

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Great Gaming Russia in Central Asia

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For the sake of Afghanistan, U.S. officials routinely invoke the importance of nurturing economic growth across South and Central Asia. But when it comes to advancing policies meant to increase regional trade, Washington has shown little effort to ease the geopolitical differences between itself and one of Afghanistan's key neighbors: Russia.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton [proclaimed](#) late last year in Dushanbe, “we want Afghanistan to be at the crossroads of economic opportunities going north and south and east and west, which is why it’s so critical to more fully integrate the economies of the countries in this region in South and Central Asia.”

That sounds promising. So what is the problem? As George Washington University Research Professor [Marlene Laruelle writes](#), present U.S. policies, like the “New Silk Road” initiative that Clinton hints at above, reflect an underlying economic rationale “to exclude Moscow from new geopolitical configurations.”

Echoing this interpretation is [Joshua Kucera](#), a Washington-based freelance writer and frequent contributor to *Slate* and *ForeignPolicy.com*. He [points](#) to Washington’s call to [tie together](#) the electrical grids of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan as well as Washington’s placement of the Central Asian states in a [new State Department bureau](#). He [writes](#), “What these all have in common is that they attempt to weaken the economic (and as a result, political) monopoly that Russia, by dint of the centralized Soviet infrastructure, has on these countries.”

Moscow already thinks that Washington’s promotion of NATO’s eastward expansion is a U.S.-led containment strategy. As we have seen in that part of the world, however, Washington’s attempts to marginalize Russia in its Central Asian post-Soviet sphere will bump up against the region’s deep historical ties, cultural influence, and geographic contiguity with the Kremlin. This all might seem obvious, but apparently not, as it would

require foreign policy planners to appreciate the overriding interests of neighboring great powers as they pertain to Afghanistan, even the ones we abhor. That will be difficult, and it is important to illuminate why.

Too many in Washington equate a less confrontational approach as a sign of weakness, and militant internationalism as a sign of strength. But in South and Central Asia, U.S. officials must understand that what they perceive to be in America's interest does not always line up with the prospect of regional connectivity. Washington's pursuit of primacy in this region is erecting hurdles to the very liberal-internationalist goals that it claims to promote. If economic growth is to have any reliable chance of success, then the U.S. should not be attempting to foreclose constructive avenues for increased integration.

Pursuing policies that place the region's general interest before America's does not convey weakness. Rather, it is a recognition that some countries are better positioned to be key players in the region, especially in light of the last 11 years, which have amply demonstrated the limits of Washington's ability to impose lasting change in Afghanistan.

As my colleague [Doug Bandow](#) alluded to the other day, Russia is not America's "[number one geopolitical foe](#)"—it is a [declining power with nukes](#). Whether officials in Washington are willing to countenance such thoughts is anyone's guess. However, given the disproportionate power of foreign policy hawks inside the Beltway—from the [liberal](#) and [conservative](#) persuasion—I wouldn't bet on it.