The Lapis Lazuli Eurasian Corridor and the Central Asia South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project (CASA 1000)

The Hoagland-Blinken Doctrine Is Washington's Updated Plan For Central Asia, part II

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Part I:

Color Revolutions? The US State Department's "Hoagland-Blinken Doctrine" Is Washington's Plan For Central Asia By Andrew Korybko, April 14, 2015

The first part of the article examined the US' stated goals in Central Asia, its geopolitical jealousy of Russia and China for their successes there, and the Color Revolution infrastructure that it's building in the region. The concluding piece contains an overview and strategic forecast about the Lapis Lazuli Corridor and CASA-1000 projects and commentary on the Hoagland-Blinken Doctrine's inferred Lead From Behind partners (both willing and unintentional), before summing everything up in a brief concluding section.

"The New Silk Road"

The two American dignitaries boast about Washington's plans for a "New Silk Road", which is envisioned to provide the basis for intra- and inter-regional integration. Realistically speaking, most of this plan (which was never that feasible for the US) is already rendered null and void by the Russia's Eurasian Union and China's Silk Road Economic Belt, but there are still two important projects which have the potential for some sort of success:

The Lapis Lazuli Corridor:

This little-known plan was given all but one sentence in Hoagland's speech, yet it's extremely important and needs to be explained in detail. He said that *"[Afghan President Ghani] then spoke of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor (during his recent visit to Washington), which would run through Afghanistan and Turkmenistan, across the Caspian to Georgia, and on to Turkey and Europe."* It may be that Hoagland excluded any further commentary on this branch of the "New Silk Road" owing to its deeper strategic significance, and not wanting to draw unnecessary attention to something that is largely ignored by the Russian and Chinese press despite its importance for American regional policy.

Lapis Lazuli Corridor (grey arrow)

Afghanistan's Chamber of Commerce describes the Lapis Lazuli Corridor (LLC) as such:

> "The Lapis Lazuli begins from Aqina in northern Faryab province and Turqundi in western Herat province of Afghanistan and continues to Turkmenbashi of Turkmenistan and after passing Caspian Sea, arrives Baku, the Azerbaijan's capital and then it connects Baku to Tbilisi, Georgia's capital and also to the ports of Polti and Batumi of Georgia. And then get cities of Kars and Istanbul of Turkey and finally ends in Europe."

What's not said but should be vividly understood by any regional observer is that this represents a modified institutionalization of the Northern Distributional Network (NDN), the de-facto conceptual successor to moving goods in/out of Afghanistan via trans-Caspian and trans-Caucasus shipping.Having at one time represented the US' logistical sprawl during the main years of the Afghan War, it's now poised for a resurgence of importance in becoming the US' lifeline of influence into the region.

Its geography dictates that it touches upon the US' key security constellation in the Caucasus (Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey) through which the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, the South Caucasus gas pipeline, and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railroad already traverse. All three projects also serve fundamental American strategic goals, and it's expected that the LLC will complement this existing infrastructure and serve to integrate the three countries even more. While Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are not explicitly mentioned as members of this new framework, considering the fact that they already have the road and rail infrastructure necessary to facilitate the movement of various goods (and have a tried-and-true record of doing so through the NDN in the past), it's likely they may also become conduits along this route, especially in the event that chaos envelops the Turkmen-Afghan frontier.

Furthermore, this alternate (or complementary) route appears even more likely when one realizes that the Germans are still basing 300 soldiers in Termez, Uzbekistan, right on the Afghan border and at the beginning of Central Asia's NDN rail route. This force could be used to safeguard the path in the event of massive domestic destabilization concentrated in the country's more populated eastern regions. Should it come under fire during the conflagration or perhaps even by Taliban or other terrorist insurgents that have found their way into the country, then the 12,000 NATO soldiers remaining in Afghanistan could rapidly come to their 'aid' and bolster their presence along the Uzbek portion of the railroad.

