Worlds Apart: the construction and deconstruction of geopolitical space in the US-Uzbekistan strategic partnership

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[approx. 7,000 words]

ABSTRACT. This article analyses the US-Uzbekistan strategic alliance in terms of the illusion of 'partnership' which sustained it, the contrasting discourses which constructed and deconstructed it, and the implications of them for the region and the study thereof. Official Uzbek accounts of geopolitics contrast with official American renditions of the Central Asian 'other' and their expectations about the pace, place and ethics of Uzbek reform. These contrasts were reconciled for a short period by the illusion of common interests which sustained the strategic partnership. I show how contending representations of the partnership came to a head immediately after the Andijon uprising, amid precipitous national and international developments. These contingencies shattered an unstable discursive compromise, crystalised US and Uzbek policy-maker's positions, and pitted the two states against one another. Whilst not pre-determined or inevitable, this split was always probable. Nevertheless, these contrasting representations have not disappeared and continue to effect the practice and study of international politics in the region. We must, I argue, understand geopolitical dynamics in the region not in terms of swings of a pendulum 'between' East and West, but in terms of the qualitative differences of each power's power in the region. In other words, it is the exclusion of the United States from a spatially-defined and discursively-constructed region of Central Asia which limits its place in the region. An analysis born out of critical geopolitics calls into question these apparently objective descriptions. Differences between the way the US, Russia and China relate to Uzbekistan are found not so much in their mobilisation of strategic and economic resources, but in terms of their powers of representation, their ability to perform the authority of the Karimov regime. The United States, I conclude, is qualitatively less powerful than Russia and China in Central Asia.

Introduction

Many recent journalistic and policy-practitioner analyses of geopolitics have discussed the rise and fall of the United States in Central Asia. For US policy-makers, the region gained increased importance after 9/11. It has been described as a 'key theatre in the war on terror,'¹ which according to analyst, Richard Giragosian, 'has acquired a new strategic relevance'². In the months following 9/11, US interest in the region as a whole increased dramatically.³ Given the establishment of US-bases in Kyrgyzstan (Ganci) and Uzbekistan (Kharshi-Khanabad, so-called 'K2'), and the establishment of over-flight rights across other countries, events seemed to bear out the dramatic power of the United States. US power, being largely material, was of universal salience and even able to inflict a 'strategic reversal' on Russia in its backyard of Central Asia. However, more recent developments, not least the sudden breakdown in the US-Uzbek strategic alliance, seem to indicate the precariousness of the US role in the region. Often such scholars are left to describe 'swings' of a pendulum, or 'tilts' of strategic balance in describing how Central Asian governments lurch between assertions of cooperation and acts of discord. However, such orthodox approaches consistently overlook or under-estimate crucial differences in how the region's elites imagine politics within the region, and how they view the Western 'other'. This article will consider this role of representation in Central Asia's international politics through a short study of the US-Uzbekistan 'partnership'd and its deconstruction.

In studying strategic partnerships we must, in contrast to much of the strategic studies literature, address questions of political community and identity. This links security to sovereignty. Barker reminds us that legitimacy is 'sustained to a greater or lesser degree by the depiction of enemies.'⁴ The Copenhagen School of security studies⁵ and the more radical critical security studies⁶ literature

¹ Douglas Lovelace, 'Foreword', in Wishnick, Elizabeth, *Strategic Consequences of the Iraq War: US security interests in Central Asia reassessed*, (US Army War College: SSI, 2004), p.iii.

² Richard Giragosian, 'The Strategic Central Asian Arena', *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2006, p.133

³ MacFarlane, Neil, 'The United States and Regionalism in Central Asia', *International Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 3, 2004, p.449

⁴ Rodney Barker, *Legitimizing Identities: the self-presentations of rulers and subjects*, Cambridge: CUP, 2001, p.138

