

## THE GREATER CENTRAL ASIA PARTNERSHIP INITIATIVE AND ITS IMPACTS ON EURASIAN SECURITY\*

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### ABSTRACT

*Besides the “Tulip Revolution” in Kyrgyzstan, the bloody events in Andijan city of Uzbekistan, decisions adopted in Astana Summit of Shanghai Cooperation Organization; the “The Greater Central Asia Partnership” has been one of the most important subjects of regional debates about Central Asia of the year 2005. This Project can also be considered as an instrument of U.S.’s changing policy towards the region. Being Afghanistan-centered, this project foresees a North-South line with the construction and invigoration of transportation and communication lines between Central Asia and South Asia. It was argued that the main aim of the Project was to challenge Russia’s and China’s influence in Central Asia and to demonstrate the permanent existence of the U.S. in the region. The article argues that the fundamental reason for security threats in the region basically stems from the poverty problem, and, in this framework, the “Greater Central Asia Partnership” may provide significant benefits to this region’s security.*

**Key Words:** *Central Asia, Greater Central Asia Partnership, USA, Russia, Poverty*

### INTRODUCTION

Greater Central Asia Partnership (GCAP) was brought into agenda by S. Frederick Starr, chairman of the Washington-based Central Asia and Caucasus

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Institute. Starr published a 36-page-long paper titled “A Greater Central Asia Partnership for Afghanistan and Its Neighbors” in March 2005. He has clarified GCAP detail publishing an article in a respected academic journal *Foreign Affairs* in July/August 2005 issue. Later on, this initiative was discussed in Kabul Conference in April 2006. The First International Kabul Conference on Continental Trade and Transport was organized jointly by the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program and The Institute of World Economy and Policy (IWEP) of the First Kazakhstan President Foundation. In this article, I will examine the main texts and try to state the positive and the negative sides of GCAP. The significance of the subject derives from the fact that GCAP initiative has been supported by the US State Department, and has considerable effects on Central and Southern Asia policy of the US.

The security matter of Central Asia has been of great interest since late 1980s, when the Soviet Union was in a steady collapse process. The importance of the issue became more evident after the emergence of five new states in the region. These newly independent states, which turned out to be the focus of superpowers due to rich natural resources, were confronted with various threats besides the struggle for domination over them. Security concerns faced by the states include a combination of social disorder, crime, corruption, Islamic extremism, terrorism, ethnic and civil conflicts, border tensions, water and transport disputes, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), illegal narcotics, etc.

The majority of these concerns have been directly related with “poverty”, which is the apparent fact of the region. Thus, it seems impossible to preserve the stability of the region unless permanent solutions for the prevention of poverty are found. In this respect, I will try to expose how GCAP can make essential contributions to the regional security.

### **Poverty and Security of Greater Central Asia**

When the USSR was about to collapse, Central Asian republics were the poorest Soviet republics and the ones with the largest percentage of the population living in poverty.<sup>1</sup> In the first stage of independence material living standards decreased even more because of the fact that substantial intra-USSR transfers for social services such as education and health were ceased. Their transition to market economies after independence also resulted in severe economic hardships for most of the population.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Pomfret & Kathryn Anderson, “Transition and Poverty in Central Asia”, *International Conference on Communist and Post-Communist Societies*, Melbourne, 7-10 July 1998; (<http://www.economics.adelaide.edu.au/staff/pomfret/melbourne.pdf>).

The economies of Central Asia managed to display a successful performance in recent years. However, despite a return to positive economic growth rates since 1996, real output in most countries in the region still remained 10-30 per cent below that of 1989.<sup>2</sup>

More than forty percent of Central Asians live below the poverty line. This ratio is above sixty percent in Tajikistan.<sup>3</sup> Deep poverty under the rule of authoritarian regimes of Central Asia has given rise to widespread suffering, which in turn causes a profound sense of hopelessness. Many people find themselves forced to, in desperation, the cultivation or trafficking of drugs or, out of pure hopelessness, embrace extremist and militant causes.

