

“War Without Borders”: Washington Intensifies Push Into Central Asia

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[Agenda](#)

A recent editorial on the website of Voice of America reflected on last year being one in which the United States solidified relations with the five former Soviet republics in Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

One or more of the five nations border Afghanistan, Russia, China and Iran and several more than one of the latter. Kazakhstan, for example, adjoins China and Russia.

The U.S. and Britain, with the support of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, invaded Afghanistan and fanned out into Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in October of 2001, less than four months after Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan founded the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to foster expanding economic, security, transportation and energy cooperation and integration in and through Central Asia. In 2005 India, Iran and Pakistan joined the SCO as observers and Afghan President Hamid Karzai has attended its last five annual heads of state summits. [1]

Now the U.S. and the NATO have over 150,000 troops planted directly south of three Central Asian nations.

Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are also on the Caspian Sea, a reservoir of oil and natural gas whose dimensions have only been accurately determined in the past twenty years and where American companies are active in hydrocarbon projects.

After the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, the Pentagon and its NATO allies deployed military forces to, in addition to Soviet-constructed air bases in Afghanistan, bases in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The first two countries border China.

As of last March the U.S. military confirmed that a monthly average of 50,000 American and NATO troops passed through Kyrgyzstan’s Transit Center at Manas as part of the war in Afghanistan. Also last year, U.S. officials mentioned building new military training centers in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

The Voice of America feature mentioned above cited a speech by U.S. Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs Robert O. Blake, Jr., who two years ago succeeded Richard Boucher in that role.

The State Department’s Blake delivered a speech at the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy at Rice University in Houston, Texas entitled “The Obama Administration’s Priorities in South and Central Asia.”

Shorn of superfluous banter and obligatory diplomatese, his address accentuated American geopolitical designs in an area which Blake highlighted as being of vitally important interest to Washington:

“Central Asia lies at a critical strategic crossroads, bordering Afghanistan, China, Russia and Iran, which is why the United States wants to continue to expand our engagement and our cooperation with this critical region.” [2]

In furtherance of U.S. designs in an area that not only abuts the four nations named, but if controlled by the U.S. would prevent regional cooperation between them except insofar as it is mediated by an outside power, Washington, Blake listed the three priorities for the region as being to:

Support international efforts in Afghanistan

Build a strategic partnership with India

Develop more durable and stable relations with the Central Asian countries

He commented after the above itemization: “After describing these priorities at greater length, I will then focus on energy resources in Central Asia, which I imagine is of particular interest in Houston,” where ConocoPhillips, Shell Oil Company and Halliburton’s Energy Services Group have their headquarters.

The State Department assistant secretary also emphasized the role of the recently activated Northern Distribution Network (NDN) in moving supplies, military equipment and troops to the Afghan war front from the west, promoting the concept that “The NDN increasingly offers the people of the Central Asian countries the opportunity to sell goods and services to NATO troops in Afghanistan, and we hope it can help catalyze greater trade and economic cooperation between Afghanistan and Central Asia.”

The U.S. has assiduously worked to ensure that Chinese, Russian and Iranian influence in Central Asia and Afghanistan is blocked and instead promotes the economic, transportation and security integration of the region through the Pentagon-NATO Northern Distribution Network. The U.S. and NATO intend the NDN to supplant the SCO as the engine of economic and security integration in Central Asia. To date eleven of the fifteen former federal republics of the Soviet Union – all except for Armenia, Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine – have been incorporated into the NDN grid originating in the Baltic and Black Seas.

Washington is also exploiting Afghanistan and Central Asia to attain an even larger prize. Again according to Blake, “South Asia, with India as its thriving anchor, is a region of growing strategic and commercial importance to the United States in the critical Indian Ocean area.

“In total, the region is home to over two billion people – roughly one fourth of the world’s population.”

He elaborated further on the main strategic objective of the wider Afghan war when he stated that “projects with India in Afghanistan mark a small but important part of a significant new global development – the emergence of a global strategic partnership between India and the United States,” as “by 2025 India is expected to become the 3rd largest economy in the world, behind the United States and China.”

“Secretary Clinton and other Cabinet officials will also travel to India this spring for the U.S.-India Strategic Dialogue, which oversees the entire spectrum of our cooperation. ”

Blake also reminded his audience of an initiative instituted last year and conducted under his jurisdiction: Annual Bilateral Consultations (ABCs) with all five Central Asian countries. In his Houston speech he stated, “I look forward to starting the second round of ABCs with Uzbekistan next month in Tashkent.”