⁵ Ole Wæver, 'Securitisation and Desecuritisation', in Ronnie D. Lipschultz (ed.), *On Security*, NY; Columbia, 1995; Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework For Analysis*

both see the presence or absence of security as a socially constructed phenomenon. Security *and* sovereignty are not merely about the acquisition of an enormous arsenal of defence and offence, or the structural conditions of balancing or bandwaggoning that might provide protection from an outside power. Rather security/sovereignty is discursively practised as a ‘speech act’⁷ or ‘a performative discourse constitutive of political order.’⁸ Thus, the study of security/sovereignty concerns ‘*processes* of securitisation and desecuritisation’⁹ as ‘extreme form[s] of politicisation’ where ‘the state’ demands the right to take extreme measures, ostensibly in the name of protecting its citizens.¹⁰ The invocation of ‘national security’ and the specifications of ‘threat’ and ‘enemy’ serve a political purpose for the accumulation of authority locally or ‘internally’ to the state.¹¹ On the other hand, if security discourses lose all plausibility among elites, subordinates or internationals, this can threaten the very legitimacy of the regime. ‘Thus,’ Walker notes, ‘to speak of security is to engage in a discourse of repetitions, to affirm over and over again the dangers that legitimise sovereign authority that is constituted precisely as a solution to dangers.’¹²

In an earlier paper I argued that ‘Central Asia’ is constructed as an imagined security community of international affairs, as a place to stand up for state ‘authority’ against the challenge to ‘stability’ provided by militant groups, democracy-promoting non-governmental organisations and foreign powers.¹³ The excellent works of Horsman, Liu and March have provided contrasting accounts of how authoritarianism is constituted through ‘official discourse’, ‘geographies of talk’ at a popular level, and the propagation of a ‘state ideology’ by elites.¹⁴

⁶ Ronnie D. Lipschultz (ed.), *On Security*, NY; Columbia, 1995; Keith Krause & Michael C. Williams (eds.), *Critical Security Studies: Concepts and Cases*, London: Routledge, 1997.

⁷ Wæver, op cit, Ref 5

⁸ James Der Derian, ‘The Value of Security: Hobbes, Marx, Nietzsche, and Baudrillard’, in Ronnie D. Lipschultz, *On Security*, NY; Columbia, 1995

⁹ Wæver, op cit, Ref 5, p.57

¹⁰ Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, op cit, Ref 5, p.241

¹¹ Ronnie D. Lipschultz, ‘Negotiating the boundaries of Difference and Security at Millennium’s End’, in Ronnie D. Lipschultz, *On Security*, NY; Columbia, 1995, p.217.

¹² R.B.J. Walker, ‘The Subject of Security’ in Keith Krause & Michael C. Williams (eds.), *Critical Security Studies: Concepts and Cases*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 73

¹³ John Heathershaw, ‘New Great Game or Same Old Ideas? Neo-sovietism and the International Politics of Imagining “Central Asia”’, in David Dusseault (ed.), *The CIS: Form or Substance?*, (Helsinki: Kikimora, 2007, forthcoming)

¹⁴ Horsman, Stuart, ‘Themes in official discourses on terrorism in Central Asia’, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2005, pp.; Morgan Y. Liu, ‘Hierarchies of Place, Hierarchies of Empowerment: Geographies of Talk about Postsocialist Change in Uzbekistan’, *Nationalities Papers*, Vo. 33, No.3, September 2005, pp.423-438; Andrew F. March, ‘State ideology and the

Another way of describing Uzbek elite political thinking is in terms of a post-Soviet ‘political imagination’ which pursues post-Soviet ambitions of ‘democracy’ and ‘reform’ through the ethical, spatial and temporal assumptions embedded within regional political discourse.¹⁵ An emerging political entity such as the state of Uzbekistan seeks to find its place in an international political system, however anachronistic, which ‘maintains its purpose because the sovereign state is viewed as the only possible locus of political life’.¹⁶ Representatives of the Uzbek state have sought a Central Asian international environment which abides by its demarcations of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. They attempt to inscribe these boundaries in their grand ‘normative visions’¹⁷ which reflect and reproduce their worldviews. However, they do so in an inherently complex, indeed ambiguous, environment where this legitimacy, authority and sovereignty depend on the performance of politics between (international) subjects.

