Stuck in Neutral

The Failure of U.S. Energy Policy in Eurasia

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Introduction

On Christmas Day 1991, the United States was given a gift by Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev in the form of a foreign policy opportunity through the eventual opening of Central Asia to foreign influence and the chance to access vast reserves of fossil fuels stored under the lands of present-day Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan. But the 'gift' presented to the United States that day also provided the same opportunity to a nearer neighbor to the region; a sleeping giant - whose influence and global reach has yet to still be determined – in the form of China. But as any good 'Christmas story' often has a plot twist, there also in the mix is a new Russia who longs for the nostalgic Christmases of the past and the control over Central Asia that it once held. As a function of how sovereign states interact with each other as well as projecting their intentions in various parts of the world, countries develop foreign policies for near-, mid-, and long-term projections to guide them (hopefully) with conflict-free activity and dialogue in the hope of fostering a relationship where both tangible and intangible benefits are realized with other states.

The United States in its 247-year history has consistently developed and reworked foreign policy concerning individual states and regions of the world with its external mission of promoting free-democracies and markets to fit in its established rules-based order to foster globalization and interdependencies to achieve a geopolitically stable and peaceful network of states that have diverse languages, cultures, and outlooks on the world view and their place in it. However, this is also where conflict and disagreement between states find a root in international relations. While the United States feels they are projecting a course all states should take to achieve success like they have done through their own projects, other states may not see it based on their unique perspectives. Central Asia is one such place. The intent of this work is to identify the energy foreign policy of Central Asia for the United States, the European Union (EU), Russia, and China as they vie for influence in the energy rich and geographically strategic lands of the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan through their own foreign policy lenses and through a narrow scope of establishing energy security for themselves – often at the expense of others. It also will provide recommendations of forging a new U.S. foreign policy for the region as the current policies largely ignore energy security in Central Asia.

We have known it for a while…

The value of Central Asia both geopolitically and from an energy standpoint has not been lost on American politicians and policymakers. Despite being closed off by the Soviet Union for much of the 20th century and largely forgotten for being a region of Asiatic and Turkic cultures, desolate steppes, and nuclear weapon testing sites, once the Soviet barriers fell and the borders of the new independent states opened up, foreign energy companies explored the region much like the Spanish conquistadores did 500 years earlier that scoured the lands of the Western Hemisphere for the fabled city of El Dorado and its gold. Where the Spaniards and other explorers failed in their endeavors to find such a place, modern-day oil men located their treasures just under the surface of Kazakh, Turkmen, and Uzbek lands. Energy was not a total mystery to many as it related to Central Asia. Soviet Russia had the infrastructure in place to extract it and transit it north into the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic state for domestic use as well as export toward its Warsaw Pact satellite states and parts of Europe that relied on Soviet energy, primarily in the form of gas. Energy to Europe transited primarily through another Soviet state, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic and the Soviet-era infrastructure remains an important piece of Russian energy export still today.

