

# BOOK REVIEW: “The Long Game on the Silk Road: US and EU Strategy for Central Asia and the Caucasus”

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*The Long Game on the Silk Road* features an overview of the 25 year-long policies of the US and the EU toward Central Asia and the Caucasus. Twenty-five years later it is fair to evaluate the results of the policies they adopted and also to take a fresh look at the assumptions on which they were based. Have the policies in place served American and European interests? Where they have not, how can they be improved? And above all, after a quarter century have these countries become more relevant to western interests, or less so? These are the questions this book will address, focusing on the South Caucasus and Central Asia, or the so-called “southern” region of the former Soviet Union. The book insightfully addresses the significant role of the region in world politics, lays out the problems in Western policies toward the region, and provides concrete recommendations on how to ameliorate them.

Dr. Frederick Starr is the founding chairman and Dr. Svante Cornell is the director of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, a Joint Center whose components are affiliated, respectively, with the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, D.C., and the Institute for Security and Development Policy in Stockholm. A Distinguished Fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council, the founding director of the Kennan Institute, and a former President of Oberlin College and the Aspen Institute, Dr. Starr also contributed to the establishment of the University of Central Asia of the Nazarbayev University in Astana, and of the ADA university in Baku. His expertise covers the issues of social and economic development in Central Asia, particularly the salience of continental transport and trade. Dr. Cornell, a co-founder of the Institute for Security and Development in Stockholm, Sweden, and a Senior Fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council, in turn, focuses on national security, regional politics, and conflict management issues in the Caucasus, as well as in Turkey and Southwest and Central Asia.

Conducting – in the words of the authors – a “medical check-up” on American and European policies toward Central Asia and the

Caucasus, the book argues that these policies suffer from both conceptual and structural impediments. It traces the framework of Western policies to the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, which resulted in the stove-piping of relations into political, economic, and democracy categories – and in often uncoordinated or contradictory policies. While the authors embrace the goal of promoting human rights and democracy, they argue that the antagonistic methods adopted to advance this goal have proven counter-productive. They propose that Western governments work with the regional states rather than on or against them; and that instead of focusing directly on political systems, policies should focus on developing the quality of governance and help build institutions that will be building blocks of rule of law and democracy in the long term.

The authors also argue that Western leaders have largely failed to grasp the significance of this region, relegating it to a subordinate status and thus damaging Western interests. The development of sovereign, economically strong, and effective self-governing states in the Caucasus and Central Asia is an important goal in its own right. For all the West has achieved in the Caucasus and Central Asia to date, according to the authors, it has yet to reap the full benefits that a more active and carefully directed relationship with these regions can offer. Conversely, the authors claim that the eight countries in question have had great expectations for their relations with America and Europe but they have yet to garner more than a fraction of these in practice. A major conclusion of this study is that the legitimate aspirations of both parties in this relationship – Central Asia/Caucasus and US/EU – are fully congruent and fully attainable. The book stresses the necessity of stepping up in promoting cooperation in several fields where the West has barely touched the surface – issues such as good governance, the development of secular laws, courts, and schools, and defense-based security – which can bring great benefits to both parties in the relationship, as can the untapped economic interests in trade and transport, among others.

The book is divided into seven chapters. The introductory chapter lays out the case for the book. It argues that these countries, because of their intrinsic characteristics and of

developments in the regions surrounding them, matter more to America and Europe today than they did twenty-five years ago. While these states differ greatly from one another, their commonalities and interdependencies are sufficient for America and Europe to treat them regionally, as well as bilaterally. And while Western policies toward these countries have given rise to impressive achievements, structural and conceptual mistakes have hampered and diminished them. These flaws have caused the West to mishandle some opportunities and to miss others. As a result, the West has yet to realize the full potential of positive relations between the West and countries of the region.

