

Casey Michel writes: The United States is often – and often fairly – maligned for a distinct lack of strategy in its relations with Central Asia. Tacked on to Chinese or Afghanistan policy, bogged in securitization or stilted democratization efforts, Washington has seemed unable to formulate a distinct, coherent policy for the region for years. Unlike Beijing’s economic expansion or Moscow’s military ties, Washington’s Central Asian policy, if one appears, often comes across as an afterthought.

That’s not to say efforts haven’t been made to bring a policy to bear. Earlier this week, Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke at the Brookings Institute, attempting to provide a sketch of Washington’s current regional plans. But in lieu of innovation or revamp, Washington appears content to continue along the muddled path it’s followed prior, with stale plans and retread ideas bundled once more.

For instance, Blinken cited the New Silk Road initiative, which has had little impact on the ground in its four years of existence. Pointing to attempts at “helping develop the region’s connectivity,” Blinken cited the CASA-1000 project, which will “help bring surplus hydro-electricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan.” The CASA-1000 project, as it is, stands as one of America’s foremost efforts at regional integration – but makes little sense when Kyrgyzstan is a net electricity importer, as it experienced during 2014. Washington hasn’t attempted to explain just how the CASA-1000 will function with Tajikistan as the sole provider of surplus electricity. Blinken didn’t offer any explanation, either.

Blinken also cited Washington’s “three important objectives” in the region: strengthening partnerships to advance mutual security; forging closer economic ties; and advancing and advocating for improved governance and human rights.” The ordering – security foremost – speaks louder than the content. Blinken later reiterated the primacy of security, noting that “our policy in Central Asia [is] founded on two distinct ideas: First, that our own security is enhanced by a more stable, secure Central Asia that contributes to global efforts to combat terrorism and violent extremism.” Security and stability stand foremost, as before. Interestingly, considering security issues apparently preempt other concerns, Blinken didn’t address the massive military donation the U.S. just offered Uzbekistan, nor Turkmenistan’s recent request for military aid.

Blinken also paid lip service to the notions of democratization efforts, noting the U.S. was hoping to help create a region “benefiting from governments that are accountable to their citizens.” But in lieu of any specifics, Blinken opted for the rote, generic phrasing that’s greeted the region for more than two decades. There were no comments about Uzbek President Islam Karimov flouting the constitution and thieving another election last month. Nothing about Astana arbitrarily selecting a date to sweep Nursultan Nazarbayev, president since the fall of the Soviet Union, into another five years in power. Nothing about Tajikistan’s ruling clique preventing its primary opposition party from landing any seats in parliament for the first time in the 21st century. Nothing about Kyrgyzstan’s dispiriting rights backslide, plucked straight from the Russian model. Blandishments preempted specifics, as autocracy hardens throughout the region.

In reality, the most interesting aspects of Blinken's speech weren't in the descriptions of stale, tired policies, or the failure to mention the remarkable autocratic consolidation the region's seen over the past year. If there was one point in the speech worth paying attention to, it belonged – just as the U.S. approach to the region long has – to the role of surrounding powers.

As can perhaps be expected, Blinken spoke far more glowingly of China's presence in Central Asia than Russia. "We don't see China's involvement in Central Asia in zero-sum terms," Blinken said. "Its development of infrastructure in Central Asia can be fully complementary to our own efforts. And in particular, we see an important role for China in supporting the transition in Afghanistan and advancing its own integration into the broader Asia region." As it pertains to Russia, however, Blinken didn't mince words: "Russia's actions on its periphery, including its violation of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine, threaten the very foundation of international order – not only in the region, not only in Europe, but beyond and around the world." (Blinken generously overlooked the fact that Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Afghanistan all recognize the Crimean annexation.)

Indeed, it is when discussing Russia's presence that Blinken was most on point. Where Russia was once seen as a primary security partner in the region and an indispensable member of the Northern Distribution Network, Moscow has made it clear that borders are but lines of convenience, to be ignored when the moment suits. Blinken continued:

"[Moscow is] threatening the fundamental principles that we all have a stake in defending in Europe and, indeed, around the world: the principle that the borders and territorial integrity of a democratic state cannot be changed by force; that it is the inherent right of citizens in a democracy to make their own decisions about their country's future; that linguistic nationalism, something we thought was confined to the dustbin of history, cannot be allowed to be resurrected; and that all members of the international community, especially its leading members, are bound by common rules and should face costs if they don't live up to the solemn commitments that they make."

Blinken later took a question on territorial integrity from Brookings Institute President Strobe Talbott, who pointed to Russian President Vladimir Putin's insinuations that Kazakhstan – and, by extension, Central Asia – had little historical backing for statehood. "Russia's actions themselves ... are sending a very discordant message to countries in the region, and that is causing them to look more and more for alternatives and different choices," Blinken observed. Talbott followed by asking whether "the fear and concern in Central Asia about Russia play[s] to China's advantage." Blinken was blunt: "Short answer is yes."

This shouldn't necessarily come as a surprise, with Beijing and Astana recently inking \$23 billion in deals and four of the five Central Asian states signing up for China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. (Turkmenistan remains the lone holdout.) And given Blinken's commentary on China's presence in the region, Washington may well be pleased to see China's burgeoning role.

Nonetheless, Blinken claimed that the U.S. presence in the region would remain, at least rhetorically. “Today, there are those who look at the drawdown of our forces from Afghanistan and see through that a region of declining importance to the United States,” Blinken said. “Nothing could be further from the truth.” Facts on the ground, of course, belie this insistence, and Washington seems content with China injecting the economic aid the region so desperately needs. If Blinken’s discussion is anything to go by, the U.S. is far more willing to cede regional influence to China, keeping Russian irredentism and Islamist expansion at bay. Crudely, it appears Washington wants to keep the Chinese in, the Russians down, and the Islamists out. If that’s the policy, it’ll have to do.