It must be said that all of the abovementioned infrastructural designs could possibly be rendered obsolete (although it doesn't mean they won't still be used in some capacity) if the 30 June Iranian nuclear deal deadline is reached, as Tehran would then be in a commanding position to offer a more efficient route for Afghan and Central Asian goods to both the European-destined Turkish transport hub and the Indian Ocean. This possibility will be discussed in the next section when the series addresses the Hoagland-Blinken Doctrine's envisioned Lead From Behind partners in the region, although it must be said that any means in which Iran indirectly supports American strategic policy in Central Asia would most likely be the unintentional collateral sum of Tehran's expanding infrastructure ties with the region and the cessation of international sanctions on the country. No matter if that's the case or not, however, the result of assisting American objectives (even if they are different and less impactful than those described above) is still the same.

CASA-1000:

Background and Context

Just as the LLC was given only one sentence in Hoagland's speech, so too was CASA-1000 provided the same light treatment in Blinken's, showing what may perhaps be a pattern of the US underplaying its latest strategic initiatives. However, unlike the LCC, CASA-1000 has fewer prospects for physical success and represents something more along the lines of a strategic backup plan that may or may not be implemented in the future.

Central Asia South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project – CASA 1000

To begin with, CASA-1000 is an abbreviation for the partially World Bank-funded "Central Asia South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project" that is supposed to transfer at least 1,000 megawatts of hydroelectric-generated energy from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan during the summer months after its completion. The problem with the project, despite its ambition, is that Kyrgyzstan is currently undergoing on energy crisis and is unable to provide its necessary 30% contribution to the project's overall hydroelectric supply. The Diplomat, in its commentary on this portion of the Hoagland-Blinken Doctrine, questions whether the project could go forward with Tajikistan being the sole energy provider, mentioning that this scenario hasn't even attempted to be explained by Washington. Supposing that this challenge can be surmounted, there's still the issue with Central Asian energy only being provided during the summer months when an excess of hydroelectric power generation makes the project possible, thus imposing a severe limitation on the entire project.

Having touched upon the problems and constraints of CASA-1000, it's now time to look at the strategic advantages its completion would provide for the US. It's understood that the project's feasibility is also contingent on the construction of hydroelectric dams in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan that the downstream state of Uzbekistan has strongly objected to in the past. As it stands, Russia and the World Bank are both supportive of Tajikistan's plans to build the Rogun Dam (the project Uzbekistan is most ardently against), with the former likely being so due to political-strategic reasons vis-à-vis Uzbekistan and overall Eurasian integration, while the latter has certified that the environmental impact can be mitigated and could thus possibility provide a loan to finance the rest of the project's costs.

Up until now, Tajikistan has had to depend on contributions from its citizens, with Russia reluctant to provide solid financial backing out concern that this would eliminate once and for all its trump card in restoring relations with regional military powerhouse Uzbekistan. Should Russia provide more than strategic and political support for this project and fully fund the rest of the endeavor (no matter how advantageous it is for its overall objectives), then it would lose the last significant opportunity to effect an Uzbek pivot, or at the very least, have Tashkent provide Moscow with an ear to listen to its concerns. Uzbekistan has been moving closer to the US as of late and could potentially become its Lead from Behind designator for the region, hence why it's important for Russia to still have some options on the table for keeping bilateral relations stable. Right now, given the diplomatic complexity of Russian-Uzbek relations, Moscow has chosen a wait-and-see approach to Rogun, providing strong diplomatic and strategic support on the backend, but officially behaving hands-off in the public eye and letting the project develop on its own per Tajikistan's initiatives, not Russia's. This gives Moscow the saving face necessary to maintain cordial diplomatic ties with Tashkent while simultaneously promoting its own regional objectives.

Pivot Potential

While it doesn't look like the US-Uzbek and Russian-Kyrgyz-Tajik configuration is going to change anytime soon, a regional trade-off between Russia and the US for regional allies wouldn't be completely unprecedented. To explain, consider that Russia would ideally like to integrate the entirety of the Central Asian space into the Eurasian Union, especially since Uzbekistan presents the most formidable economic and military opportunities in the region. At the same time,Uzbekistan is inarguably close to America nowadays, but it's still strategically dependent on the Russian-aligned upstream states of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan for the water sources that power its economy and provide for its people, which would only deepen with the construction of the hydroelectric dams necessary to power CASA-1000 and the possible lessening of downstream supply.