Chapter 2 sketches the region's development from independence to the present. It recalls the conditions under which these countries became independent, maps the achievements of the new states, and sets forth the key challenges to their further development. The authors illustrate how the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus have made important strides during the quarter century since independence. "First and foremost, they have become real and functioning states that are recognized as such internationally. They have built viable state institutions and have, to a significant extent, worked to combat poverty. They have begun to build systems of modern education, and have maintained secular systems of laws and government. Finally, they have proven adroit at establishing themselves on the international scene and navigating between the great powers that surround them." While serious issues, such as overcoming landlockedness, the legacy of Soviet mentality, and a challenging regional environment still remain, the nations of Central Asia and the Caucasus have come a long way since independence. Meanwhile, the authors emphasize, "western leaders and analysts alike have grossly underestimated the challenges to the development of modern democratic statehood across this region. As a result, the U.S. and Europe also underestimate what the countries have in fact accomplished without unleashing social strife, and have been overly impatient with their slow progress toward better and more open governance and hence ineffective in assisting them in that process."

In Chapter 3, the authors acknowledge that serious efforts were made by the West to shore up the sovereignty and security of

these new states, with the development of the Caspian oil and gas resources in particular being the most significant single accomplishment of the United States and Europe in the region in the past two decades. Besides the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline project, the authors also mention among many vital initiatives in the economic sphere: The World Bank’s CASA-1000 electricity export initiative, transport projects to link the region to the South and West under the EU’s TRACECA, the ADB’s CAREC program, and the American New Silk Road. Additionally, the West’s engagement in the political and diplomatic spheres (e.g., the US and France becoming involved in the Minsk Process to defuse the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan) allowed the regional states to achieve a balanced relationship vis-a-vis their major neighbours. In light of all this, the authors claim, “it is no overstatement to say that no other country or grouping of countries comes close to either the U.S. or the EU, let alone the two of them together, in the amount of their assistance, the range of fields to which it has been applied, or the amount and quality of expert know-how made available to the new states of Central Asia and the Caucasus since their establishment as new sovereignties.”

However, according to the authors, Western commitments did not extend to providing functioning forms of collective security for the countries of the region. As Russia’s geopolitical weight increased, “this created a highly volatile security situation for all the regional countries, and especially those to the West of the Caspian that refused to accept a Russian security umbrella, as Armenia and Belarus had done.” Instead, the US came to increasingly view the region mainly through the prism of its Afghanistan policy rather than as a place where the US had long-term interests in its own right. As a result, Washington failed to arrest the decline of relations with Uzbekistan in 2005 and, subsequently, with Kyrgyzstan, which led to the end of the US military presence in both countries and a sharp decline in US influence. In addition, referring to the authors, both the US and EU implemented divergent policies with respect to the Caucasus and Central Asia from the late 2000s, which had a detrimental effect on Trans-Caspian communications and transportation. Both America and Europe also failed to grasp the importance of conflict resolution. For years following the Key West summit,

America did not take seriously its role in the Minsk Group, and this neglect contributed to the escalation of the conflict after 2008. Nor did America and Europe play a serious role in Georgia's conflicts until it was too late – after the 2008 war, when Russia had created a new reality on the ground. Western powers also allowed a growing disparity to arise between the commitment to territorial integrity they voiced in various conflicts, with strong support for Moldova and Ukraine, with the much lower commitment they displayed in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh.

While fully acknowledging in Chapter 4 the immensity of Western support and assistance to Central Asia and the Caucasus and the many concrete advances they achieved over a quarter century, the authors go on to once more emphasize some of the principal shortcomings of Western policies in the region. These include: the West's false assumption about civil society's independence from government; their underestimation of the importance and complexity of building open, effective, and incorrupt state institutions; holding the new states of the region to a stiffer standard than other parts of the world; neglect of the cultural context and deep history of the people of the region; ignoring the importance of secular states and secular systems of law; their constant temptation to deal with the regional states as objects to be manipulated on political or cultural chessboards; their underestimation of the existential threat to the sovereignty of the regional states; and complete ignorance of the view of regional governments that the preservation of sovereignty and security was the *sine qua non* for the advancement of all other Western goals. As a result, the general structure of U.S. and EU engagement with both Central Asia and the Caucasus remained largely intact throughout the first quarter century of their involvement there, and continues today. "For all the positive steps they have taken with respect to these two important regions," note the authors, "the West has hobbled itself through impatience. It conveniently forgets the time that was necessary to rebuild Germany, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan and establish them as functioning democracies with open systems of law and government. Instead, they have conducted themselves like the impatient farmer who plants in May and then stalks the fields in June, pulling out seedlings to see how they are doing."

