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15 September 2023 – Online Expert Discussion

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On 15 September 2023, the Centre for Eurasian Studies of St. Petersburg State University together with the Centre for Euro-Asian Studies at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) and the Information and Analytical Centre of Lomonosov Moscow State University organized an online expert discussion dedicated to the analysis of the US “Greater Central Asia” project (GCA) in the current conjuncture of power competition in Eurasia.

The GCA concept was conceived in 2005 by the American think-tank “Central Asia–Caucasus Institute” (CACI) and adopted by the Bush Administration. The mind driving the effort, Richard Starr, a professor at Johns Hopkins University, introduced it as a comprehensive plan for a new, big scale, partnership between the five post-Soviet republics of Central Asia and Afghanistan, such to orient the former away from the rest of the ex-USSR towards the Indian sub-continent, of course, under Western guidance<sup>1</sup>. Those were the years of the initial phase of the US occupation of Afghanistan under Hamid Karzai, so that the plan fitted the imperative to support that unpopular power imposed by Washington. At the same time, the GCA served also a quite larger design. To grasp it, one should have a look to the profile of its inventor<sup>2</sup>. An archaeologist by formation, with the unipolar moment of US foreign policy at the beginning of the 1990s, Starr was nominated to chair the Aspen institute, a think-tank of global reach intended to spread US soft-power across the world<sup>3</sup>. Under Clinton presidency, Starr specialized in geopolitics on the footsteps of Z. Brzezinski’s “Great Chessboard” conception. The GCA was thus just one of the strategic devices to assure Zibg’s dream of American supremacy. However, his idea received a serious set-back already on the very year of its announcement: in summer 2005 the US broke ties with Uzbekistan, then the principal referent of the Washington’s strategy for Central Asia<sup>4</sup>. Rebranded as “New Silk Road”, the GCA concept of merging Central and South Asia resurfaced again with Hillary Clinton as Secretary

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. F. Starr, *A “Greater Central Asia Partnership” for Afghanistan and Its Neighbors*, Silk Road Paper, Central Asia–Caucasus Institute, March 2005, <https://silkroadstudies.org/CACI/Strategy.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> On Starr’s character see K. Silverstein, *The Professor of Repression*, Harper’s Magazine, 24 mai 2006, <https://harpers.org/sb-professor-repression-3284828.html>.

<sup>3</sup> It suffices to have a look to the Italian branch of the Institute. Here, the actual deputy chair is John Elkann, heir of the former main industrial complex of Italy and current master of some of the main newspapers still able to form public opinion in Italy. Current premier Giorgia Meloni was also coopted during her climb to power as they were before Romano Prodi, Renato Brunetta e Giancarlo Giorgetti, the latter being the minister calling the shots of the economic strategy of the current government. See: <https://open.online/2021/02/03/giorgia-meloni-aspen-institute/>

<sup>4</sup> F. Viller, *Les États-Unis en Asie centrale : Chronique d’une défaite annoncée*, «Outre-terre – Revue française de géopolitique», n. 17, 2006, pp. 263-277.

of State but it was soon archived again following her departure from the White House. The idea is now coming up again. Already last year, Starr published a GCA 2.0 project<sup>5</sup> and this return is quite surprising since it takes place after that Washington has lost its grip on the Afghan GCA pivot.

The aim of the 15 September round table was precisely to discuss which could be the reasons and the meaning of the new GCA hypostasis. To such end, the event's coordinator, professor **Alexander Knyazev** managed to gather a number of highly qualified experts from Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Russia. In addition, also Vision & Global Trends was invited in order to have an European perspective on the issue.

Professor Knyazev opened the brainstorming asking for a tour the table of opinions about the possible objectives of the current GCA "reincarnation". Rinat Burnashev, a professor intervening from Kazakhstan, singled out a constant in all the GCA appearances. Every time, for the USA it is a matter to put the burden of the consequences of American regional strategy on the shoulders of neighbouring countries. This was the main US concern in 2005 when Washington first realized that it was unable to deal with the Afghan quagmire and such purpose remains relevant up to our days.

Another expert from Russia (AVB), rightly observed how the GCA aims always fell **short of the number of resources that Washington and its allies were ready to invest** in the region. A reorientation of Central Asian external connectivity on the scale announced by the GCA strategy would require hundred of billions, the Western investments in the region have always remained at a scale one hundred times lower.

One of the participants from MGIMO happened to be on scholarship at Johns Hopkins University during the years of GCA gestation. He remembered the fervour then accompanying public discussion of the new strategy, suggesting how the **ideological dimension** has always been prominent in it. This also implies that the concept returns without no specific novelties.