This paper develops this argument by exploring the US-Uzbek strategic relationship in terms of ‘partnership’ – a discursively constructed and deconstructed phenomenon. It took the events of the Andijon massacre in May 2005 to accentuate the differences in these representations and lead the partners in opposing camps. Part one charts the ambiguous terms of representation of an illusory partnership. It reveals the discursive contrasts between Uzbek testimonies of an equal partnership and US discourses of Uzbek reform through engagement. The breakdown of this ambiguity is examined in part two through a discussion of the role of performance and representation in the key moments of 2004 and 2005. Over this period, the Andijon uprising stands out as a moment of rupture which encouraged a hardening of discourses from both sides and a loss of the constructive ambiguity which had precariously constituted the partnership in the first place. In part three, I consider the implications for Uzbekistan’s foreign relations, regionalism in Central Asia and our study thereof.

legitimation of authoritarianism: the case of post-Soviet Uzbekistan’, *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 2003, pp.209-232

¹⁵ Morgan Y. Liu, ‘Recognising the Khan: Authority, Space and Political Imagination Among Uzbek Men in Post-Soviet Osh, Kyrgyzstan’, unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Michigan: 2002

¹⁶ Krause & Williams, op cit, Ref 6, p.x

¹⁷ Walker, op cit, Ref 12, p.78

The illusion of common interest: contrasting US and Uzbek representations

Late-2001 was a period of extraordinary international politics in Central Asia. Before the year was out, two US bases were established in the region, including at Kharshi-Khanabad in Uzbekistan – home to around 1,800 US personnel – to provide vital support to the American attack on Afghanistan. With this dramatic development came hopes for meaningful partnership on both sides. Meppen, a US Army Foreign Area Officer, notes that Karimov's policies of keeping Russia 'at arm's length' meant that he 'appeared to be an ideal leader' with 'the necessary political mettle for a close alliance with the U.S.'¹⁸ The initial US-Uzbekistan Status of Forces Agreement was 'vague enough' so that 'both nations were immediately able to pursue their own interests.'¹⁹ By early 2002, the partnership apparently reached its high-point with a March visit to Washington by Karimov and the July signing of a more detailed document, the 'Declaration on the Strategic partnership and Cooperation between the United States of America and the Republic of Uzbekistan.' This document was initially drafted by Uzbekistan and, according to Meppen, found common ground with the US in terms of anti-Soviet sentiment and the desire to make Uzbekistan 'first among equals' in Central Asia. The 2002 Declaration included substantial measures of military assistance to that end.²⁰

This article affords little space to narrate US-Uzbekistan relations across the period of their strategic partnership between 2001 and 2005. Rather, I will examine the constructive or constitutive role of these different representations. Central Asian international relations and geopolitics is a field of study with a surfeit of metaphors and analogical referents. Policy-analysts and policy-makers from all sides organise their thoughts around and litter their statements with terms such as the 'Heartland', the 'New Great Game'; and, 'coloured revolutions' which have become familiar across the region. However, Uzbek and US actors implicate profoundly contrasting registers of thought when they deploy these turns of phrase. These differences in political imaginaries were present before, during and after the tenure of the Kharshi-Khanabad airbase, despite apparently dramatic shifts towards and then away from the US. Such political imaginaries are more than

¹⁸ Meppen, Kurt H., 'U.S.-Uzbekistan Bilateral Relations: Policy Options', p.15, pp.18-21

¹⁹ Ibid., p.16

²⁰ Ibid., pp.22-24

mere rhetoric. They constitute a public discourse of international politics common among elites in both countries. Here I look first at the discourses of US policy-makers and a close circle of Washington-based Central Asia analysts, before considering testimonies from Uzbekistan, in particular statements by President Karimov and a number of Tashkent-based academicians.

Washington's World

The 'global war on terror' has dominated US strategic discourse since 2001. According to Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs Elizabeth Jones, 'since 9/11 US strategic interests in the region have focused on anti-terrorism, especially the elimination of terrorist and other destabilising groups.'²¹ This pragmatic maxim of realpolitik provided the basis for the idea that the 'strategic partnership' might be in the 'true interests' of both the US and the Karimov regime.²² However, the US view was composed out of conflicts between wider political ideas and interests circling in Washington.

