

Central Asia not just for US

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While the US gradually strengthens its influence and involvement in Central Asia, Central Asian countries will balance their US relations with their ties to other major powers in the interest of regional stability and development.

Since five Central Asian countries became independent from the former Soviet Union in 1991, the United States has shown great interest in the region and continued to boost political, economic and military co-operation there.

But for most Central Asian countries, a pro-American stance comes with expectations for US economic support. In recent years, limited political and financial aid have chilled Central Asia's hopes.

Communication between the United States and Central Asia is an exchange of interests, meaning relations depend on how Central Asia plays into international political, trade and military affairs.

The United States maintains that Central Asia will affect its national security interests this century.

The reasons: Central Asia's location is of vital importance as it lies amid three Eurasian power bases: the EU, Russia and China. Control over this region will facilitate US influence on the continent.

And because Central Asia is in the Islamic world, the United States will try to gain a foothold to maintain its interests in South and West Asia and to counter enemies such as Iran and Iraq.

Due to relations between Central Asia and Russia, deep US involvement in the area will contain the re-emergence of Russia.

Rich natural resources, especially strategically important raw materials, coupled with huge market potential, also pique the United States' strategic interest.

A US national security strategy announced in January focuses on contact with Central Asian countries to exert influence in case social instability or human rights violations threaten regional security.

To strengthen its presence in the area and

defeat its rivals, the United States has made comprehensive partnership plans with the region through increased financial support and investment.

One of the first objectives in building diplomatic ties is to dissolve potential threats from the Central Asian countries and make Kazakhstan nuclear free.

The United States has gone ahead with its strategies since Kazakhstan removed its last nuclear warhead in 1995.

The essence of the Central Asia strategy is said to be supporting countries breaking off from Russia and to bring them into a Westernized system with US institutions and values. The area would become a strategically important resource base and a point from which to contain Russia and Iran.

This agenda is clear. In recent years, political relations between the United States and Central Asian countries have progressed smoothly, and a portfolio of important agreements have been signed.

There are frequent visits between the US and countries in the region. And leaders in the region consider their visits to the US as some of the most significant foreign affairs milestones.

Bilateral ties between the United States and Central Asian countries centre on economic co-operation, with the region receiving various forms of financial support.

In 1994, US\$311 million in aid was granted to Kazakhstan; in 1996, Kyrgyzstan received US loans of US\$460 million. In 1998, the US increased financial aid to the region by 34 per cent.

Development and transportation is key as well. The United States and Kazakhstan decided to spend US\$28 billion to explore resources under the Caspian Sea in 1997. At present, of the US\$2 billion of direct foreign oil and gas investment in Kazakhstan, US\$1.5 billion comes from the United States.

Rapid advances have also been made in military co-operation. The United States has vigorously participated in the build-up of military forces in Central Asia with money, training and equipment.

Since the entrance of Central Asian coun-

tries (except Tajikistan) into the NATO Partnership for Peace Programme, the United States has used NATO guidelines to promote military ties.

Central Asian countries are looking forward to US political and economic support. They need US investment to unravel economic crises and US influence to protect regional stability and national security. Most countries consider diplomatic ties with the United States as priorities.

However, while partnerships pick up speed, new issues emerge.

There is big gap between the two sides' understanding of democracy. Many US politicians are dissatisfied with democracy in the region and have criticized the human rights situation in some countries. Besides, the United States is concerned only with resources in the region, such as along the Caspian Sea, and gives limited support to economic structural changes. This imbalance has aroused the discontent of many Central Asian countries.

To counter US influence, Russia has enhanced its alliance with the region since President Putin took office. Russia and the region united under the common threat from terrorism.

In November 1999, during President Putin's visit in Uzbekistan, both sides emphasized that Russia was indispensable to peace and stability in the region.

The United States, more concerned with resources, does not intend to compete with Russia. So Central Asian countries have extended diplomacy to strike a balance between big, regional powers.

Their leaders have emphasized geopolitical equilibrium and reining in US relations to avoid suspicion and disapproval from other countries.

The US strategy in the region will be challenged by the influence of other countries, meaning relations between the United States and Central Asian countries will be subject to many external factors.

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