



# Central Asia without the West?

*'Central Asia without the West' is a result of a brainstorming and simulation that took place at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) during the 2018 Central Asia Working Group, Strategic Studies Network meeting. A team of experts from Central Asia, the United States, Ukraine, India and Hong Kong tried to address the concept of the 'West', its impact on regional and national priorities of the Central Asia states, what the region might lose or gain without the West, and how other actors can change their agenda and narratives in the region, are they ready to step in and will they benefit without the US or not.*

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Edited by Anna Gussarova

The workshop participants agreed to define the **West** or the **Western world** in terms of the Central Asia politics as the U.S. and Europe. The exercise, hypothetical in nature, is an attempt to assess the value of the 'West', in particular what the West does for, and mean to Central Asia, and what is "missing" without the Western involvement.

The proposition "*Central Asia without the West?*" is, to be noted, a question rather than a statement of fact. In reality, for better or worse (depending on one's stance), Central Asia will probably never in near future be left without any Western engagement. For the development of democratic societies and good governance, strong market-based economy and an independent civil society, it is positive factor that the West will most probably engage Central Asia long into the future.

That being said, the question posed, "Central Asia without the West?" raises at least two more additional questions. One is more of a backward-looking evaluative question: "***What would be lost if the West were to stop engaging Central Asia?***" The second is a more forward-looking and practical question: "***What are the options and alternatives to the Western role in Central Asia going forward, were the West to disengage?***"

For the first question, the following points appear to be of particular relevance here.

The role of the West has been very multi-dimensional, although not equally substantial in all directions. Arguably, the most important area of Western engagement has been that of promoting democratization and related issue such as: civil society, human rights, minority rights, gender equality, freedoms (of association, press, speech, expression etc.) and others. It is open to argument whether in any of these directions any of the five Central Asian countries has been successful, and whether the collective West has always contributed positively to these causes. Nevertheless, the very fact that democracy, human rights and related spheres are much discussed and are on the agenda within these societies has the most to do with the Western policy and little to do with any other actors. Were the West to disengage from Central Asia, it would weaken the possibility of pushing these issues into national agendas in the region.

There are several other areas, related to domestic development where the West has been a primary if not the only outside actor in Central Asia to be active in: economic reforms, good governance, border management, environmental protection and water safety, anti-corruption policies, education and educational reforms. Without the Western engagement, these topics would likely to lose significant impetus for reform and development. In the 1990s, the United States and European Union nations funded variety of programs to encourage civil society development, especially in the form of non-governmental organizations. The formation of free media, political parties, and electoral procedures and transparency were also common themes. While such efforts were overshadowed by security cooperation programs following the 2001 military campaign in Afghanistan, they remain an integral part of how the West engages with Central Asian states.

In terms of international affairs of the Central Asian states, the West has been always one of the key directions, the others being Russia, China and several less influential, and also somewhat different for the

various Central Asia countries: Turkey, Iran, South Korea, India, Japan, etc. All Central Asian countries generally proclaim 'multi-vectoral' foreign policies, but often find Russia occupying a disconcertingly prominent place in their foreign relations, to the detriment of their abilities to pursue relations with others – especially with the United States and/or the European Union. The last is especially visible in the case of Kazakhstan with its path to Europe.

Western disengagement would mean the loss of that crucial balancing factor in Central Asia foreign relations. In an increasingly divided, quarrelsome state of affairs in the world, it will be difficult to maintain what might pass for multi-vectoral relations but to not have worthwhile options for such a policy would be an even more serious challenge. Absence of an equivalent of what the Western role has been hitherto would make it challenging to make progress in most of the above areas that need reforms and development.

However, the important question has been raised during the discussion: what will be a reason for the West disengagement? Is it because of spoiled, broken relations with the regional states or because of the lack of interest in this region? A certain signals of the losing attention in the region from the side of the US and the EU have been witnessed for the last few years.

Thus, to answer the first question, if the West seriously disengage from Central Asia, it would certainly mean a significant loss for a number of spheres where these countries need support and assistance to move forward and improve. Would efforts to improve political transparency, market economic reforms, and civil society fall by the wayside, making it even harder for the regional governments to function? While worst-case scenarios painted by Western organizations (assuming Central Asians ignore or don't have access to their aid) may not transpire, the regimes do run the risk of becoming inefficient kleptocracies that only look to enrich themselves.

Another dimension is a security sphere. The United States have been paying attention to the region sporadically, focusing on Afghanistan, the "global war on terror" and energy security. It is not clear whether the Central Asian countries still need a security umbrella, provided by the West, either engaged or disengaged. Yet, from security point, no major shifts to be expected in Central Asia without the disengaged West, in particular the United States. Nor clear losses were named among key aspects that might be targeted if the West were leaving the region. It was agreed that the influence, except of Afghanistan dimension, will be on human security and democratic control over security sector, rather than in a sphere of hard security.