Central Asian republics, especially Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have very rich natural resources. During the Soviet period their main role was being producers of primary products, especially cotton, energy and minerals. In the Soviet system, ruling elite, “Nomenclature” was the only group to benefit from the revenue of these products. Since the collapse of USSR, old ruling elite has kept their exceptional position. After 15 years of independence, in Central Asian countries the same figures still hold the power and misuse of the revenue cannot be prevented. Nowadays, in Central Asian Republics, while small elite earns vast incomes from the exportation of natural resources, most of the population lives in poverty, just the same as Soviet period. The income earned with the export of certain commodities is distributed among a very small circle of the ruling elite.

Relatively excluding Kazakhstan, in all of these countries, the private sector is very small, the agricultural sector is in crisis, majority of young people are unemployed. In Central Asia around half of the population is under 30. Higher rates of illiteracy, unemployment, poor health, and drug use prevail among Central Asian states. These people are more likely to be victims or perpetrators of violence. Few regions have seen such sharp declines in the welfare of their youth, and the combination of declining living standards with a demographic bulge brings increased risks of political instability and conflict. It is not surprising that young people increasingly seek solutions outside mainstream

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<sup>2</sup> Amarakoon Bandara, Muhammad Hussain Malik and Eugene Gherman, “Some Perspectives on Poverty in Countries of Central Asia”, Meeting of Eminent Persons on Current and Prospective Economic and Social Performance in the ESCAP Region, Bangkok, 14-15 October 2004; ([http://www.unescap.org/pdd/calendar/EPM%202004/paper\\_centralasia.pdf](http://www.unescap.org/pdd/calendar/EPM%202004/paper_centralasia.pdf)).

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), *Environmental Knowledge for Change*; ([http://maps.grida.no/go/graphic/poverty\\_in\\_central\\_asia](http://maps.grida.no/go/graphic/poverty_in_central_asia)).

society through alternative options of religion, violence, extremism or migration.<sup>4</sup>

Kazakhstan is the wealthiest and most stable country in Central Asia, thanks mostly to its oil reserves. But the political system has become increasingly authoritarian, corruption is widespread and rural areas are still very poor.

According to official data, Uzbekistan since the mid-1990s has been growing at around 5 per cent on average, with growth accelerating to around 7 percent in 2004 and 2005. Economic growth has not been reflected in a significant improvement in living standards. Household survey data reveal that around a quarter of the population is poor and around 46 per cent of the population lives on less than US\$ 2.15 per day.<sup>5</sup>

Restriction over small enterprises implemented by Uzbek Government has caused spreading of poverty. According to Uzbek sociologist Bahadır Musayev, Uzbek government is aware of the situation. "Government is afraid of emerging a serious opposition base against to them if they let the small and medium scale business. So they are trying to hinder small business consciously."<sup>6</sup> Uzbek government's efforts to control or close the bazaars, on which the livelihoods of millions depend, have been particularly damaging. Frustrations over economic policies led to increasing unrest in 2004 and 2005. The biggest incident took place in May 2005, in the eastern city of Andijan. The potential for resurgence of unrests in Uzbekistan still remains.<sup>7</sup>

Tajikistan is the poorest and among the most fragile of the CIS countries. Over two thirds of the population continues to live on less than \$2.15 a day. Despite the turn around in economic growth, 64 percent of the population remains below the poverty line.<sup>8</sup> Kyrgyzstan is one of the poorest countries in

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<sup>4</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG), *Youth in Central Asia: Losing the New Generation*, Asia Report, No. 66, Osh/Brussels, 31 October 2003.

<sup>5</sup> World Bank, *Uzbekistan Country Brief*, (<http://www.worldbank.org/uz/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/ECAEXT/UZBEKISTANEXTN/0,,menuPK:294197~pagePK:141132~piPK:141107~theSitePK:294188,00.html>).