Firstly, the region as a whole is understood primarily in terms of historical analogies of great power politics and orthodox geopolitics which are deemed to have a timeless quality. The 'great game' serves as a familiar metaphor for leading analysts seeking historical analogies for contemporary dynamics.²³ While in the 1990s the metaphor was marshaled to explain geo-economic competition, particularly for Caspian Sea oil and gas resources, post-9/11 developments have added a new dimension of geo-strategy.²⁴ Blank, for example, argues that 'Central Asia has become a cockpit not only of terrorism and of a renewed great

²¹ This is a paraphrasing of the testimony found in, Elizabeth Wishnick, *Strategic Consequences of the Iraq War: US security interests in Central Asia reassessed*, US Army War College: SSI, 2004, p.4

²² Frederick S. Starr, 'Introduction', in John C.K. Daly, Kurt H. Meppen, Vladimir Socor and S. Frederick Starr, *Anatomy of a Crisis: US-Uzbekistan Relations, 2001-2005*, Silk Road Paper, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, February 2006, p.5

²³ Frederick Starr, 'Making Eurasia stable', *Foreign Affairs*, 75, 1, p.80; Fiona Hill, 'The United States and Russia in Central Asia: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran', *The Aspen Institute Congressional Program*, August 15, 2002, p. 29

²⁴ See Z Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geo-strategic Imperatives*, New York: Basic books, 1997; A.M. Jaffe and Martha Brill Olcott, 'The geopolitics of Caspian Energy', in Dov Lynch & Y. Kalyuzhnova (eds.), *Euro-Asia: A Period of Transition*, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2000; J. Stanislaw and D. Yergin, 'Oil: reopening the door', *Foreign Affairs*, 72, 4, 1993.

game, but also of ideological contestation.’²⁵ However, this ideological contestation, according to Blank, is one fought over the Central Asian region by Russia and China via their ‘neo-colonialist programmes and policies’ where national governments recede in importance, becoming as pawns in the hands of real players. This geopolitical logic is made more explicit in Brzezinski’s *The Grand Chessboard*. It adopts Mackinder’s ‘Heartland’ and the ‘New Great Game’ to speak influentially to Washington policy-makers.²⁶ Such strategic thinking in the US Department of Defence seems to have been a particularly important discursive dynamic in constituting the illusion of common interests. The Karimov-Rumsfeld relationship seems to have been integral to maintaining the strategic partnership until 2004.²⁷

However, US discourses also include two important elements which contrast with Tashkent’s understandings. In spatial terms, Washington tended to see Uzbekistan in terms of the region as a whole, including Afghanistan. In many ways Central Asia constitutes a single space in US discourse. Moreover, despite a huge and dramatic increase in US strategic involvement following 9/11 after the establishment of the Ganci and Kharshi-Khanabad military bases, it is not clear that the region is seen as especially important in its own terms, apart from its significance for Afghanistan.²⁸ Hill notes,

The primary American interest is in security, in preventing the “Afghanicisation” of Central Asia and the spawning of more terrorist groups with transnational reach that can threaten the stability of the interlocking regions and strike the United States.²⁹

Policy-makers have proved inclined to reduce the region’s specificities via even greater spatial obfuscation. In the Secretary of Defence’s 2002 report to Congress it was identified as part of an ‘arc of instability’ from the Middle East to North East Asia.³⁰

²⁵ Stephen Blank, ‘Making sense of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation’s Astana summit’, *Central Asia – Caucasus Analyst*, Wednesday July 27, 2005, available at: http://www.cacianalyst.org/view_article.php?articleid=3504; accessed: 09/10/05

²⁶ Igor Torbakov, ‘Reexamining Old Concepts about the Caucasus and Central Asia’, Eurasianet, 4 February 2004, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav020404a.shtml>, accessed: 10 April 2004.