Border security is understudied topic in terms of Western involvement and future possibilities. As the West, including through the OSCE, invested in border security and management initiatives, anti-trafficking, as well as the US and NATO presence in Afghanistan added to this, the disengagement in all three fields could bring unpredictable results.

Also, experts expressed opinion that Western disengagement can lead to the increase of uncontrolled law enforcement activities, police, intelligence service dealing with opposition and disobedience of the population.

Whereas citizens of some Central Asian countries would prefer if the West were to leave and elites were supposed to follow the path of the Russian “sovereign democracy”, the critical mass of ‘agents of change’ are either leaving the country or getting more adaptive. As a result, a Western-free Central Asia will open strategic opportunities to other regional and non-regional actors.

**If the West were still to disengage, what are the practical options for other partnerships that could at least in part play a role equivalent to that of the West?**

To begin with, given the strained climate in international affairs, most of the actors would prefer not to take up the role of the West in Central Asia, to the detriment of their relations with Russia and China. That said, several ‘partial replacements’ would be India, South Korea, Japan, and in some aspects, possibly Georgia, Ukraine and Armenia. What unites all of these countries - and contrasts them to Russia and China – is that for all of them, democratic government is not an unwelcome irritant but a political commitment, which they discuss routinely. They are committed to rule of law, accountability of government, freedom of citizens to engage in politics and governance, etc. All of this does not mean they have fully achieved any of these; but they are committed to them and their publics are capable of demanding them from their governments. However, at the same time, democratic changes inside of the Central Asia states are not prerequisites for the cooperation, as in case of the EU or the US.

The difficulty with all of these countries – but some might argue, an advantage – is that none of them are ‘missionaries’ of political reforms or other humanitarian objectives. Such policies have always been distinctly Western sort of approach – to promote democracy and human rights around the world. Though these countries can have a positive effect to the Central Asian societies in these regards by their examples. Closer and wider scope of interaction with these countries is able to expose Central Asian publics – governments, activists, youth in general – to how these countries are governed, what is attractive in them. Georgia has already become a sort of a magnet in this respect, and Armenia has been approaching it, even though more is yet to be seen to make Yerevan a credible model. South Korea amazes most Central Asian citizens both for its economic achievements and for its rule of law – demonstrated in the case of a deposed president who was accused of corruption. India has emerged as the largest democracy despite certain socio-political challenges, and sets an example before the newly emerging democracies. It has recently been activating its foreign policy thrust toward Central Asia. India's role in Central Asia in the field of IT, education and skill development is worth mentioning. Ukraine still needs to reopen its relations with Central Asian states, which are at the lowest level, but lessons from fighting hybrid warfare and potential manipulation with post-Soviet heritage is something the Central Asian countries and experts have already been carefully studying. Moreover, each of these countries has a range of foreign and security priorities that will limit how much assistance they could actually provide to the Central Asian states. In terms of volume, they would pale in comparison to the funding coming from countries like Russia and China.

As for Russia, it is unclear whether the Kremlin is developing a new comprehensive strategy for the region. It remains the same, preserving the same tools of integration/collaboration within the CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union. Russia is unlikely to step to take responsibilities to promote development in Central Asia, while facing economic sanctions and pushing other EAEU partners to export substitution. Politically, for the past 25 years Russia failed to address the region properly and increase its strategic influence and presence. Moscow always preferred a bilateral approach, post-Soviet economic influence, and security threats – so living by the past, rather than proposing a 'future' and modernization of the Central Asia.

As the Kremlin has never played a humanitarian game in the region, Russia is incapable of credible substitute for the West in long-term sustainable development. Moreover, Russia never paid a significant attention to such issues as environment or NGOs development, water security, anti-corruption activities, which are less political but not less important for the Central Asia. Also, with current sanctions regime against Russia, Moscow will not be able to invest significantly contrary to the Western companies.

Apart from Russia, Chinese assertiveness in Central Asia without the Western influence lies within the Chinese tendency to profit from the Western absence is a consistent Maoist Three World Theory practice to befriend and align with exploited nations. For instance, despite the U.S. being Cambodia's largest trading partner in the immediate years after the 10-year ban in 2007, at the onset of the Cambodian-Thai border dispute, the Chinese acted quickly to fulfil the gap of decreased U.S. aid. Economic power in this case translated to political power in the ASEAN region.

In Central Asia, one country can sympathize several actors. Most of the states do not want to choose only one vector and prefer multi-vector approach - searching power from one side (Russia), culture from another one (Muslim world) and economy more and more from China.