From these first observations it results how the GCA is characterized on one side by its academic, wishful-thinking dimension. As the current US strategy for Central Asia reads, this is "a geostrategic region important to United States national security"<sup>6</sup>. Which could be those interests asked a participant? With all evidence, the geostrategic location next to Russia, China and Iran, so that the GCA, like most of the other Western strategies for the region boil down to the motto: "everyone but Russia, China and Iran". Vision and Global expert Fabrizio Vielmini called the US strategies similar to the GCA "diversions on continental scale". Their aims are not to create regional order but rather to either interferes with the plans of the competitors or consolidates coalition of vassals functional to its geostrategic interests. Indeed, the years pass but the Mackinder formula on the imperative of Heartland division remains as an authentic obsession shaping the US interest towards the region, as one can find also in the latest US analysis devoted to the region<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> S. F. Starr, *Rethinking Greater Central Asia: American and Western Stakes in the Region and How to Advance Them*, Silk Road Paper, Central Asia–Caucasus Institute, June 2022, <https://silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/220615-Starr-Final.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> *United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019-2025. Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity*, February 2020, <https://state.gov/united-states-strategy-for-central-asia-2019-2025-advancing-sovereignty-and-economic-prosperity/>

<sup>7</sup> For instance: "As Sir Halford Mackinder theorized over a century ago in "The Geographical Pivot of History," whoever controlled the "Heartland"—in which modern-day Central Asia lies—would emerge as the greatest actor on the international stage. Those thoughts echo today, not through control but through influence, and the United States must ensure it doesn't remain on the periphery" in H. Stoll, *A Case for Greater U.S. Engagement in Central Asia*, Commentary, RAND, 11.09.2023, <https://rand.org/blog/2023/09/a-case-for-greater-us-engagement-in-central-asia.html>

The GCA concept continues to sound odd and unnatural to local hears. In particular, its core idea of making Afghanistan the hub and organizing factor for the whole Central Asian space. To this regard, senior researcher at the Institute of State and Law of the Uzbekistani Academy of Sciences R.R. Nazarov stressed that, despite the common ancient past, Central Asians consider contemporary Afghanistan as culturally alien – the Amu Darya River, which marks for hundreds of kilometers the border between former Soviet Asia and Afghanistan being a sort of “chronological frontier”. As a result, the kind of regional combination foreseen by the GCA concept cannot be accepted by locals.

Bakhtior Ergashev, the director of the Uzbekistan think-tank “Mano”, pointed out the principal new factor underpinning the context for US geopolitical manoeuvring in the region. Namely, the **current government in Tashkent is interacting with Afghanistan based on the national interests** of the country. And the Uzbekistani national strategy see in **cooperation with Iran** a priority so that in the future connectivity with South Asia will be considered in first instance through that direction. This will not avoid the Afghan territory since communications will also take the Mazar I Sharif-Herat direction. It can be noted that such a development will also be appreciated by Teheran, for whom those Afghan regions have always been considered as important for its national security.

Further to this point, many participants observed, the current conjuncture is characterized by a more prominent engagement of Russia in the southern dimension of Central Asian geopolitics. Indeed, following the NATO-fed conflict in Ukraine, Moscow has started to be more consequent in the realization of the North-South transport corridor through the Caspian and Iran towards the Indian Ocean. With the global confrontation provoked by the war, China appears to be sympathetic to this Russian effort and thus assisting in building up connectivity along the South Asia-Central Asia route.

At the same time, a leading Russian expert on the region, Stanislav Pritchkin, commented that despite the more variegated conjuncture and the virtual character of the GCA, the US influence in the region is advancing by inertia. The vehicle for such a penetration are hundreds of young specialists, usually dwelling in the main regional urban centres, who, over the years, received education or some sort of grant support paid by Washington or the European subordinated capitals. Exactly Starr’s CACI has been one of the main standard bearers at the forefront of this effort, through the joint programs it established with structure like the Atlantic Council and the Rumsfeld Foundation. The latter in particular, named after Donald Rumsfeld, “the worst secretary of defense in American history” as one of the main responsible for US wars of aggression under G. W. Bush<sup>8</sup>, starting in 2008 has over the years reached to hundreds of young leaders, journalists and academics from Central Asia, bringing many of them directly to the United States<sup>9</sup>. This mass of people, nowadays often placed on positions close to the political power or such to influence public opinions in the region, are set to be increasingly relevant in the definition of the political agendas of the republics.

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<sup>8</sup> G. Packer, *How Rumsfeld Deserves to Be Remembered*, “The Atlantic”, 01.07.2021.

<sup>9</sup> This is the mission of the Rumsfeld Fellowship Program and of CAMCA (Central Asia–Mongolia–Caucasus–Afghanistan) a yearly regional forum conceived by Donald H. Rumsfeld in person to gather young leaders from the mentioned former Soviet countries and expose them to the influence of high-ranking Atlantic personalities. The 2016 Forum took place in Tbilisi, Georgia, with Rumsfeld, Ambassador R. James Woolsey and then Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili and Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili. See: <https://www.silkroadstudies.org/fellowship.html>

Some kind of activation of these networks might be soon to come: as the military situation in Ukraine turns into another disaster of the American foreign policy, Central Asia is set to become a privileged object of Washington's attention. This is what Russian Foreign Minister S. Lavrov called the "second front" against Russia. Vision & Global's specialist F. Vielmini said that in this perspective, Kazakhstan and especially its former capital, Almaty, has already been and is set to further grow into the most sensitive point in the region. Here one can find an explosive mixture of large layers of former and current beneficiaries of Western endowments, a perceivable effect of pro-Ukrainian propaganda, the existence of an Islamist underground and a solid background of traditional anti-Chinese feelings. With a skillful manipulation, the combination of these factors can result in a second general uprising similar to the one already witnessed in January 2022.