In light of the above-mentioned vivid pitfalls of Western engagement in the region, the following chapters identify areas in which the effectiveness of Western programs in the region are limited and practical improvements might be achieved in the future, presenting those findings in some kind of systematic order. Ultimately, the authors provide five key conclusions regarding the challenges, and the associated recommendations to follow, in the structural and organizational realm, and ten in the conceptual and strategic.

Concerning structural reforms, above all, the authors recommend Western policymakers to overcome the mutual isolation of central bureaucracies from one another that was the legacy of the Helsinki accords, and to institute mechanisms to restore coordination of the West's policies toward the South Caucasus, on one hand, and Central Asia, on the other, remedying the artificial dividing line created in their bureaucracies that effectively makes the Caspian Sea a barrier rather than a bridge. The authors also call for: assigning a senior US official to be responsible for coordination between the issue areas, or "baskets," of Western interests in the region; strengthening their internal analytical capability to understand the regional developments; calibrating the public language of Western leaders to a more constructive and collegial approach to these partners; and moving beyond unilateral mandates in each field toward high-level negotiations with the regional countries. These issues, according to authors, can be addressed and corrected by the executive agencies themselves, without either amending or supplementing existing additional legislation.

Chapter 6, in turn, identifies strategic issues that require rethinking, suggests better alternatives, and presents practical steps for implementing them. First and foremost, referring to the authors, "Western governments should devote serious attention to the sovereignty and security of the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia as the necessary and inescapable foundation of long-term and many-sided relationships in both regions, and to this end play a more deliberate and active role as part of the 'balances' that define the strategies of many, but not all, regional states." Furthermore, the US and the EU should reduce their one-sided reliance on NGOs, re-examine the false

romanticism of “civil society,” and “work with governments, not on them,” promoting good governance, supporting secular laws and modern educational systems, as well as helping the regional governments to improve their access to news and information through a variety of channels. While maintaining their strong web of bilateral relations in both the Caucasus and Central Asia, the US and EU should also increasingly focus on regionalism as an emerging and necessary structure for the advancement of Western interests there.

The authors also recommend the US and Europe to avoid making demands on these countries that they have not sought to impose on countries in Asia and Africa, and apply to Central Asia and the Caucasus the same kinds of standards that have shaped recent approaches to countries such as Vietnam, Cuba, and Iran. Referring to impatience as the greatest enemy of American and European strategy in the region, the chapter calls for Western programs to adopt a more realistic time horizon for their end goals. Western assistance, in turn, should not be seen as a reward for approaching the finish line in a “race to democracy” but as an investment in countries that are important to a range of American or European interests. Concerning voting and citizen participation, the authors emphasize that the West should recognize that free and fair elections of national leaders are more likely to be the culmination of a democratization process rather than its starting point.

To sum up, the Caucasus and Central Asia provide a valuable case study of how the often divergent interests of Western policy relate to one another and how they can reinforce or contradict each other. At various times in the past quarter century Western powers have been intimately engaged in security affairs; economic and energy matters; and the promotion of democracy and human rights. This book argues that these areas of interest are not inherently contradictory. Yet, in practice, the lack of coordination and leadership in the development and implementation of policy has all too often caused it to appear that way. In the absence of clear direction from leaders, bureaucrats have engaged in turf wars, clashed over priorities, and allowed themselves to be influenced by special interests with narrow agendas. We can think of few world regions where these phenomena are as clearly



and vividly manifested as in America's and Europe's relations with the Caucasus and Central Asia. "Political and economic development is not a sprint but a distance run, in which clarity about ends and means, leadership and, above all, tenacity are the key determinants of success," the authors recall, "and if the West, in this long game, can now muster these qualities and apply them to its relations with the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia, it will prevail. And all parties to the relationship will benefit far more even than during the past quarter century."

**Reviewed by: Polad Muradli**