When Western firms reported the potential of ‘new’ Central Asian energy and the opportunity to lay a claim to it through diplomatic and corporate means, American politicians also found it to be potentially a foreign policy windfall for the United States and its European allies as an extension of energy security moving forward. In an U.S. Senate committee hearing regarding Energy Supplies in Eurasia and Implications for U.S. Energy Security in 2005, Senator Chuck Hagel identified the new Central Asian states as a “vitally important energy basin and transit corridor (possessing) more than 10 percent of the world's proven oil reserves, and more than 30 percent of the world's proven natural gas reserves” (Energy Supplies in Eurasia and Implications for U.S. Energy Security, 2005). But he also identified Russia as still an important player in the region both as an energy reserve holder and as an exporter to two other vital regions, Europe, and Asia. Still, Sen. Hagel noted the potential of Central Asia to American foreign interests; the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline was bringing Central Asian oil West *and* bypassing Russian territory originating from Azerbaijan and it also possessed the potential of energy as political leverage. Other states like Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan had the needed reserves, but no transit lines for export other than Russian controlled pipelines. Still, the potential for Central Asia remained and while still an ocean and a continent lying in between, the U.S. seen the opportunities to move more energy west to its European allies while at the same time bypassing Russia to reduce European dependence on Russian-influenced energy. While Sen. Hagel highlighted the opportunity, in the same Senate hearing, Karen Harbert, the Assistant Secretary for Policy and International Affairs in the Department of Energy at the time, laid out a rudimentary roadmap to access that energy. Echoing many of the highlights of Sen. Hagel presented to the Senate committee, Harbert noted export challenges in bringing Central Asian energy West and to the broader global market. Specifically, she noted “Insufficient export capacity (where) independent pipelines…are basically nonexistent” (Energy Supplies in Eurasia and Implications for U.S. Energy Security, 2005). Harbert pointed out the then Bush Administration’s support in overcoming the lack of transit pipelines in the region but she also noted that it cannot be simply corporate efforts to establish an American presence in the region as it lacks the political power to establish a firm foothold in Central Asia; what was also needed according to Harbert was a “robust energy dialogue” with the Central Asian states in a two tiered approach by addressing and resolving “issues in a government-to-government manner” while at the same time taking a “regional approach in addressing Eurasian energy topics” (Energy Supplies in Eurasia and Implications for U.S. Energy Security, 2005). This approach appeared to be an effective way in projecting traditional U.S. foreign policy of promoting democratic principles, free markets, and security in the region on a state-by-state basis while injecting energy security for the U.S. and Europe by linking energy as a regional task to move oil and gas west. Harbert succinctly claimed this strategy when she noted that “U.S. energy security is strengthened when Eurasian countries are stable, are secure, and are strong energy producers and exporters” (Energy Supplies in Eurasia and Implications for U.S. Energy Security, 2005).

U.S. energy security recommendations in Central Asia like Harbert’s at the time were overshadowed by the more pressing foreign policy concern of addressing terrorism and extremism in the aftermath of 9/11 (Scott and Alcenat, 2008). Instead of collaborating with these states in exploring for energy, the United States was seeking agreements to use bases and airspace to launch missions into Afghanistan to eradicate Al Qaeda, take out its leader Osama bin Laden, and replace Taliban rule through Afghani state building. It also by this time in 2005 the

United States was heavily involved militarily in Iraq and was seen by many in the region as a war maker rather than a democratic peace maker. From George W. Bush up to Joe Biden, each presidential administration has been preoccupied with Afghanistan more than any other Central Asian state. Biden's current strategy for Central Asia for 2019-2025 appears to stress regional security as a primary concern (U.S. Department of State, 2020) and first step towards prosperity in the region. It mentions support for a "unified electric grid across Central Asia (that) will help facilitate the trade of surplus electricity to… improve regional energy security and reduce reliance on external actors" (p. 3) but has yet to develop specifics as it focuses more on "(reducing) terrorist threats in Central Asia" (p. 4) with narrower scope for stability in Afghanistan. It appears that before American politicians, policymakers, and CEOs of energy companies begin to collaborate with the Central Asian states in energy, U.S. foreign policy for Central Asia will continue to stress that violent extremism is addressed, current energy infrastructure will not be compromised because of anti-American sentiment and the influence of other major players in Central Asia will be reduced. This may be a tall order given the recent history of American military activity in the region. Yet, despite Secretary of State Anthony Blinken's visit to the region in February 2023 and his message of Washington's changing approach in the region from one of a military presence to one of supporting each of the Central States through their promotion of democratic principles, sovereignty rights, and financial aid (Blinken Starts Asia Trip With Promise Of New Aid To Central Asia, 2023), (Helf, 2023), the U.S. has been preoccupied by a geopolitical rival in Eastern Europe that also poses a threat to Central Asia – Russia.