If somehow Russia manages to make breakthrough inroads with Uzbekistan in hammering out their regional visionary differences and come to some type of implicit accord, then the US can immediately interject itself by offering to fund the remainder of the Rogun Dam's costs or by offering some kind of other large-scale assistance in its construction. The purpose behind Washington's obtrusive intervention would be to draw a line between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (both of which would at that point be understood to have come to agreement with Russia's integrational objectives) and Russia and Tajikistan, knowing that this would break the delicate agreement that Moscow had brokered between its allies. Of course, the US would only sacrifice its immensely strategic relations with Uzbekistan if it felt they could not be (easily) recovered from Russia, but should it be able to pull off another Color Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, it could capitalize off of its newfound high-ground ally and the geographic split between the Eurasian Union and Tajikistan to try to rapidly bring Dushanbe into the fold as well.

One should remember that downstream Uzbekistan is ultimately dependent on Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan's water supplies, and that the Great Power which exercises influence over these states indirectly controls the Uzbek economy (especially if the dams are eventually built). The consequence of a combined Color Revolution in Kyrgyzstan with a near-simultaneous US Rogun pivot to Tajikistan would surely lead to war with Uzbekistan, which in this overall scenario would result in fractious chaos in Central Asia that would shatter Russia's integration plans. Could such a 'switch off' between allies happen? Well, something similar occurred with the US and the USSR over Ethiopia and Somalia during the 1977-1978 Ogaden War, whereby Moscow switched its support to Addis-Ababa and Washington in turn flipped towards Mogadishu in a stunning and relatively sudden reversal of regional geopolitics. Such a reconfiguration may not have been premeditated, but it still happened nonetheless, meaning that such scenarios mustn't be precluded by astute decision makers.

Contingent On A Pivot (Or Lack Thereof)

Another absolutely crucial issue that mustn't be precluded is whether or not the Hoagland-Blinken Doctrine's envisioned Lead From Behind partners will succeed in their outlined mission. The probability is still up for grabs, but nonetheless, because the Doctrine alludes to both Turkey and Iran serving this role, this topic must be addressed in full.

Turkey:

Strobe Talbott

Blinken doesn't include Ankara in his joint doctrine with Hoagland until prompted to by Strobe Talbott, former Deputy Secretary of State from 1994-2001 and his self-admitted mentor who was present in the audience and largely presided over and dominated the Q&A session. The following brief exchange definitely needs to be highlighted and analyzed:

> "MR. TALBOTT: Which brings to mind one other country, and then we will go to Johannes. I remember Turgut Ozal, at the time that the USSR was disintegrating, making no secret of a Turkish dream, given the Turkic influences in the region that we're talking about. What is – how is Turkey seen today, particularly given some of the tumult that's going on there?
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> DEPUTY SECRETARY BLINKEN: It's a good question and frankly one that I'm almost more comfortable asking of our partners in the region. I don't want to necessarily suggest how they're seeing Turkey. I think you're right about Turkey's interest and ambition. It's also true that the Turks have a tremendous amount on their hands in their immediate environs right now, and that's challenging.
>
> But the bottom line, at least from our perspective, again, is this is not about creating false choices or imposing choices on our partners in Central Asia. One of the differences that we bring to the table is a profound and strong belief that our partners have a right to make their own decisions and make their own choices about the future. And if that involves us, so much the better. But if it involves other countries in the region, that is their decision."

The first thought that comes to mind is that Blinken didn't refrain from unnecessarily suggesting how Central Asian states are seeing Russia, having earlier gone on and on about how he imagines that they "fear" Moscow ever since the reunification with Crimea. The hypocritical bias that's on full display in this instance is indicative of a clear strategic preference by the State Department over which states should and shouldn't have influence in Central Asia. Turkey's deepening soft power involvement in Central Asia doesn't compete with the US' strategic objectives, it furthers them, since the essence of Lead From Behind is that the US relies on proxy entities to carry out its policies and overall will in targeted geostrategic regions. Ideally, the US would like for Turkey's Neo-Ottoman foreign policy to penetrate across the Caspian and into the heart of the former empire's ethnic affiliates. This would assist Ankara in spreading the subversive and terrorist Muslim Brotherhood, the latest proxy group that it's taken patronage of, throughout the region in order to undermine the associated governments and establish an anchor of influence that could only be expelled via forcible means that would further destabilize those states.