<sup>6</sup> Bahadır Musayev, "Pravyaşy Rejim Oblehçæt Vıhod Na Senu Radikalnoy Religioznoy Oppozitsii", *Fergana.ru*. 27 December 2005. (<http://news.ferghana.ru/detail.php?id=8174410098532.7,300,11893678>)

<sup>7</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG), *Uzbekistan: In For The Long Haul*, Asia Briefing, No. 45, Bishkek/Brussels, 16 February 2006, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> World Bank, *Tajikistan Country Brief*, (<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/ECAEXT/TAJIKISTANEXTN/0,,menuPK:287257~pagePK:141132~piPK:141107~theSitePK:258744,00.html>).

the world with about 40 percent of the population below the poverty line.<sup>9</sup> With an authoritarian ex-Communist regime in power and a tribally based social structure, Turkmenistan has also widespread internal poverty.

Despite the progress after the remove of Taliban regime, Afghanistan remains extremely poor, and highly dependent on foreign aid. Much of the population continues to suffer from shortages of housing, clean water, electricity, medical care, and other basic necessities. State and nation building process in Afghanistan is continuing. Afghanistan is the major source of drug trafficking, and instability in the region. Most of the security problems of Central Asia derive from Afghanistan's instability.

Political suppression, economic stagnation and widespread corruption are the common character features of the Greater Central Asia countries. Support for radicalism has partly resulted from bad governance and a lack of democratic reforms and justice that push people to extremism. Their governments are closed systems dominated by elites who use the rhetoric of democracy to secure their international standing, while pursuing authoritarian policies.

The primary step to be taken for the permanent stability in Central Asian countries is to solve the poverty problem. No advancement seems to be achieved in the near future unless current authoritarian regimes and the Moscow-dependent economic systems are replaced. There are various considerable projects initiated by UN, EU, Asia Development Bank and Japan about this issue, and GCAP is among these projects. Nevertheless, there are many different aspects of this particular project.

### **Significance of the Central Asian Region in the US Foreign Policy**

Central Asia was not among the US top foreign policy priorities during the first years of collapse of the USSR. The US went on following the "Russia First" strategy until mid 1990's and undervalued Central Asia compared to other former Soviet territories. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott was the strongest proponent of this strategy. According to this perception, Washington let Russia provide the required stability and security in the regions like Central Asia, which had less priority in the agenda of US, and had many internal problems that US did not want to interfere with. But at this period U.S. energy

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<sup>9</sup> World Bank, *Kyrgyzstan Country Brief*, (<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/ECAEXT/KYRGYZEXTN/0,,menuPK:305770~pagePK:141132~piPK:141107~theSitePK:305761,00.html>).

firms invested in oil and natural gas development in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.<sup>10</sup>

In the second half of 1990s, when US began to realize the vital importance of Central Asia, the region gained priority in American National Security Strategies. Likewise, National Security Strategy released in 1998 clearly revealed the essentiality of the transportation of the region's natural resources to the international markets and the permanent stability of the whole region.<sup>11</sup>

The "Silk Road Strategy Act", accepted in the Congress in 1999, outlined the policies of US towards Central Asia and The Caucasus. The document advocated that the US foreign policy and international aids should be condensed to democracy building, liberal market policies, preservation of human rights and regional economic integration besides their political and economic freedom.<sup>12</sup>

The geopolitical importance of Central Asia increased after the 9/11 attacks and America's military operation in Afghanistan to demolish Taliban regime. Similarly, the importance of Central Asia region for American foreign policy increased even more. The US, which was trying to approach the region through economy and energy, began to surround the region with politic and military means.

Soon after the 9/11 terrorist attacks all the Central Asian states offered over flight and other support to coalition anti-terrorist efforts in Afghanistan. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan have hosted coalition troops and provided access to airbases.

Since the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, the Administration has on many occasions stated that U.S. policy toward Central Asia focused on three inter-related activities: the promotion of security, domestic reforms, and energy development. The September 11 attacks led the Administration to realize that it was critical to the national interests of the United States to enhance its relations with the five Central Asian countries.<sup>13</sup> Post 9/11 the U.S. entered into new arrangements with all the countries of the

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<sup>10</sup> Çağrı Erhan, "ABD'nin Orta Asya Politikaları ve 11 Eylül", Mustafa Aydın (Der.), *Küresel Politikada Orta Asya*, (Ankara: Nobel , 2005), p. 20.