Blake’s boss, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, visited Uzbekistan last month – the first secretary of state to do since Colin Powell’s trip there in December of 2001 – as well as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbek President Islam Karimov just returned from Brussels where NATO had invited him to visit its headquarters and meet with Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen. While in the Belgian capital he also met with European Commission President Jose Manuel Barossa and Energy Commissioner Günther Oettinger. Uzbekistan, though poor in oil supplies, is one of the largest producers of natural gas in the former Soviet Union.

Uzbekistan is, like its neighbors, assuming greater significance for the U.S.-NATO war effort in South Asia: “The airport at the Uzbek city of Navoi has emerged as a key cog in the Northern Distribution Network, a web of Central Asian rail, road and air links that funnels supplies to US and NATO troops in Afghanistan. Most of the NDN supplies bound for Afghanistan flow through the railway junction at Termez, at the Uzbek-Afghan border.” [3] German troops are based in Termez and across the border in Afghanistan’s Kunduz province.

While Clinton was in Kyrgyzstan she, seemingly without even the suggestion of a formal agreement to the effect, assumed the extension of U.S. rights to the air base there, stating “Washington would examine again in 2014 whether it needed the Manas base.”

“Clinton said Manas was the central transit point for troops from 49 countries going into Afghanistan. ” [4]

Her subordinate Blake’s speech at Rice University also included discussion of the strategic role of Central Asia in regards to hydrocarbon extraction and transport. He claimed that the biggest and richest of the Central Asian states, Kazakhstan, “will account for one of the largest increases in non-OPEC supply to the global market in the next 10-15 years as its oil production doubles to reach 3 million barrels a day by 2020.” The U.S. and its EU and NATO allies have long planned the shipping of Kazakh oil and natural gas westward to the South Caucasus and thence to Europe, both bypassing and replacing Russia as Europe’s main supplier of hydrocarbons.

Western projects include the Nabucco natural gas pipeline and building a pipeline under the Caspian Sea to bring Kazakh oil to Azerbaijan where it would be transported via the Baku-Tbilisi- Ceyhan (Azerbaijan- Georgia-Turkey) pipeline with a connection to an Odessa-Brody-Plock-Gdansk branch running from Ukraine to Poland’s Baltic Sea coast and from there to the rest of Europe.

That is, the Western-initiated Southern Corridor versus Russia’s South Stream natural gas pipeline to the Black Sea and the Balkans.

In 2009 Richard Morningstar, the State Department’s Special Envoy for Eurasian Energy,

spoke in the Czech Republic at an EU summit called Southern Corridor-New Silk Road, and asserted: "President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton share your support for the Southern Corridor and consider Eurasian energy issues to be of the highest importance."

His State Department colleague Blake also said last week: "Though often overlooked as an energy source, Uzbekistan has substantial hydrocarbon reserves of its own and produces about as much natural gas as Turkmenistan. Located at the heart of Central Asia, much of the region's infrastructure - roads, railroads, transmission lines, and pipelines - goes through Uzbekistan, offering it a unique opportunity to expand its exports with little investment in new infrastructure. "

The energy project that attracted the attention of Blake most, however, was the agreement concluded on December 11 of last year for the TAPI (Turkmenistan- Afghanistan- Pakistan- India) natural gas pipeline to run from the Caspian Sea littoral nation that gives the acronym its first letter to India, which was the death sentence for a competing "peace pipeline" from Iran to Pakistan, from there to India and onward to China - the \$7 billion, 1,430-mile Iran-Pakistan- India gas (IPI) pipeline - that had been years in the planning but was opposed by Washington, which backed the earlier TAP (Turkmenistan- Afghanistan- Pakistan) and later the TAPI alternative.

The pipeline is extend over 10,000 miles and deliver 33 billion cubic meters of natural gas annually.

After mentioning that "The country's substantial natural resources may make Turkmenistan one of the top five countries worldwide in terms of gas reserves" which have "attracted the attention of many countries interested in securing Turkmen gas for various pipeline projects," Blake announced that "The U.S. has welcomed renewed interest in TAPI." In fact it has been the prime mover behind the project through its influence in the Asian Development Bank, which is underwriting the pipeline's construction.

Turkmenistan's President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov "almost single-handedly resurrected the Turkmenistan- Afghanistan- Pakistan- India pipeline, which if successful will finally link the resources in Central Asia with the markets of the south," Blake added.