Russian Policy and Challenges

The political scientist and Russian and Eurasian expert Peter Rutland provided a perspective into Russian foreign policy in which at its essence “reveals that Russia has deployed political, military, and economic tools to advance its interests” and when used as justification for security of its interests, begins to manifest as Russian neo-imperialist ambitions in the region in what it sees as its “backyard” or “near-abroad” (Scott and Alcenat, 2008, p. 12). This revanchist attitude is more of a result of what Charap and Peterson (2011) note as “Soviet-era habit” rather than a real security concern that seeks to exclude the influence of other great powers” (Charap and Peterson, 2011) (Scott and Alcenat, 2008), specifically the United States. This neo-imperialist approach impedes the economic development of the Central Asian states that once formed the southern frontier of the Soviet Union and further prevents these new states from establishing solid foundations from which to build stable democracies and capitalist markets. It further exacerbates the dependency of these states on Russia from which to move its oil and gas to markets and the direction of its flow as it is Soviet-era energy infrastructure that moves Turkmen and Uzbek gas, as well as Kazakh oil north into Russia in which it is converted abstractly as what Coffey (2022) describes as a “tool of foreign policy.” Still, Russia appears to enjoy and benefit from “strong historical ties and political, military, economic, and social leverage over many states in the region” (Rojansky, 2019, p. 4) and will continue to exploit that advantage as it seeks to reassert its influence in the region and prevent the United States from gaining favor through economic and energy incentives. The Central Asian states, notes the Russian and Eurasian expert Thomas Graham, is historically “the region that has given Russia its geopolitical weight (and) psychologically, it is central to Russia’s self-identity as a great power, for a great power, by definition, must radiate power and influence into neighboring regions.”

(Charap and Peterson, 2011). These notions of the importance of Russia's sphere of influence have been heavily tested in Eastern Europe where its invasion of Ukraine has been met with Western resistance primarily through NATO member support in military aid and economic sanctions. As a result, Russia cannot afford to lose geopolitical influence on its southern flank; yet Russia also realizes that it does not have the capacity and wherewithal to keep Western influence at bay. As a result, it has turned to another regional power that is also a geopolitical rival to the United States – China. It is here that Russia has possibly scored a point in using its "geography as an aid to its statecraft, engaging China as strategic power to counter U.S influence" (Scott and Alcenat, p. 13).

Chinese Policy and Challenges

In 2005 when Harbert addressed the Senate Subcommittee on International Economic Policy, Export and Trade Promotion, she projected that Russian energy was going to be increasingly exported to Asia year over year. (Energy Supplies in Eurasia and Implications for U.S. Energy Security). China has been a state that is only too happy to oblige and fulfill that prediction as it is now the one of the world's largest consumers of fossil fuels. Yet, the collapse of the Soviet Union in the last decade of the 20th century entailed just the right timing to coincide with China's regional, then global, rise as an economic powerhouse. Central Asia opened up at just the right time which allowed for a renewed interest in the region for China beyond geopolitical issues of state security (mainly in the form of the Muslim Uyghur population in the northwestern province of Xinjiang) and provided and opportunity for a retooling of Chinese foreign policy in Central Asia. The Chinese, taking advantage of the "geopolitical vacuum" left by the Soviet Union, sought to establish "economic control and oil access" (Scott and Alcenat, p.

15) in Central Asia primarily through its Belt and Road Initiative that seeks to connect trade routes from China, across the barren steppes of Eurasia and into Europe and Africa. Yet, the responsibility that the Chinese doesn't want is to maintain a security presence in the region. Scott and Alcenat (2008) reference the Chinese expert Konstantin Syroezhkin who "simplifies the Chinese foreign policy as a non-confrontational one…seizing the "opportunities to expand trade and economic contracts with Central Asia" (p. 15-16). With China's membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Russia as a partner in the alliance, China has let Russia take the reins in maintaining the primary security presence in the region. This leaves China to fully concentrate on building economic relations and energy infrastructure in these former Soviet states (Scott and Alcenat, 2008), (Rojansky, 2019) to shift the directional flow of energy west to east leaving much of continental Europe in the cold and short on energy supply in reserves and dependent on Russian gas; all without an energy security contingency plan that should have been addressed long ago.