<sup>11</sup> The White House, *A National Security Strategy for a New Century*, Washington, October 1998, pp. 39-41.

<sup>12</sup> *Silk Road Strategy Act of 1999*, 106th CONGRESS, First Session, S. 579; (<http://www.eurasia.net.org/resource/regional/silkroad.html>).

<sup>13</sup> Jim Nichol, "Central Asia: Regional Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests", *CRS Issue Brief for Congress*, 12 November 2004; (<http://www.fas.org/man/crs/IB93108.pdf>).

region. These arrangements directly addressed the Afghanistan. The United States established bases and other military access in the region for U.S.- led coalition actions in Afghanistan, and stressed that the United States will remain interested in the long-term security of the region.

Starr claims that all these new arrangements were explicitly linked with post-9/11 goals in Afghanistan and did not offer specific and credible further perspectives. “Because of this, and in spite of a decade of prior U.S. activity in the region, local states came to view U.S. engagement with them as temporary, with no longer-term relationship yet in sight. Governments in the region with the impression that the U.S.’s approach to Afghanistan and Central Asia as a whole is episodic rather than systematic, ad hoc rather than strategic. The U.S. should adopt a “post-post 9/11 strategy” that realigns all existing programs in Afghanistan and its neighbors with long-term goals and not just with the urgent but short-term needs that dominated after 9/11”. Establishing a permanent “GCAP” was seen by Starr as the proof of US long-term interests in region and its engagement.<sup>14</sup>

### **Greater Central Asia Partnership**

Idea of partnership in the context of Greater Central Asia was originated to take advantage of recent improvements in Afghanistan and to reopen continental trade routes that have been closed for a century. Trade, which in turn requires improvements in transport, is seen as the key for the development of the region. The purpose of the initiative is explained as a means to flourish economies of Afghanistan and its neighbors, which have been in isolation for a long time.

As Starr points out, region wide trade would enable Afghan farmers to get their legal produce to world markets, create jobs, and provide revenue to the central government; for other Central Asian countries, it would lead to expanded relations with countries to the south, providing an alternative to Russia's monopoly over their export of hydrocarbons, electricity, and cotton, and expanded relations with China. “In short, trade would help Afghanistan and its neighbors move from economic marginality to the very center of a new economic region - that of greater Central Asia.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> S. Frederick Starr, *A Greater Central Asia Partnership for Afghanistan and Its Neighbors*, *Silk Road Papers*, March 2005, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> S. Frederick Starr, “A Partnership for Central Asia”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 4, July-August 2005, pp. 164-178.

On the other hand, Starr suggested GCAP as a means for the US to reach its long term goals in the region. The main function of GCAP was to coordinate and integrate U.S.'s bilateral and region-wide programs in diverse fields, including economic and social development, governance, trade, counter-narcotics, anti-corruption, democracy, and transparency, as well as security.<sup>16</sup>

According to Starr, one of the functions of the GCAP would be a tool for more effectively delivering and coordinating aid and assistance programs. A small GCAP office should be established within the region itself, initially in Kabul and then moving every two years to another regional capital.<sup>17</sup>

When we examine the texts of the project, it can be understood that this partnership has purposes beyond an active coordination. Starr claims that there are not any effective region-wide structures promoting security and development across all of Greater Central Asia countries and explains lack of the other regional initiatives as follows: "Russia's Commonwealth of Independent States is functionally dead; the Central Asian common market was stillborn, and its fledgling successor, the Organization of Central Asian Cooperation, excludes Afghanistan; and the Eurasian Economic Union stalled. Japan's impressive "Six Plus One" program takes a region wide approach to development but not to security, and it excludes Afghanistan. The Asian Development Bank's framework for economic development embraces the region as a whole but does not touch on issues of security and political development. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization combines security and economic concerns but ignores political development and excludes Afghanistan. The Economic Cooperation Organization includes all the greater Central Asian countries plus Turkey and Iran, but it is ineffective. Meanwhile, NATO is active through the Partnership for Peace in the five former Soviet states and through its International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, but it has no strategy or overarching structure of engagement with the region." This explanation indicates that GCAP aims to found a much more assertive and extensive regional organization.