One of the key components of the American strategy is to have Turkmen gas (the reserves of which are among the world's largest) enter the European market via a Turkish hub in order to assist with anti-Russian energy diversification. Ankara and Ashgabat already signed a deal last November to bring the latter's gas to Europe through the TANAP pipeline, but the lingering question has always been how to bridge the geographic divide between the two countries. While some have spoken of a trans-Caspian pipeline, the lack of maritime delineation between Iran on one hand, and Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan on the other makes this all but impossible pending a forthcoming agreement on the Sea (which even then could result in the sea being designated as a lake, and as such, all of its profits [and possibly decisions] would have to be shared). The proto-deal with Iran could surprisingly change the calculation, however, and facilitate a Turkish-Iranian-Turkmen energy axis that would do away with the Caspian complication and also work out to Iran's benefit as well (whereas the trans-Caspian pipeline would have been to its absolute detriment).

No matter which way Ankara does it, if Turkey is able to craft an infrastructural foothold in Central Asia via Turkmenistan, then it could use this as a springboard for pumping its soft power and political influence deeper into the region (a 'reverse pipeline', if one can call it that). However, Turkey's role as one of the US' two Lead From Behind partners in the area is contingent on it not pivoting away from the West and towards Eurasia, which has increasingly become a plausible possibility in the past year. Should that happen, then the Turkish-Iranian-Turkmen energy axis could turn against the US' grand strategy and present an asymmetrical threat to the unipolar world instead of a complementary component, although the Brzezinski-esque threat posed by the Muslim Brotherhood virus could still be exploited as a unipolar weapon, whether intentional or not.

Iran:

As with Turkey, Iran isn't mentioned much in the Hoagland-Blinken Doctrine, but this shouldn't be taken to mean that it doesn't occupy an important envisioned strategic role. Hoagland only briefly comments, almost as an aside, that:

> "Central Asia's geography also places it in close proximity to Iran, a country that shares many ancient cultural and economic ties with Central Asia. We are aware that there are areas on which Iran's Central Asian neighbors need cooperation, such as water conservation, desertification, and countering the trade of illicit narcotics. So we hope that Iran finds a productive way to work with its Central Asian neighbors."

Blinken also has barely anything to say about Iran, muttering that:

> "Iran's historic and cultural ties to the region are deep and longstanding, and for countries that are increasingly focused on their connectivity to the rest of the world, Iran stands as a potential gateway to Europe as well as a maritime route to Asia."

Later, in response to one of Talbott's talking-point questions, he elaborates that:

> "Depending on Iran's evolution over the next years or more, it could be Iran as well, as a gateway to Europe, as a gateway to India."

While they may not seem like much, these small statements are loaded with strategic meaning and hint at the White House's future plans for Iran in a post-deal world. It should be said that the author wrote a forecast back in mid-November touching upon some of the strategic risks for Tehran inherent in any kind of nuclear deal with the US, such as the soft vulnerabilities of Western trade dependency and NGO infiltration. These warnings are still relevant today and they demonstrate some of the measures by which the West can gain influence over Iran even against Tehran's will. The reason is that Iran doesn't have to intentionally pivot towards the US (although this is what America would ultimately prefer, despite its near-impossible odds), since Washington can exploit the regional moves that Tehran makes to further its own advantage in a post-deal (non-sanctioned) world.

In the event that a final deal is reached before 30 June (which would signify a global pivot for all the Great Powers in some sense, the pivot on which the following is dependent), the US actually *wants*there to be as much infrastructure connecting Iran to Central Asia as possible owing to the geographic efficiency in using the country as a conduit for facilitating interregional connectivity (ergo the “gateway to Europe, as a gateway to India” comments). Iran would thus become the gatekeeper to Central Asia’s exports to the outside world and Europe and India’s imports to the heart of Asia, which would be an arrangement equally beneficial for both the country and the region. So what can go wrong?