²⁷ Meppen, Op. Cit., Ref. 18, p.30

²⁸ MacFarlane, op.cit., Ref. 3; Hill, Op. Cit., Ref. 23, p.17; Wishnick, op.cit., Ref. 21, p. 1

²⁹ Hill, Op. Cit., Ref. 23, p.18

³⁰ Cited in Wishnick, op.cit., Ref. 21, p.6

Thirdly, and in some tension with the first point above, US policy discourses had a strong normative dimension born out of a liberal-democratic ethical framework. This discursive direction was particularly prominent in the State Department and liberal internationalist or ‘Wilsonian’ accounts of US foreign policy. For Hill, reflecting statebuilding discourse, Central Asian states are challenged by ‘extreme domestic fragility’.³¹ Since 9/11, American development thinking has shifted somewhat from democratization via civil society where NGOs become the primary interlocutors, to statebuilding where attention is refocused on governmental reform. Nevertheless, both tracks have been pursued in similar ways by US-supported programmes across the region. One of the final USAID-funded community development programmes to be funded in the region was the Community Action Investment Programme (CAIP) which aimed to, ‘help prevent conflicts and promote broad-based citizen dialogue and participation [...]; resulting in improved standards of living, more active and engaged citizens and more open, accountable local government.’³² Such programmes blend statebuilding and reformist goals, and are consequently viewed with suspicion in Tashkent. In 2001 and 2002, such discursive orientations allowed U.S. policy-makers across departments to find and emphasise the importance of ‘reform-minded moderates’ in Uzbek policy circles.³³

Tashkent’s World

Many of the same metaphors are deployed in Uzbek discourses, and texts such as *The Grand Chessboard* and ‘the Heartland’ thesis are widely popular in the region³⁴, yet they are invoked in terms of quite different discursive assumptions.

Firstly, Uzbek analysts, deploying traditional geopolitical thinking, distinguish between the US and Russia/China in terms of their place in the region, seeing the former as an ‘external’ player in a way that Russia and even China are not. Khassanov, for example, picks up on the Heartland thesis’s determination of

³¹ Hill, Op. Cit., Ref. 23, p.19

³² Mercy Corps Central Asia Region, ‘Final Report for the Community Action Investment Program (CAIP)’, August, 2005, p.1

³³ Meppen, Op. Cit., Ref. 18, p.22

³⁴ Bahodirjon Ergashev, ‘Determinism versus Friction: A Critique of MacKinder,’ *Central Asia and The Caucasus*, Special Issue, No.4 (34), 2005, p.81; Sevara Sharapova, ‘MacKinder’s “Heartland” Theory and the Atlantic Community’, *Central Asia and The Caucasus*, Special Issue, No.4 (34), 2005, pp.103-116.

‘outer’ actors and attributes this designation to the United States.³⁵ The heartland thesis brings a geopolitical basis for this dynamic with its notions of the ‘inner crescent’ (including Russia and China) and ‘outer crescent’ (including the United States). Khassanov argues that this has certain implications for the foreign policies of Central Asian states including Uzbekistan. Khassanov argues,

The new sovereign states located on post-Soviet territory, including Central Asia should rid themselves of any illusions about a new world order, and accept the controversial rules of survival in the modern world. They are located on Halford MacKinder’s Heartland, an ongoing site of international struggle, and must act accordingly.³⁶

This representation of Central Asia as a location of primary importance for conflicting ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ powers is also apparent in official transcripts. In a January 2005 interview, Karimov echoed the Heartland thesis in noting, ‘the main geostrategic players of the planet compete for influence in the most important - from all points of view - region of Central Asia.’³⁷ Moreover, he noted that cooperation between such powers was unnatural.