In the middle of this month Afghan President Karzai and Indian President Pratibha Devisingh Patil sent letters to their Turkmen counterpart "express[ing] confidence that the gas pipeline TAPI (Turkmenistan- Afghanistan- Pakistan- India) will be implemented soon." [5]

Shortly afterward Berdimukhamedov met with European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso, who also met with Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev on the same trip and subsequently with Uzbek President Karimov in Brussels, in the Turkmen capital and announced that his government is prepared to replicate the TAPI project by shipping Caspian natural gas to Europe with "construction of a pipeline under the Caspian Sea [and] transportation of natural gas across the Caspian Sea on specialized ships, tankers." [6] Turkmenistan will then link up with the Southern Energy Corridor (including the Nabucco gas pipeline) to bring Caspian and Middle Eastern, including Iraqi, natural gas to Europe.

Until now Turkmenistan's natural gas deals had been primarily with Russia, China and Iran. Both Russia and China have expressed interest in participating in the TAPI pipeline, but the U.S. will ensure that doesn't occur. "Washington's vital interest in TAPI includes having an alternative route for Central Asian gas that will bypass the Russian pipelines' network."

In addition, “India has objected to any Chinese firm or consortium being given contracts related to the building of the Turkmenistan- Afghanistan- Pakistan- India (TAPI) gas pipeline.” [7]

“The U.S. has supported TAPI – and Turkmen efforts to keep Russia off the project – as a way to break Russia’s and China’s monopoly on exporting Caspian Basin energy to the rest of the world.” [8]

It was observed years ago by past Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs and all-around former Soviet space hand Matthew Bryza, now the incoming U.S. ambassador to Azerbaijan, that the transportation corridor the U.S. and its Western allies developed in the 1990s to ship energy to the west was used to transport troops and equipment to the east starting with the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. What the U.S. and NATO have for years called the New Silk Road, which is in truth an arms and energy transit route.

Until recently, however, Turkmenistan had remained comparatively uninvolved in the transit going both ways. It is the only Central Asian nation not to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (which also includes Armenia and Belarus as member states.)

Journalist Deirdre Tynan has provided valuable information on the degree to which Turkmenistan has been surreptitiously incorporated into the U.S. and NATO greater Afghan war structure. Two years ago she disclosed that Turkmenistan has been “quietly developing into a major transport hub” for the Northern Distribution Network to deliver supplies to U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan.

Tynan also revealed:

“The Pentagon has confirmed a small contingent of US military personnel now operates in Ashgabat [the capital] to assist refueling operations.

“The United States has a deal in place that allows for the landing and refueling of transport planes at Ashgabat airport, according to the US Department of Defense. NATO is also seeking to open a land corridor for supplies destined for troops in Afghanistan. ...”

She also quoted a spokesman for the Defense Department stating, “The United States has a small Air Force team, normally around seven airmen, who assist US aircraft who refuel at Ashgabat Airport....” [9]

In a recent article the author wrote:

“Despite its long-avowed status as a neutral nation, Turkmenistan is playing an important supporting role for US and NATO forces fighting in Afghanistan. Washington and Ashgabat are both keen to keep Turkmenistan’s strategic role low-key, especially the financial aspects of cooperation. “

The country has supplied fuel for American and NATO troops in Afghanistan, “delivered free of all duties and taxes.”

“Fuel is exempt from local duties and taxes due to Turkmenistan’s and Azerbaijan’s participation in the NATO Partnership for Peace program....Similar arrangements are in place

in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.. ..US military aircraft have been using Turkmen airspace and facilities since at a least 2002, and Ashgabat is a hub for operations involving C-5 and C-17 transport planes.”

A spokeswoman for the Pentagon’s Defense Logistics Agency (DLA) told Tynan the following:

“It is DLA’s understanding that both Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan are partners in the NATO Partnership for Peace. As partners, they agree to abide by the terms of the NATO status of forces agreement, which provides in relevant part that NATO member countries shall make special arrangements for fuel, oil and lubricants for use by another member countries military and civilian personnel to be delivered free of all duties and taxes.” [10]

Tajikistan, with China to its east and Afghanistan to its southwest, has hosted a French air force contingent of at least 200 personnel, C-160 transport aircraft and Mirage multirole fourth-generation jet fighters since early 2002.