EU policy and Challenges

Veneziano (2023) notes that "part of the EU's energy issues concerning supply and usage stems from the fact… that the (European) Union did not have an effective mechanism in place to address then-current and future energy concerns" (p. 7), with the issue of energy security considerations being left out of the 1992 Maastricht Treaty citing "that (energy security considerations) was an area best left to individual countries" (Öğütçü, 1995, p. 42). Now, with Russia locked into a prolonged conflict with Ukraine which is the primary transit route for Russian gas to be distributed to dependent European states, Europe is facing little options for its energy consumption to keep each individual state's economies running and people warm in the cold European winters. Though gas prices in Europe have fallen since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Europeans "have acutely felt the consequences of Russia's invasion" (Coffey, 2022) concerning energy security and may continue to experience adverse market conditions moving forward based on a "combination of geopolitics, economics, and production factors" as it pertains to energy (Bremmer, Kupchan, 2023). This will put a further economic strain on each individual European state as it seeks solutions to finding the energy it needs to maintain normalcy within its borders and sustain a healthy economy, though in the interim at the expense of "energy-intensive sectors such as steel, aluminum, and fertilizers, and creating an overall drag on economic growth" (Bremmer, Kupchan, 2023) as each state seeks to curb and ration existing supplies.

Liquified natural gas (LNG) is an option that some states are taking in lieu of Russian gas, but the shipment and storage of LNG is expensive and specialized and will take some time to build the requisite infrastructure. Some states like Germany have also foolishly reduced their energy diversification mix by shutting down the last of its nuclear power plants over concerns that a disaster similar to that of Chernobyl or Fukushima will happen within Germany. Decisions like these will severely limit the energy options European states have to maintain energy security and will limit the ability for the United States to help Europe in its energy issues. Further, some of the remaining options for obtaining energy may run against the grain of U.S. foreign policy and may cause diplomatic tensions as a result. The construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline that transports Russian gas from Vyborg Russia to Lubmin Germany (The Pipeline, n.d.), against the objection of the United States now appears as a black eye on German energy policy since Russia's invasion of Ukraine and shows an embarrassing dependency on Russian energy which is making U.S. efforts to sustain Russian sanctions a shaky endeavor as the Germans now have to make some serious geopolitical and diplomatic decisions between keeping allies or keeping warm.

Regarding these less than favorable options, the EU has been looking to Iran as a potential energy partner but there are still obstacles to overcome in this consideration; U.S. sanctions targeting Iranian oil and petrochemical sales have made dealing with the Iranians difficult where European companies that deal with the Islamic Republic could also be at risk of their own sanctions by the U.S. (US issues more Iran sanctions amid stalled diplomacy, 2023). Even if some European states circumvent the U.S. sanctions at their own economic peril, Iranian gas, though produced voluminously, is produced primarily for the Iranian domestic market and any remaining supply may not adequately satisfy the demand needed by importing states; additionally, Iran also “lacks the proper infrastructure to export significant amounts of oil to Europe because of years of chronic underinvestment” (Coffey, 2022).

Other pipeline alternatives are in operation or have been considered. The Southern Gas Corridor, which opened in 2020, supplies gas from the Azeri gas fields in the Caspian Sea, transiting through the Caucasus and overland through Türkiye to its terminus point in Southern Italy has brought gas to the Continent but critics of the pipeline contend that the costly project has not adequately met the energy needs of these importing European states and will further strengthen the authoritarian regime of Ilham Aliyev in Azerbaijan through increased gas revenues (Southern Gas Corridor, n.d.). Other pipeline initiatives like the NABUCCO pipeline that would also have brought Azeri gas through Türkiye was summarily aborted despite strong U.S. and European support as it was Russian energy leverage and influence in the region that successfully nixed the project.

Despite the initiatives that the Europeans are making now to circumvent the Russian energy supply that primarily transits through a now war-torn Ukraine, European efforts should have been addressed long ago. Coffey (2022) notes that "frankly, Europe should have seen this coming (yet) Europe's addiction to cheap energy created a situation of collective denial when it came to the degree of dependency on Russia." Building partnerships and infrastructure to the energy-rich states of Central Asia now has too many obstacles to overcome and a long lead time to build the necessary infrastructure to address the energy insecurity many European states are experiencing now. Soft power initiatives may now only work in incremental amounts due to a lack of a broader energy policy for a larger, more influential EU.