Contradiction among the different aims of the project is quite visible. On the other hand inadequate infrastructure and different perspectives of region states impedes such a comprehensive structure. Frederick Starr also accepts this fact and offers "à la carte" system for exceeding problems. "It should also be an à

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<sup>16</sup> S. Frederick Starr, *A Greater Central Asia Partnership for Afghanistan and Its Neighbors*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>17</sup> S. Frederick Starr, "A Partnership for Central Asia", pp. 164-178.

la carte project, like NATO, with each member free to participate only in programs that are relevant to its needs. The only obligatory programs should be those aimed at promoting regional and continental trade and promoting democracy.”<sup>18</sup>

Democratic subjects in the project are also contradictory. Starr has developed the formula “Work with Governments in the Region Rather than Working On Them” considering the concern of the region’s authoritarian regimes.<sup>19</sup> “Recent events in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan generated anxieties among Central Asian leaders who have secured power by focusing on the sovereignty and security of their countries rather than on the legitimacy of their governments. If Washington imposes inflexible threshold requirements in the area of democratization on states seeking to participate in the GCAP, it will generate more hostility than change.”<sup>20</sup> These statements could cause the arguments that democracy takes a back seat to energy and security in the Central Asia policy of the U.S. But recently there was a consensus among the American scholars on the fact that the excessive focus on immediate democratization is unrealistic. Because of some massive factors such as the strong post-Soviet legacy, and the strengths of regional and clan networks, they do not give a chance for immediate transition in Central Asia.

It is thought that the project is artificial and directed towards to wean Central Asian states away from Russia and China. Starr also accepts that Russia and China will heighten their concern, but he assures that this project will bring advantages to both countries. “The GCAP would pose no threat to Russia’s or China’s legitimate activities in the region, but it is understandable that Russia or China might object to its creation. Both countries would perceive, correctly, that the GCAP signified a longer-term U.S. interest and presence in the region - and a break on the realization of their own aspirations, insofar as those aspirations run counter to the sovereignty and viability of the regional states. Still, Washington can help Russia and China appreciate the benefits that the GCAP would offer each of them. Development would alleviate the extreme poverty that feeds extremist movements, and it would stem the tide of illegal immigrants to Russia. Strengthened border regimes would help

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<sup>18</sup> S. Frederick Starr, *A Greater Central Asia Partnership for Afghanistan and Its Neighbors*, p. 18.  
S. Frederick Starr, “A Partnership for Central Asia”, pp. 164-178.

<sup>19</sup> S. Frederick Starr, *A Greater Central Asia Partnership for Afghanistan and Its Neighbors*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>20</sup> S. Frederick Starr, “A Partnership for Central Asia”, pp. 164-178.

reduce separatist activity in Xinjiang. The improvement of transportation infrastructure would give western Siberia and the Urals new export routes to Asia, and China's Xinjiang region would gain a window onto the south."

Murat Laumilin, who describes the GCAP as the new "Mega Project" of the US, claimed that the main aim of the project was to avoid the region turning to sphere of influence of Russia and China. According to Laumilin, if the project was realized, Central Asia would be separated from its integral part of Eurasia and it would be removed from Russia and CIS.<sup>21</sup> On the contrary Martha Brill Olcott thinks that US policy would only have a marginal effect of minimizing Russian or Chinese presence in the region.<sup>22</sup> The SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization) is gaining in geopolitical throw-weight quite substantially. So this initiative could be seen as a geopolitical "counterweight" to SCO.

