

Opponent's Review

Lídl, Václav: Uzbekistan's Foreign Diplomacy (2001-2012). The Pendulum Diplomacy between the US and Russia. Master Thesis, Prague, 2014.

The author focuses on the foreign policy (FP) of Uzbekistan after USSR dissolution. His analysis includes the overview of Uzbekistan FP preconditions and factors influencing its turnovers after breaking event in 2001, 2005 and after 2012. His conceptual and theoretical framework is based in realism and neorealism, which enables the author to deal pragmatically with the topics. However, both concepts, applied to the single case, have also their limits. In particular, using geopolitical framework (and MacKinder's theory) could be relatively tricky and misleading for decision-making about the policy towards Central Asia (or any other region or state).

Main author's conceptual argument deals with the pendular foreign policy drifting between Russia and US. However, Uzbekistan's FP is basically proclaimed as multi-vectoral. Even if this very term is rather vague (almost each foreign policy has many vectors), in practice it means that Uzbekistan develops the relations with other countries as well. In the beginning of 90s Turkey could have been considered as this kind of balancing actor between Russia and USA (and West in general). Since the break of the century China steadily but firmly was included into the key foreign partners of Uzbekistan, although many Uzbek officials were not in favor of Chinese vector.

In 2014 we have to consider Chinese factor in Central Asia and, particularly, in Uzbekistan at least on the same level as Russia and US. Thus, considering author's discourse, we have to analyze quadrangle (US-RU-CN-UZ) rather than triangle (RU-US-UZ) when dealing with the geopolitics of Uzbekistan. While Chinese factor is growing, US role is rather falling down because of US withdrawal from Afghanistan (full process is about to be finished later than in 2014, but the process is clear), even if many specialists, grown up in the past decade and half, try to brake or at least slow down the process. In this context we have to ask whether the return of US to Uzbekistan is so clear and long-termed? Does US turns sufficiently its focus on the region in general?

Geopolitical significance of Uzbekistan seems to be overestimated due to allegedly key geographical location of the country. This argument serves (by inertia) as the reason for further involvement into the country. It seems that in contemporary situation the geopolitical role of Uzbekistan is diminishing at the expense of Kazakhstan. The image of Uzbekistan as the central regional cluster has lost its position in the recent years in the view of rising economic performance and power of Kazakhstan in the region. Central Asia turns to be clearly divided on the two main areas – Kazakhstan and Central Asian southern wing. Looking briefly on the issue from other Central Asian states standpoint, Kazakhstan does not need Uzbekistan for Central Asian integration as it can directly interact with all necessary players (China, Russia in particular). Kazakhstan could also use “the window” to the West and South through the Caspian Sea bypassing Uzbekistan in both cases. Kyrgyzstan is relatively open to Kazakhstan (and consequently to Russia) as well as to China, although tied with Uzbekistan due to infrastructure and gas supplies. Therefore, Tajikistan remains the most landlocked country and vulnerable to Uzbekistan geographical and geopolitical position with a little perspective to overcome this position. Both smaller countries have rather problematic relations with its Uzbek neighbor and they are aware of Uzbekistan's role in any potential Central Asian integration. Turkmenistan could be considered as even less important; key issue of bilateral interests is the pipeline to China. However, the pipeline does not possess any serious geopolitical advantage to Uzbekistan as a) the pipeline is in the common interest for both countries and b) it is controlled by China itself, which has no interest in harming the pipeline and has enough economic power to maintain both countries calm in case of any potential dispute. This brief overview shows that Central Asia could be integrated even without Uzbekistan despite all problematic aspects of this step provided by the author (p. 65-68). Such a conclusion challenges the author's thesis about the key position of Uzbekistan for Central Asia.

The author could also consider more the regional factor, i. e. the factor of Afghanistan (which is mentioned selectively in the text) as well as other Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan in particular). This view extends the text beyond the main topic. This insight, however, would probably show another perspective on Uzbekistan's role in the region and could be reflected also within the defense of Thesis.

Above mentioned aspects lead us to challenge the very thesis about Uzbek pendular policy as well as Uzbekistan's final drifting towards US (p. 79-80). We could read about this "definitiveness" even after 2001 or 2005. Writing about definitive inter-connection of US and Uzbekistan evokes the idea that Uzbekistan foreign policy always tend to distance itself from Russia (and today from China as well), while the period after 2005 could be considered as anomaly caused by US highly negative attitude towards Uzbekistan.

However, critical remarks and notes cannot overshadow the very sense of the author's text. On the contrary, I could discuss with the author just because of his in-depth analysis and high quality of the text. For the purposes of State exam I am happy to claim that Vaclav Lidl's M.A. Thesis fulfills (and far exceeds) all requirements for this kind of work and I fully recommend the Grade 1 for the author. In addition, I could unconditionally suggest the text for Dean's *cum laude* award. I also strongly recommend author to take part in any M.A. Thesis competition both in Czech Republic and abroad. I also recommend him to consider the text for the publication, although in this case the broader context should be added (i. a. Chinese factor, regional context, internal sources of foreign policy decision making processes etc.).

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Helsinki, June 3, 2014.