "further the initiatives of Kazakhstan in terms of decentralization", currently "the core of USAID activities is a combination of training, with technical assistance and equipment..." (Hoffman, 2011). In the summer of 2009, the United States established the Northern Distribution Network, which is a series of agreements and logistics operations, connecting the Baltic and the Caspian Sea ports to Afghanistan via Russia and Central Asian Republics, something that Kuchins and Gordon (2009) believe "will strengthen the partnership between the United States and Central Asia" (Aziz, 2012).

According to Stephen Blank⁶ (2011), "there are three main reasons for the interest of the Washington in Central Asia". Firstly, "the struggle against terrorism following the attacks of September 11" (Blank, 2011). Moreover, the fact that the United States wants to "prevent the emergence of any Eurasian 'empire' (be it Chinese, Russian, or possibly Iranian) in the region" (Blank, 2011). Finally, the issue of energy. Here, the author, being American, admits without subterfuge: "We want to have free access to energy sources" (Blank, 2011). In the opinion of Stephen Blank (2011), "the core of the energy policy of the United States has been focused on promoting the development of multiple pipelines, linking external consumers and producers of energy".

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⁵ David Hoffman, Personal Interview, Almaty, 2011.
⁶ Stephen Blank, Personal Interview, United States of America, 2011. Stephen Blank is an expert at Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College.
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Paulo Duarte is a PhD student in International Relations at Université Catholique de Louvain, Belgium. The author is a researcher at Instituto do Oriente in Lisbon (duartebrardo@gmail.com).