Challenges for the Central Asian States

Energy-rich states like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan see the EU's extreme dependency on Russian energy as a golden opportunity for a win-win between Europe and themselves to satisfy two energy security needs. As stated previously, Central Asian energy traverses north through Russia via Soviet-era pipeline infrastructure where the Russian government majority-controlled Gazprom purchases the energy and converts it for its own sale to Europe. Harbert in her address to the Senate subcommittee in 2005 (Energy Supplies in Eurasia and Implications for U.S. Energy Security) identified that "one of the most significant issues for Eurasian countries is increasing resource development and production" that includes extraction and production technologies and infrastructure to transit the energy in more than one cardinal direction. If there was a time geopolitically, diplomatically, and economically that such energy infrastructure should have been constructed to help these Central Asian states build their energy sector, it should have been in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union where an increased projection of soft power would have paid dividends. While some joint energy projects were created between Western energy corporations and the ruling regimes of these states, the potential for Western governments to enlarge the energy sector in the region was not realized and that opportunity appears to have been lost to Russia and China, as well as other regional powers like India and Iran, for the moment. Western influence through soft power in Central Asia also may have been compromised by corporate greed by the Western energy companies that worked with these regimes to build their energy economies through investment contracts. Harbert noted in Kazakhstan there had been a feeling in President Nursultan Nazarbayev's government that past agreements with foreign investors were too generous" (Energy Supplies in Eurasia and Implications for U.S. Energy Security, 2005) implying that these arrangements with Western corporations were not fully benefitting the Kazakh people and the West was exploiting Kazakh resources.

Another major issue beyond the lack of energy infrastructure found in these Central Asian states to produce and move oil to the global market are the geopolitical concerns found in each state that makes foreign external investment a major risk moving forward. Harbert addressed in 2005 three geopolitical and diplomatic issues that still seem to be plaguing the region today; 1) a lack of agreement "among the five littoral states (concerning) the Caspian Sea's oil and natural gas resources" and the sovereign claims of these resources, 2) the heavy-handed legal and regulatory laws that some of these countries have for potential foreign investors and the lack of transparency and corruption that are found in these regimes, and 3) the increasing centralization of energy companies that are influenced by their respective government for their use as leverage in international affairs. (Energy Supplies in Eurasia and Implications for U.S. Energy Security, 2005). While foreign powers and states see the great potential in energy investment and energy security that could be achieved in Central Asia, it is the Central Asian regimes themselves that are often hampering their own initiatives to remove themselves from Russian energy infrastructure dependency.

American Policy Recommendations

Since Asst. Secretary Harbert's comments to the Senate in 2005 to the present day, American foreign policy concerning energy in Central Asia has been stuck in neutral. While the focus in Central Asia since 9/11 has been primarily centered on security in Afghanistan and helping the individual states in the region to eradicate terrorism and extremism, the United States has allowed Russia to re-exert its influence in its former republics and has allowed China to project soft power through investment in these states with the goal of building it Belt and Road Initiative. While the U.S. has declared its commitment to the sovereignty of these states, these declarations do not equate to a formidable influence of U.S. energy policy in the region. Beyond the security initiatives in place from U.S. foreign policy in Central Asia, Charap and Peterson (2011) emphasize that "U.S. interests and priorities can and should be examined in a different light (through) a fundamental reimagining of Eurasia." Several experts and observers on Eurasia, U.S. foreign policy in the region, and Central Asian energy potential have offered a variety of recommendations that on their face coincide with the new realities that have been created by other states' interest in the region and the lack of emphasis that caused a vacuum of influence that the United States created from its own doing by ignoring energy initiatives and opportunities in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. On the diplomatic side, the United States should see the Central Asian states not merely as governments with energy resources that do not know how to find it, bring it to the surface, and take it to market while exploiting these technology deficient states to the exclusive benefit of Western energy firms but rather treat these states in a more direct and bilateral way. By using diplomatic policy as “bargaining chips” or comparing these Eurasian states’ relationships with other countries relative to the relationship they have with America, it will force these countries to choose between these courting states. At this juncture, the U.S. does not hold the advantage as Russia and China hold stronger cultural, historical, lingual, and geographical ties to Central Asia. By treating these states as equal partners in the realm of energy and not as vassal states will set the foundations for stronger relations in the region. Such pragmatism would result in greater “transparency and win-win opportunities, while simultaneously rejecting Russian notions of “spheres of influence” and antiquated zero-sum arguments from the Eurasian governments themselves.” (Charap and Peterson, 2011)