The US now seems to be testing a softer, ‘friendlier’ face.

Plenty, actually. As the case of Cuba clearly shows, the US now seems to be testing a softer, ‘friendlier’ face to its long-term regime change ambitions, and opening up Iran might be the Mideast application of this prototype policy. Everything therefore depends on the effectiveness of the Iranian and Central Asian security services in preventing, identifying, and stopping Color Revolutionary influences from taking hold of their countries and setting up expansive social and physical infrastructure projects. Even though these are still a threat without increased trade traversing their territory, as a typical rule, the more physical foreign influence that moves through a country (such as trade goods), the more likely it is that Color Revolutionary forces will try to exploit this logistics pipeline to infiltrate their target. It’s well-known that the West was behind the 2009 Green Color Revolution attempt in Iran, and although ultimately a failure, it did succeed in rattling the nerves of the security establishment which hadn’t fully prepared for this asymmetrical scenario.

Even though Iran has obviously made defensive arrangements to guard against a repeat of such contingencies ever since learning from the failed Green Revolution, the US is typically always one step ahead in its Color Revolution innovations, as seen by the terrorist war that followed Syria’s failed Color Revolution or the ultra-violent and hard-core nationalist tactical and strategic ‘modifications’ of EuroMaidan. It already looks like an unconventional war might be heating up in Baluchistan with the killing of 8 Iranian border guards earlier this week (an insurgency that was forecasted by the author in early January), and it’s likely to increase in intensity (and mutate with its methods) as Western covert influence enters the region via new non-sanctioned trade routes to Central Asia.

Additionally, the greater Iran’s economic dependence becomes in enabling easier Central Asia-European/Indian trade (and reaping some of the benefits, too), the more vulnerable it is to any type of Taliban-ISIL hybrid destabilization targeting Turkmenistan, the projected desert ‘highway’ linking it with the region’s more populous reaches (and notably avoiding anarchic Afghanistan). This also means that it would become vulnerable to any forthcoming destabilization in Uzbekistan, the region’s most populous market, as would its Indian and European partners that the US may try to indirectly affect through prodding this scenario forward (amongst other strategic reasons that it may have). Thus, it’s not to say that Iranian-Central Asian (and consequently, Central Asian-Indian/European) trade networks should not be constructed – not in the least! – but that they must be monitored with extreme vigilance. Crucially, strategic considerations must be at the forefront of Tehran’s thinking in order to prevent such dire scenarios from occurring, mitigate their aftershocks if they do, and avoid overdependence on Central Asian-European-Indian trade and/or Turkish-Iranian-Turkmen energy cooperation.

Concluding Thoughts

The Hoagland-Blinken Doctrine is motivated by the US' geopolitical jealousy against Russia and China's successful infrastructure and integration advances in Central Asia. Being poorly clothed in cooperative rhetoric, it's easy to see through the layer of talk and expose what's underneath the deceptive words and colorful euphemisms. The reality is that "the Emperor has no clothes", and that after the eloquently spun 'clothes' come off and the charade is finally over, the regime change mannequin is laid bare for all to see.

The US wants to hold the region hostage under the threat of regime change destabilization in order to keep it in check and promote its two infrastructure projects, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor and CASA-1000. It's banking on Turkey and Iran being its Lead From Behind partners (with Turkey willingly filling this role and Iran unintentionally) in order to indirectly deepen its strategic influence over Central Asia. It can't conclusively be said which of the examined scenarios will eventually play out or in what exact manner (although the Kyrgyz Color Revolution convincingly appears imminent), but the examined possibilities are based on strategic reasoning, established facts, and most importantly, Hoagland and Blinken's own words.

The US is definitely planning to reengage Central Asia like never before, as the construction of state-of-the-art embassies all over the region attest. The unveiling of the Hoagland-Blinken Doctrine is thus no mere coincidence and should be taken to signify a new era of relations between the US and Central Asia. *Even if Washington isn't as successful in its doctrine as it hopes, it can still make an impact simply by retaining a diplomatic and shadow presence in the area. After all, as Blinken himself quipped, "As we all know, 90 percent of life is showing up."*

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