Central Asia is a region of concentrated Chinese interest, for domestic economic sustainability, alleviate terrorist threats and to secure energy resources. This is why China is likely to be assertive in Central Asia regardless of Western influence. The relatively lesser change in governments in Central Asia also adds incentive of Chinese engagement, in contrast to uncertainty in democratic South East Asian states such as Malaysia and Myanmar. Although the one-sided interest of the Belt and Road Initiative poses threats for Central Asian states to pursue their independent strategic visions, these threats remain economic in nature.

For example, Western sanctions against Iran and Russia mean that Turkmenistan is much more likely to sell energy to China in order to secure funds, while selling gas to Russia remains an option for 2019. Although Chinese debt is unknown in Turkmenistan, Turkmen economic reliance on the Chinese is almost certain without other active energy buyers. After the Crimea annexation, China also secured a USD 400 billion Russian energy deal for 30 years. Spelled out as the Period of Strategic Opportunity, Chinese profiting from Western sanctions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is a recurring pattern that is likely to continue further.

The evidence of China's assertiveness beyond the economic realm is found also through its commercial turned military uses of ports along the Belt and Road. The port facility in Djibouti, the Gwadar port in Pakistan and Hambantota port in Sri Lanka pose serious strategic threats to India and its Western allies. Chinese interest in Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor and Iran's Chabahar port is also alarming with the U.S. sanctions. Thus far, Chinese overseas military presence serves as to protect investments and overseas Chinese nationals, highlighted through China's military evacuation of Chinese citizens from Libya in 2011 and its anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden. Military bases in Central Asia seem unlikely given its geographical proximity to Russia, on top of the fact that China imports close to 70 percent of its military equipment from Russia, with its current usage restricted to Southern China. However, possibility to gain some territories due to the huge economic debts of some Central Asian countries (by the Sri Lanka model) is feared in the region.

With the 2016 Quadrilateral Cooperation Coordination Mechanism (Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China) and the late 2017 ASEAN-SCO transnational crime cooperation, Chinese strategies in Central Asia aim towards asserting its influence in multilateral organisations as well. To cloud out Western counterpart, China encourages alternative institutions to fulfil its functions, for example by having the SCO monitor elections to compete with the OSCE election monitoring.

**The hypothetical proposition of "Central Asia without the West", thus, raises a number of issues that would need to be considered were such a proposition to materialize.** Currently, the state of Western-Central Asian interaction may be said to be at a somewhat lowered but dynamic state. That is, renewed relations are taking place. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and Nursultan Nazarbaev have both been active in engaging with the West), while some older relations have come down (such as a drop in Kyrgyzstan's volume of engagements since the closure of the US airbase in 2014 and subsequent, but not necessarily causally linked, worsening of relations since that time). In the past year, Uzbek officials, to include the President, have visited the United States, with a message that the country is "open for business," and economic reforms are taking place. Even if the US government is less committed to funding programs in the region, it is hoped that the private sector takes a greater interest.

The US-sponsored framework of C5+1 diplomatic platform has been another new way of engagement that has good political potential even though not implying any significantly funded projects. Indeed, in the past two years, the C5+1 framework has been utilized by the Central Asian countries without high-level American participation. The current lack of interest in Central Asia by the Trump administration has already conditioned the regional leaders to come to terms with a lessening of American assistance. More pragmatic US policy towards the region can also bring additional FDI to the region, including energy sphere.

The European Union is currently in late stages of preparing a new multi-year strategy of cooperation with the Central Asian states, expected to be launched in 2019 and capable of giving renewed energy to the EU-CA relations. Several European countries have maintained their independent engagements with Central Asian countries on a stable basis, such as Germany, France, the UK and several others.

## Contributors

Svetlana Dzardanova, Program Manager, Politics and Security Program, OSCE Academy in Bishkek, Turkmenistan

Anna Gussarova, Director, Central Asia Institute for Strategic Studies, Kazakhstan

Emil Juraev, Associate Professor, OSCE Academy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

Roger Kangas, Academic Dean, Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies, Washington DC, USA

Rashmini Korparkar, Independent Researcher, India

Lidiya Parhomchik, Senior Research Fellow, Eurasian Research Institute, Kazakhstan

Ravshan Sobirzoda, Central Asia Economic Adviser, Department for International Development Central Asia, British Embassy in Dushanbe, Tajikistan

Hanna Shelest, Editor-in-chief, UA: Ukraine Analytica; Board member, Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism"

Talant Sultanov, Expert, Center for Strategic Initiatives, Kyrgyzstan

Niva Yau Tsz Yan, Associate Research Fellow, OSCE Academy in Bishkek, Hong Kong

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