Afghanistan takes its place in the center of the project. The starting point of the project was also the achievements attained in Afghanistan. The expression "Afghanistan is no longer a barrier" has often been repeated by officials. Nevertheless, Russian specialist Irina Zvyagelskaya does not agree with this argument. She claims that it requires longer time and effort for Afghanistan to reach the same level with the poorest Central Asian country, which had already passed modernization process within the USSR. "In spite of the donation the US and its allies made and the foundation of new political system, Afghanistan has still been at the edge of collapse."<sup>23</sup>

Critics towards the project also come from the inside. Zeyno Baran, Director of International Security and Energy Programs of the Nixon Center expressed her strong disagreement with the State Department's decision to move Central Asia out of the European Bureau and into the South Asian Bureau. According to Baran, "The U.S. has been able to help the Caspian Sea region's energy projects and internal reform process by offering the region an East-West perspective. If the Central Asian countries are put together with Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, the chances of them coming under the SCO's influence will be significantly increased."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Murat Laumilin, "Boşlaya Sentralnaya Aziya (BSA) - Noviy Mega-Proekt ŞŞA?", *Kontinent*, No. 22 (158), 16-29 November 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Joshua Kucera, "Washington Seeks To Steer Central Asian States Toward South Asian Allies", *Eurasia Insight*, 28 April 2006 .

<sup>23</sup> Irina Zvyagelskaya, "Klyuçi Ot Şastya İli Boşlaya Sentralnaya Aziya", *Rossiya v Globalnoi Politike*, No. 4, Summer 2005; (<http://www.globalaffairs.ru/numbers/15/4507.html>).

<sup>24</sup> Zeyno Baran, "Energy Supplies in Eurasia and Implications for U.S. Energy Security", Nixon Center, 27 September 2005; (<http://www.nixoncenter.org/Senate%20Testimony/SenateEnergySuppliesinEurasia-September05.pdf>).

The GCAP would require a number of organizational changes on the U.S. side. Starr showed the geographical delineations used by the U.S. government prevent policymakers from recognizing Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan as comprising a single region - which has impeded the development of a coherent Central Asia policy and asked for a higher level coordinating body than the ones that exists at present. "The State Department groups the five former Soviet states of Central Asia with Russia and considers Afghanistan part of South Asia, while the Defense Department's Central Command treats the six countries together. Such uncoordinated arrangements have reduced the United States' ability to build regional success on the national success in Afghanistan. With the exception of the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement it entered into with the five former Soviet states of Central Asia, virtually everything the United States has done in the region has been on a bilateral basis."<sup>25</sup>

After her October 2005 Central Asian tour, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced re-organization of the US State Department's South Asia Bureau to include the Central Asian states, and a new US "Greater Central Asia" scheme. Rice said on January 5, 2006 that South Asia and Central Asia are high on her list of global priorities, and announced that the Central Asian republics were moved out of the European bureau into Southern Asia bureau, which has Afghanistan, India and Pakistan. Shifting the republics to the State Department's South Asia bureau would integrate the region better, Rice said. She added that "it represents what we're trying to do, which is to think of this region as one that will need to be integrated, and that will be a very important goal for us."<sup>26</sup> This re-organization and other developments indicate the Starr's proposals are reflected as official policy.

### **Kabul Conference on GCAP**

Over sixty people participated in the conference. The focus of the conference was on the question: "How can each country benefit from opening major transport routes to the Indian Ocean, South Asia, and beyond?" A special emphasis was put on the role of Afghanistan in the center of a regional and

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<sup>25</sup> S. Frederick Starr, "A Partnership for Central Asia", pp. 164-178.

<sup>26</sup> Vince Crawley, "State Dept. Putting Regional Focus on Afghanistan and its Northern Neighbors", (<http://usinfo.state.gov/xarchives/display.html?p=washfile-english&y=2006&m=January&x=20060106145107mvyelwarc0.2283594&t=livefeeds/wf-latest.html>).

continental trade network, and how Afghanistan can benefit from regional cooperation.<sup>27</sup>

The conference resulted in the following three major recommendations:

1) To immediately open Kabul airport to regular air links with all Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbors and also with its likely future partners in continental trade.

2) To reduce the lengthy waits imposed on freight transporters at border crossings throughout Greater Central Asia.

3) To reorganize International Financial Institutions and governmental ministries in order to place Afghanistan and the other countries of Central Asia under a single bureau that will facilitate region-wide coordination of projects and initiatives across all Greater Central Asia.

In his speech in Kabul Conference, Boucher echoed Starr's ideas with his statements like: "Afghanistan is no more an obstacle, rather it is the current pivot country... The USA has many long-term interests in the region... We are not here to knock down governments".