Additionally, another recommendation is to provide for an effective balance of projecting American influence in Central Asia while maximizing gains through those efforts. While the foundations of American foreign policy consists of “promoting democratic institutions to facilitate Western market access to the region (Scott and Alcenat, p. 10), the U.S. must allow for “change be locally driven and focus the U.S. reform agenda on improving social and economic conditions rather than on democracy promotion (and) not condition security cooperation on human rights performance” (Rumer, Sokolsky, and Stronski, 2016). In addition, the United States should not bring up any notion of NATO initiatives that go along with this state-to-state cooperation as such dialogue will only increase tensions with Russia as evident with geopolitical situations in Ukraine and Georgia, both former Soviet republics. With Russia already trying to reaffirm control over Kazakh, Turkmen, and Uzbek energy, any indications of making promises to these states through better security arrangements over the Russian and Chinese led CSTO and SCO, respectively, will be seen as a geopolitical threat to Russia and China. Rather, The United

States should find opportunities within the region that are outside energy initiatives such as forging agreements and alliances to counter terrorism and extremism, both common security concerns shared by both the U.S. and Russia, as well as China and the Central European states. At the same time, the U.S. should "avoid militarizing U.S. policy by overreacting to the threat of Islamic extremism" (Rumer, Sokolsky, and Stronski, 2016) as the majority of these states are demographically Islamic in majority and by explicitly placing a religious identifier to such extremism can have adverse ideological implications that can affect any established relations between the U.S. and these states. By finding areas of cooperation with Russia and China, the United States can discretely 'chip away' at and undermine Russian hegemonic ambitions in the region and can effectively engage with these Eurasian states in the realm of energy.

With the prospect of a more engaging diplomatic relationship between Russia and China, the U.S. should realize that it cannot take on such a two-headed monster. As such, by finding these common goal opportunities can be a way of what the Eurasian political scientist Thomas Graham identifies as an effective counterbalance towards China (Graham, 2019, p. 20). Yet, Graham also stresses that the United States should not seek to turn Russia and China away from each other as such an endeavor would be an "impossible task." Thus, the United States, as profound and incredulous as it may sound, should avoid the hawkish stance in Central Asia and "recognize that the United States shares some interests with Russia and China" while at the same time harnessing Russian and Chinese foreign policy actions to further advance U.S. interests to its benefit. (Rumer, Sokolsky, and Stronski, 2016). These energy policy initiatives also need to be realistic and long-term to establish lasting relationships so that the greater policy areas of democracy promotion and free market initiatives can take root and flourish in Central Asia.

By establishing security and stability in Central Asia with the cooperation of Russia and China all involved, the region will be able to attract more foreign investment and make arrangements with transparent regimes in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. More importantly, and to ensure enduring energy agreement arrangements with states like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, the U.S. should also put these states' interests at the forefront. Anything less will cause these states to turn to their larger regional neighbors who can offer better incentives and thus claim a larger share of Eurasian energy.

How Will American Recommendations Clash With Chinese and Russian Foreign Policy.

