

EU STRATEGY ON CENTRAL ASIA: REALPOLITIK AFTER ALL

By Cornelius Graubner (05/14/2008 issue of the CACI Analyst)

Almost a year after the adoption of the EU Strategy on Central Asia, the prioritization of issues within EU-Central Asian cooperation have become clearer. The planning stage of the strategy was marked by a controversy between proponents of an interest-based approach focusing on energy and security, led by Germany; and supporters of a value-based approach that stressed the importance of human rights and democratization, led by the UK, Ireland, the Netherlands and Sweden. Hence, the strategy paper represented the minimal consensus among member states. Today, in spite of rhetoric, it has become clearer that in the implementation stage of the strategy the proponents of *realpolitik* have prevailed.

BACKGROUND: On closer inspection of the strategy paper and its annexes one cannot help but noticing that rather than a fully-fledged political strategy, one is looking at a framework paper outlining a handful of issues that are deemed to be of some importance. This loftiness is very likely a result of the different views among EU member states during the planning stage. Noticeably absent are benchmarks of any kind. This renders an independent monitoring or evaluation of the progress of the strategy in general, but especially in the area of human rights and rule of law, all but impossible. Nonetheless, EU officials are enthusiastic about the progress of the strategy's implementation, saying that the results of the first year have exceeded initial expectations. They point to the increased numbers of meetings between EU officials and regional elites, and the prospect of opening more EU member states embassies and EC delegations in the region. In private conversation, however, some officials also acknowledge that progress in the areas of human rights and rule of law is difficult to achieve. Insiders of the human rights dialogues with Uzbekistan report that judging from their behavior, members of the Uzbek delegation in Ashgabat were obviously not interested in conducting a serious dialogue on the issue.

Another peculiarity that generates doubt about the importance attached to human rights and rule of law issues is that the strategy's implementation is an exclusive, elite-driven process. Members of civil society organisations or academics in Central Asia say that neither the EU nor their governments have consulted them on any of the issues at any time and that local public knowledge about the strategy and its contents is virtually non-existent. Until very recently, the strategy paper was not publicly available in Russian language and has yet to be translated in any of the region's local languages. EU officials say that the EC delegations in the region would step up efforts to disseminate information on the strategy, but also point out that by now, the strategy is in the implementation phase, and continue to meet with regional elites behind closed doors.

Senior EU officials themselves have added to the impression that human rights and rule of law are not a top priority in EU-Central Asia relations. Pierre Morel, EU Special Representative for Central Asia, named as most pressing issues terrorism, extremism, water distribution and climate change in a recent interview with a Kazakh newspaper. Only when the journalist pressed on and asked directly, Pierre Morel acknowledged that free speech and other human rights were also important. Furthermore, members of Mr. Morel's staff say that they are very careful to avoid creating any "double standards" by singling out any of the states for criticism on their human rights record. This approach benefits the countries with the most severe record of human rights abuses in Central Asia – Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan – and discriminates against other countries with less severe human rights issues, for example Kazakhstan, by placing them in the same basket.

IMPLICATIONS: The existence of a structured human rights dialogue with Uzbekistan alone or the number of meetings during which human rights issues were discussed is insufficient as a

measure of success, if the EU is serious about its commitment to making rule of law and human rights integral parts of its Central Asia Strategy.

Some analysts have pointed out that Europe's approach to Central Asia so far has been overly moralistic and therefore counterproductive. They argue that if the EU puts too much emphasis on issues such as rule of law and human rights, it will push the Central Asian states to seek even closer cooperation with Russia and China and thus thwart the EU's prospects to diversify the sources of its energy imports. This argument, however, has its limits. First, all the regimes in the region are pursuing a multi-vectored foreign policy and regime elites are extremely anxious not to become too dependent on either Russia or China. The EU gas deal with Turkmenistan, which came less than a year after a deal with Russia and Kazakhstan that at that time was perceived as a "huge blow" to the energy security aspirations of Brussels and Washington, has just demonstrated this point. Second, energy reserves in the region itself are limited. On a net level Uzbekistan is an energy importer, while both Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have already contracted most of their energy export either to Russia or China. Third, even if Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan agree to export a larger share of their energy exports to Europe, viable export options bypassing Russia are unlikely to be realized in the short or even medium term. Neither the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline nor the Nabucco project have moved significantly beyond the planning stage and, even if realized, won't be supplying gas to European consumers until at least 2013 in a best-case scenario.

Still, the analysts are right that in a region where the concept of democracy is mainly associated with economic downturn, mass disorder and the image of a drunken Boris Yeltsin, pushing for more democracy might not yield the desired results. However, emphasizing the promotion of good governance instead of the promotion of democracy could solve the image problem of an ideologically charged terminology while retaining the underlying contents. Also, a sound concept of promoting good governance addresses the inherent weaknesses that some of the region's states face, while working to remedy them. The EU, which is perceived as honest broker in the region, has the credibility to press for such changes without being accused of pursuing an imperialist agenda or bringing instability to the region by supporting more colored revolutions.

CONCLUSIONS: The EU has sound reasons to push for and support these kinds of reforms beyond its legacy as a value-driven organization. Today, the linkages between good governance and positive societal and economic development and security are well documented. Given the many challenges the Central Asian regimes are facing today – amongst the most pressing are the omnipresent corruption, drug trafficking, widespread poverty, unstable and troublesome energy distribution, environmental problems, the current food crisis and unstable economies based largely on the export of natural resources, foreign aid or remittances from workers in Russia – a serious commitment to value-driven issues such as rule of law and human rights on the part of the EU may be more conducive to preserving stability in the region than trying to preserve the current status quo. As things are in Central Asia, it may be that on the medium and long run a value-driven foreign policy might actually help achieve the objectives of an interest-driven foreign policy.

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