It could be said that The Central Asians have also displayed a lack of interest in the idea of "Greater Central Asia". This became apparent during the Kabul conference.<sup>28</sup> As a top official only Kazakhstan Foreign Minister Tokaev attended the conference. While Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan was represented by low level, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan did not send representatives to the conference.

Kassymzhomart Tokaev, Kazakhstan's Foreign Minister said in the conference his government supports the idea of a Greater Central Asia. Tokaev speaking at the conference, said: "As a regional leader, Kazakhstan can and is willing to bring meaningful contribution to the restoration of Afghanistan and creation of a Greater Central Asia, which we view as a civilizing and economic entity aimed at ensuring security and development of the region."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Nicklas Norling, *First Kabul Conference on Partnership, Trade and Development in Greater Central Asia*, Conference Report, Central Asia- Caucasus Institute Silk Road Studies Program, April 2006, p. 19.

<sup>28</sup> M. K. Bhadrakumar, "China, Russia Welcome Iran into the Fold", *Asia Times Online*, 18 April 2006.

<sup>29</sup> *Kazakhstan News Bulletin*, 31 March 2006; (<http://www.homestead.com/prosites-kazakhembus/033106.html>).

As Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs Baucher visited India after Kabul Conference and asked for India's active participation. "We would welcome India's participation in endeavors that reinforce Afghanistan's newfound status as an open corridor, rather than a barrier that separates South Asia from Central Asia. Bringing your experience in development, democracy, education and other fields is another important way for India to show regional leadership to the benefit of all."<sup>30</sup>

Apparently connected with results of Kabul Conference, US officials in late April advanced a plan to develop a new electricity grid linking Central and Southern Asia. The plan counts on electricity generated in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to serve as the engine for the development of stronger inter-regional ties.<sup>31</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The concept of "Greater Central Asia" settled into the political studies concerning Central and Southern Asia. The project put forward by Frederick Starr has become the official foreign policy of State Department of the USA. By officially supporting this project, US showed that it will stay in Afghanistan for a longer period and it was quite determined to do it. Kazakhstan and India are the two key countries in Washington's Afghanistan centered new Central and Southern Asia strategy. Likewise, the recent official visits to these two countries paid by higher-ranking officials indicate the same fact.

In the short run, it seems impossible to accomplish the project; but any improvement that can be done in transportation and trade would contribute to the regional stability. The most pressing challenge for the short-term is ensuring the stability and security of Afghanistan, and the fight against drug production and trafficking. The success of the project is directly connected with the future of Afghanistan. The state building process of Afghanistan is still going on, and the country's being divided into many parts in terms of both ethnicity and geography turns it into a far more complex form. Due to this

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<sup>30</sup> "The U.S.-India Friendship: Where We were and Where We're Going", Remarks By Richard A. Boucher, Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs at The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), New Delhi, India, 7 April 2006; (<http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/WO0604/S00161.htm>).

<sup>31</sup> Joshua Kucera, "Washington Seeks to Steer Central Asian States toward South Asian Allies", *Eurasia Insight*, 28 April 2006; (<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav050806.shtml>).

scattered nature, it will not be easy to set up a stable Afghanistan. In this long and suffering process any step taken towards stability, would positively affect the peace of the whole region.

Through this project, the US is pushing to open up trade and relations between Central and South Asia, particularly in the energy sector. GCAP could be also seen as the US response to Russia's and China's growing influence in Central Asia. The USA tries to reorient the region toward South Asia.

Main three outputs of the GCAP will be reconnecting Afghanistan with the outside world, restoring the infrastructures and communication between Central Asia and South Asia as well as ensuring the supply of energy resources to the growing economies of South Asia.

All security arrangements and political reforms in Central Asia will not survive without economic development. The deepest source of internal instability throughout the region is neither religious extremism nor ethnic conflict but poverty. The most pressing needs of economic development are enabling Central Asians and Afghans to feed their families and creating jobs for themselves and others. Until these are met, there will be no peace in the region. Any contribution by GCAP to prevail regions isolation will provide a positive affect to the Eurasian security.

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