While these recommendations appear dovish and deferential to the interests of Russia and China in the region, the United States must realize that by its own complacency and lack of initiative in energy influence in Central Asia, it has placed itself in this position, thus, it is in no geopolitical or diplomatic position to dictate with a heavy hand how to guide the energy industry in the region. The recommendations mentioned formerly represent an opportunistic way to a path of least resistance of ensuring energy security for not only the West, but also for China and Russia, and more importantly the origin states from which the energy comes from. The energy policies and challenges that each global power player identified in this work, the U.S., EU, Russia, and China, interact with each other in a tangled and complex web that affects not only these actors but a wider arc of energy dependent and supplier states in different ways. American sanctions on Russian energy exports affects its European allies resulting in Russian gas moving to markets in Asia, particularly India and China. Lack of energy diversification in Europe because of a fragmented energy security construct drives the countries of the EU to seek less than desirable partners in the form of Iran or drive these states to go against American-led initiatives against authoritarian energy states and buy from them. For many countries in Europe, it literally is a life and death situation. For the U.S. to try to contain China from making any geopolitical and diplomatic gains in Central Asia invites broader external tensions and drives Russia and China into a formidable partnership arrangement to drive U.S. interests out of the region. Thomas Graham notes that the "U.S. intelligence community warns that 'China and Russia are more aligned than at any point since the mid-1950s, and the relationship is likely to strengthen'" (Graham, p. 17). Similar sentiments have also been echoed by the political scientist and energy expert Ariel Cohen who cautions the creation of a closer Chinese-Russian partnership that would have the efficacy to monopolize Central Asian energy for itself, impose imperialistic conditions in the region, and effectively kickout U.S. interests in Central Asia (Scott and Alcenat, 2008). But the prospect of a lasting Sino-Russo relationship between Putin and Xi is not a guarantee. While both sharing a common rival in the United States, both states' energy security and geopolitical challenges are uniquely distinct. Any slight dispute over energy resources in Central Asia could ignite broader geopolitical tensions. This would not be anything new; despite similar political ideologies in the 1950s, Russian and Chinese ideologies diverged in such a way that nearly sparked a war between the two powers. Something similar could evolve again. But as it stands now the "burgeoning Russo-Chinese partnership threatens to dominate both East Asia and the heart of Eurasia" (Graham, p. 17) and constrains and limits the United States' ability to project its foreign policy in not only Central Asia, but more broadly the entire continent of Asia.

The current U.S. foreign policy on sanctions against Russia over its invasion of Ukraine and to a lesser extent sanctions imposed on Iran over its nuclear weapons ambitions harms more than those two states. With the global COVID pandemic beginning to recede resulting in a quicker global economic recovery, China looks to ramp up its economy that requires large imports of energy which will affect current supplies and drive up prices due to increased global demand. Though Russia will only too happily sell its energy supply to China (even at discounted prices) the heavy demand of China's energy needs will be felt on a broader scale. Bremmer and Kupchan (2023) note that these "high oil prices will place a heavy burden on poorer developing countries (causing) emerging markets (to) chip away at the Western sanctions regime by continuing to trade with Russia" (Bremmer and Kupchan, 2023). In something similar to an escalating arms race, the U.S. would likely strike back at some of these states with secondary sanctions for breaking ranks with the United States in its efforts to cripple the Russian economy to halt its war with Ukraine. Such activity on both sides can only result in a geopolitical escalation beyond energy consumption, supply, and price.

As it pertains to the energy-rich states of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, the diplomatic sabre rattling and rhetoric of the great powers of pushing each other out of the region does not extract the fossil fuels out of the ground any faster nor bring it to market. No infrastructure gets built which results in lower supply of energy globally. The Central Asian states do not want to be involved politically and ideologically in a situation that forces them to choose sides as it relates to geography, culture, religion, and regime choice. What it wants is an energy consensus that economically can benefit all involved. Hawkish policy exhibited by these great powers vying for influence and most importantly hawkish U.S. energy policy as it pertains to the Central Asian states may do more harm than good. In the midst of the struggle for influence in Central Asia that may be dubbed the "New Great Game" it seems as if all the major powers forgot about the most important players that may wield the greatest power in the game – the former Soviet republics in Central Asia. Any excessive policy exerted on these states will cause the other powers to react adversely to prevent the hegemonic ambitions of that state. But these Central Asian states still hold one invaluable asset that comes with sovereignty, that asset being choice. The most attractive policy will be the one that respects the sovereignty of these energy states, puts their interests first, and permits a type of inclusivity that prevents that asset of choice to be invoked and allows every state to benefit from Central Asian energy without the prospect of conflict. Outside of a geopolitical and realist paradigm which energy policy and security often finds itself in, this inclusive path is ideally the path of least resistance and should be applied as such in U.S. energy policy for Central Asia.