Indeed, the history of the GCA concept points out to the relevance of Kazakhstan for this American strategy. Prof. Knyazev recalled how since its inception, when Kasym-Jomart Tokaev was Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kazakhstan has always been the main respondent and supporter in the region.

Another Russian expert added to this dimension by remembering how diversified Western activities in the region are. In facts, Washington and its European subordinates act in each republic according to their specific vulnerabilities so that to be able to leverage a broad spectrum of issues relevant to Central Asia security, such as water management or the stability of ethnically sensitive regions as for example Karakalpakistan in Uzbekistan. To this regard, the director of the Tauride Information Analytical Center, A.V. Bedritsky, pointed out a relevant characteristic of the Anglo-American strategy in the region. Dealing with societies which in their majority structurally reject the liberal values of their civilization, the Anglo-Saxons, in their effort to turn away the region from Russia and now also from China, regularly end up in making appeal to locals' nationalistic feelings.

Evidence that Washington is preparing new moves for its Central Asian policy are to be found in the exceptional pace of Western diplomatic missions reaching out to the region at the highest level. The latest move in the aftermath of the virtual roundtable was the C5+ 1 (Central Asia states + the USA) summit organized on the sidelines of the 78th session of the UN General Assembly in New York. For the first time ever, the event took place at the level of heads of State, with impaired US President Joe Biden as a chair. The US President called the meeting "a historic moment" for the US "cooperation" with the region, "grounded in our shared commitment to sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity". New initiatives are on the pipeline. In October, USAID, the American aid agency, whose activities have often been a cover for intelligence in the region, will convene a C5+1 "Regional Connectivity" ministerial meeting. Since the 1990s, the central piece of the Anglo-American strategy for Eurasia is the diversion of regional connections across the Caspian Sea, so that to exclude Russia and Iran. The US and EU multiply now support for investment to develop a Trans-Caspian Trade Route (so-called "Middle Corridor") through the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (a collaborative effort by Group of Seven to fund infrastructure projects in developing countries).<sup>10</sup> Moreover, with the escalation of international imperialist competition following NATO-provoked war in Europe, the US and other Western corporations are scrambling into the region to get control of rare earths and other strategic resources before Russian and Chinese

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<sup>10</sup> M.K. Bhadrakumar, *Russia scrambles as EU surges in Caucasus*, Indian Punchline, 23.09.2023. <https://indianpunchline.com/russia-scrambles-as-eu-surges-in-caucasus/>

actors, an effort of which Kazakhstan is again the main target<sup>11</sup>. In this perspective, USAID will organize a “C5+1 Critical Minerals Dialogue “to develop Central Asia’s vast mineral wealth and advance critical minerals security”.

Summarizing, threatening clouds are looming over the geopolitical horizon of Central Asia. Apart from the wisdom of local politicians, the key to regional stability will be the capacity of China, Russia and Iran to prevent provocations and to coordinate their efforts in order to prevent a descent into chaos of the region, which will be fateful for all the actors in Eurasia.

## THE AUTHOR



[Fabrizio Vielmini](#) is associate professor of International Relations at Webster University in Tashkent (Uzbekistan), associate researcher of Vision & Global Trends. International Institute for Global Analyzes and member of the Editorial Committee of Geopolitics. He is an expert in foreign policy, history and affairs of Russia, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Between 2002 and 2021 he resided in the former USSR, where he worked for the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) and the European Union. For over a quarter of a century, he has dedicated himself to the study of the political-economic dynamics of Kazakhstan, the country in which he lived for a long time and the subject of his latest essay: *Kazakhstan: fine di un'epoca. Trent'anni di neoliberalismo e geopolitica nel cuore della Terra (Kazakhstan: end of an era. Thirty years of neoliberalism and geopolitics in the heart of the Earth)* Preface by Aldo Ferrari Ca' Foscari University – Venice) - Mimesi Edizioni, 2023 – ISBN: 9788857590431

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<sup>11</sup> A. Kurmanov, *Kak i v 90-e gody pri Nazarbaeve strategicheskije mestorozhdenija zakhvatyvajutsja zapadnymi korporatsijami*, 19.07.2023, [https://socialism.kz/index.php?newsid=727&fbclid=IwAR3-8aBJxid7NQOdP4OwIYLv6LXob1eWIyTgsM0YYx-7Xh\\_PgCmTZKLdmk](https://socialism.kz/index.php?newsid=727&fbclid=IwAR3-8aBJxid7NQOdP4OwIYLv6LXob1eWIyTgsM0YYx-7Xh_PgCmTZKLdmk)







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