Last week the nation’s state-run railroad disclosed that in 2010 “In keeping with the agreements signed by the Tajik government, republican railroads delivered over 160 tonnes of commercial cargo, which was later taken by motor transport to Afghanistan for NATO needs.” [11]

In 2007 the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers financed the construction of a bridge across the Panj River connecting Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

On January 17 U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Susan Elliott was in Kyrgyzstan to arrange for resuming bilateral consultations, which were suspended last year after the second violent overthrow of the government in five years occurred. [12]

The following week Kazakh Secretary of State Kanat Saudabayev visited Washington, D.C. for two days. Before meeting with his counterpart Secretary of State Clinton, he met with Colin Powell, Brent Scowcroft, Zbigniew Brzezinski, ConocoPhillips Chairman and Chief Executive Officer James Mulva and Halliburton Energy Services Chairman and Chief Executive Officer David Lesar.

Clinton and Saudabayev stressed “the importance of timely implementation of the agreements” between President Barack Obama and Kazakhstan’s President Nursultan Nazarbayev on the sidelines of last April’s Global Summit on Nuclear Safety in Washington. Accords that, according to Senior Director of Russian and Eurasian Affairs at the National Security Council Michael McFaul, “will allow troops to fly directly from the United States over the North Pole to the region.” [13] U.S. and British troops led NATO Partnership for Peace training exercises, codenamed Steppe Eagle 2010, in Kazakhstan last August and afterwards Kazakhstan assigned military personnel to NATO’s International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan.

As Washington and NATO consolidate military-to- military relations with the five nations of Central Asia, the majority of both Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Collective Security Treaty Organization members will be shifted from the Russian and Chinese to the U.S. column.

Indian analyst and former diplomat M K Bhadrakumar wrote an article a month after NATO’s summit in Lisbon in November in which he stated that “the alliance is well on the way to

transforming into a global political-military role” and “NATO is by far today the most powerful military and political alliance in the world.”

He added: “The various partnership programs of NATO in Central Asia and the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Mediterranean regions can be viewed as part of the overall approach to take recourse to other states or groups of states to promote the Euro-Atlantic interests globally.”

“From a seemingly reluctant arrival in Afghanistan seven years ago in an ‘out-of-area’ operation as part of the UN-mandated ISAF (International Security Assistance Force), with a limited mandate, NATO is suo moto stepping out of the ISAF, deepening its presence and recasting its role and activities on a long-term basis.”

“It is within the realm of possibility that NATO would at a future date deploy components of the US missile defense system in Afghanistan. Ostensibly directed against the nearby ‘rogue states,’ the missile defense system will challenge the Chinese strategic capability.”

The current geopolitical reality in Central and South Asia “is very much linked to NATO’s future role in Afghanistan. US strategy toward an Afghan settlement visualizes the future role for NATO as the provider of security to the Silk Road that transports the multi-trillion dollar mineral wealth in Central Asia to the world market via the Pakistani port of Gwadar.”

“The resuscitation of the Silk Road project to construct an oil and gas pipeline connecting Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India (the TAPI pipeline) will need to be seen as much more than a template of regional cooperation.

“The pipeline signifies a breakthrough in the longstanding Western efforts to access the fabulous mineral wealth of the Caspian and Central Asian region. Washington has been the patron saint of the TAPI concept since the early-1990s when the Taliban was conceived as its Afghan charioteer.”

“On the map, the TAPI pipeline deceptively shows India as its final destination. What is overlooked, however, is that the route can be easily extended to the Pakistani port of Gwadar and connected with European markets, which is the ultimate objective.

“The onus is on each of the transit countries to secure the pipeline. Part of the Afghan stretch will be buried underground as a safeguard against attacks and local communities will be paid to guard it. But then, it goes without saying that Kabul will expect NATO to provide security cover, which, in turn, necessitates long-term Western military presence in Afghanistan.

“In sum, TAPI is the finished product of the US invasion of Afghanistan. It consolidates NATO’s political and military presence in the strategic high plateau that overlooks Russia, Iran, India, Pakistan and China. TAPI provides a perfect setting for the alliance’s future projection of military power for ‘crisis management’ in Central Asia.” [14]

Immediately after the signing of the TAPI agreement in the capital of Turkmenistan by the presidents of that country and Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as Indian’s energy minister, the government of Hamid Karzai announced that 7,000 Afghan troops – the army is being trained by the NATO Training Mission – Afghanistan – would be deployed to guard the pipeline. [15]

Since the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union, Central Asia (with the Caspian Sea Basin on its western flank) has been the chessboard on which intensified international strategic positioning has occurred. It may be transformed into a battleground of conflicting 21st century geopolitical interests.

Notes

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- 4) Reuters, December 2, 2010
- 5) Trend News Agency, January 13, 2011
- 6) Trend News Agency, January 15, 2011
- 7) Hindustan Times, January 17, 2011
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