Conclusion

In 2005 Harbert asserted that Eurasian energy production “will, and will continue to be, a significant contribution to world markets” (Energy Supplies in Eurasia and Implications for U.S. Energy Security, 2005). The current and future potential for Central Asian energy is too much of a prize to fail at achieving due to either poor or non-existent foreign energy policy for the region. The United States for much too long was complacent on creating, implementing, and asserting efficient energy policy to Eurasia. Thomas Graham sought to explain the complacency exhibited by Washington through an erroneous assessment of a Russian projection of power in the region just after the collapse of the Soviet Union which should have been the optimum time for which the U.S. to begin its efforts of cooperation in the region with not only the new states of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, but also a new Russia that tried to seek warmer relations with the West. Today, it is not only complacency that is hurting American energy interests in the region but also a narrow view of “a misreading of current Russo-Chinese cooperation” in Central Asia that seeks to kick out the United States. (Graham, p. 17). Chinese sympathy for Russia due in part to Western-led sanctions on Russian energy has created a win-

win arrangement for both China and Russia that may level the diplomatic and geopolitical playing field and has the potential to create broader tensions as Russia and China seek to upend the current world order dictated by the U.S. and its allies. While Graham notes that Russia has the ability to play "different roles from the standpoint of U.S. interests at opposite ends of the Eurasian landmass" (Graham, p. 20) where in Ukraine it is an adversary (though both states are *not* actively engaged on the battlefield), but the potential to collaborate as a partner in Central Asia for regional security can exist due to common security concerns. While Russia does see its former Central Asian republics to the south as its "near-abroad" and its "backyard" thus "employing a defensive strategy" in the region (Scott and Alcenat, p. 20) the United States can find a route in Eurasia through soft power initiatives that does not appear threatening to Russia provided that geopolitical alliances are not promised outside the realm of energy security that is inclusive for all who wish to participate.

In 1904 when Halford Mackinder submitted his article titled *The Geographical Pivot of History* to the Royal Geographical society, he may not have understood fully the impact his "Heartland Theory" and the dictum which is ascribed to it had on international affairs in the 20th and 21st centuries. Additionally, Mackinder may not have fully realized the vast known and potential reserves of Central Asian oil and gas that lies just under the surface and which now plays an important role in the geopolitics of the region, especially as it relates to the foreign policies of the United States, Russia, China, and the EU; resulting in the "convergence of the major powers in the area (which) has fueled competition and generated potential for conflict, thereby creating uncertainty in the political development of the countries" (Scott and Alcenat, p. 6).

Geopolitical conflict that revolves around the control for energy resources creates disruption of the world order, impedes progress, potentially destroys energy infrastructure, and causes a wider crisis of energy insecurity globally; this was seen in Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. The one arrogant decision by an overconfident and authoritarian dictator resulted in the eventual fall of his rule, the fall of his country, a heavy American military presence in the Middle East and later, Afghanistan that lasted for three decades. The United States cannot withstand another multi-decade military intervention over energy security and supply in a new hotly contested region of the world. While some American policymakers and politicians want to operate under a realist perspective when it comes to energy security seeking a head on confrontation mano-y-mano, the more pragmatic approach to American foreign policy in energy security in Central Asia should be viewing the region under a new lens of cooperation and to find opportunities in a paradigm they constructed due to complacency and inaction during the brief unipolar moment of American supremacy after the Cold War that the United States felt would last forever. Time never stands still. In a speech to the 14th annual convention for Americans for Democratic Action on May 12, 1961, President John F. Kennedy told the audience "There are risks and costs to a program of action. But they are far less than the long-range risks and costs of comfortable inaction" (Times Call For Liberal Action, Says Kennedy, 1961). We need to move from comfortable inaction to an active policy of energy security in Central Asia.

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