When in Kyrgyzstan two aerodromes - Russian and American - are located at 30 km from each other, I don't quite understand this. This is not only demonstration of power - this is *not natural*.³⁸

Secondly, the Tashkent view privileges an ethics of ‘stability’ and ‘authority’ over reform. Analysts and policy-makers posit very different ethical and temporal understandings of what constitutes progress. In discussing the power political battle between Russia and the United States, Khassanov reveals the underlying assumptions which prioritise neo-Soviet goals, with reference to post-Soviet example:

³⁵ Ulugbeck Khasanov, ‘On Modern Geo-Political Pluralism or One Nation Hegemonism’, *Central Asia and The Caucasus*, Special Issue, No.4 (34), 2005, p.36

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ ‘Islam Karimov excludes possibility of ‘colour’ revolution’, Press Service of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 01/18/2005, http://www.press-service.uz/eng/rechi_eng/rechi_eng32.htm, accessed 1 February 2005, [No pagination]

³⁸ Ibid., [No pagination, my emphasis]

Whereas the United States is at the zenith of its might, Russia is weakened by years of thoughtless, hasty and destructive “restructuring” [*perestroika*] and reforms, which have actually resulted in the degeneration of the state and the reduction in its ability to direct the political, economic and social life of the country.³⁹

The significance here is not in the placing of the US over Russia, but in the imagining of the US as stable and in control in a way that Russia under Yeltsin was not. Kyrgyzstan is often used as the archetypal anti-model by Karimov, a place out of control due to its failure to control political and economic forces within its territory.⁴⁰ Such portrayals contribute to a fundamentally different imaginary of reform idealised in official portrayals of ‘national independence’.⁴¹ As sovereign representatives, Uzbek policy-makers expected to be treated as equals by the United States.⁴²

Thirdly, Uzbek elites deploy a much broader definition of what constitutes ‘threat’ than that inscribed by (already expansive) US definitions of terrorism. It includes *inter alia* ‘democracy-promoting’ organisations and their international donors. This is apparent in the derogatory discussion of ‘coloured revolution’ which was prevalent across the region following Georgia’s ‘Rose Revolution’ of 2003 and especially Ukraine’s ‘Orange Revolution’ of late 2004. Such events were not only seen as evidence of the threat constituted by democracy-promoting groups, but also the sinister hand of foreign powers. Karimov linked foreign NGOs conducting seminars with young people with US intervention in Iraq as examples of, technologies of the so-called “promotion of democracy”. On the former he contended, ‘during various symposiums and seminars, [a] methodical process of brainwashing takes place. They prepare people that call themselves “citizens of the world” and say there will be no borders soon.’⁴³ When an uprising by opposition elites in Kyrgyzstan in February and March 2005 led to the removal of the Akayev government, Uzbek elites joined a cacophony of criticism against ‘the West’. For instance, a front-page article published in the newspaper *Novosti*

³⁹ Ulugbeck Khasanov, ‘On Modern Geo-Political Pluralism or One Nation Hegemonism’, *Central Asia and The Caucasus*, Special Issue, No.4 (34), 2005, p.31

⁴⁰ ‘Islam Karimov excludes possibility of ‘colour’ revolution’, Op. Cit., Ref. 36

⁴¹ Islam Karimov, *Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge, MA, 1998.

⁴² Meppen, Op. Cit., Ref. 18, p.21

⁴³ ‘Islam Karimov excludes possibility of ‘colour’ revolution,’ Op. Cit., Ref. 36

Uzbekistana blamed the United States for fomenting instability in the region. ‘The West,’ it noted ‘thoughtlessly applied the technologies of the ‘colour revolutions’ in Central Asia.’⁴⁴ However, these efforts backfired as ‘those who wanted democracy [in Kyrgyzstan] got complete anarchy.’⁴⁵ Such analyses are notable for their *act of othering* – where Western actors are unquestioningly lumped into a single whole with Western NGOs acting as footsoldiers for their governments under the banner of ‘the West’.⁴⁶ Such representations mirror ‘the other’ of Washington’s ‘Central Asia’, a place that needs ‘more, open accountable local government’.

Contingency and irreconcilable differences: colliding representations⁴⁷

Such discursively-constructed divisions worked against the constructive ambiguity of ‘partnership’ and are the major constitutive dynamic of the split. Their specific contrasts produced the conflicting testimonies by which the strategic partnership was deconstructed. However, it would be an act of crude discursive determinism to suggest that these differences made the split inevitable. Rather it was the specific events during the Andijon massacre of May 2005 and its aftermath which brought these different viewpoints into sharp focus. For the Tashkent regime, Andijon was the very kind of local difficulty that a partnership with the United States would help it suppress. Whereas for US policy-makers who believed in the reform instincts of the regime, the government’s response to Andijon was the very thing they were seeking to avoid. In hindsight, these tensions suggest a ticking bomb waiting to explode in US policy-maker’s faces. However, these kinds of tensions between so-called realist and liberal-idealist tracks are a habitual feature of American foreign policy. Thus, in 2005 one big event, interpreted through the increasingly conflicting discourses of both partners, led to a swift and sudden shift from tension to divorce. A brief discussion of the

⁴⁴ Eurasia Insight, ‘Uzbekistan serves United States with airbase eviction notice’, 01/08/05, available at: <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav080105.shtml>, accessed: 10/08/05

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Graeme P. Herd, ‘Colorful revolutions and the CIS’, *Problems of Post-Communism*, 52, 2, March/April 2005, p.4

⁴⁷ This section is a development of the account of the Andijon crisis in John Heathershaw, *Op Cit*, Ref 13.

Andijon events allows us to pick out the role of the discursive environment in deconstructing 'partnership' and ending the strategic alliance.

Pre-Andijon: unstable ambiguity

Whilst Andijon precipitated a sudden conclusion to the short-lived US-Uzbek strategic partnership, the rupture was by no means unprecedented. According to insiders had been brewing for at least two years and had been foreshadowed in earlier tensions.⁴⁸ The 13 July 2004 freezing of a small amount of US aid to Uzbekistan due to Uzbekistan's poor human rights record, was prompted by Congress' insertion of human rights baselines into the 2004 Foreign Operations Act.⁴⁹ This caused considerable resentment in Tashkent. While in orthodox geopolitical analysis this would have registered as a small blip, which had little bearing on the material interests driving the relationship, it was an indication of the problems that may lie ahead for the US-Uzbek ties. Russian and Uzbek policy analysts provided different interpretations to the plaudits granted by US-based human rights groups.⁵⁰ To Human Rights Watch the decision was 'a welcome show of principled leadership'. By contrast, most commentators within the region recognised it as an unwise attempt to challenge Tashkent's authority, its position of leadership. Arkadii Dubnov, for example, wrote in Moscow's *Vremya Novostei*, that it was 'a very public slap in the face for the Uzbek regime.'⁵¹ These contrasting regional and Western interpretations foreshadow the war of words prompted by the Andijon events.

In terms of political imagination, common ground between Russian and Uzbek elites continued to be strong throughout the short-lived strategic partnership with the US. In this sense, a move 'back' to Russia should not be seen as unexpected. Before the freezing of aid was confirmed, Karimov was already signaling a formal intensifying of ties with Russia. On 16 June 2004, they signed a wide-ranging 'strategic partnership', including 'the right to use military facilities on each others territory'. Moreover, substantial commercial and economic relations with Russia, which had continued throughout this time, were enhanced

⁴⁸ Meppen, Op. Cit., Ref. 18, p.31

⁴⁹ Meppen, Op. Cit., Ref. 18, pp.23-24.

⁵⁰ See RFE/RL, 'US Aid to Uzbekistan: carrots and sticks', Central Asia Report, Vol. 4, No. 28, 21 July 2004

⁵¹ Cited in Ibid.

with a substantial exploitation agreement between Russia's LUKoil and Uzbekistan's state-owned oil and gas company Uzbekneftegaz.⁵² Karimov compared his country's two partnerships in a January 2005 interview with Russia's *Nezavisimaya Gazetta*. The partnership, he noted, 'brings us, our people, our countries, which are bound with thousands of ties, millions of human fates, closer.'⁵³ Moreover, he went on to restate the consistent Uzbek position that the US base would no longer be needed, 'after the completion of the antiterrorist operation in Afghanistan,' adding, 'we understand well what our sovereignty is and will defend it.'⁵⁴

Andijon: elusive ambiguity

On 12-13 May 2005, an uprising by armed oppositionists of the 'Akramiya' group in the town of Andijan in the Ferghana Valley of Uzbekistan led to a severe response by the authorities and the deaths of many rebels, troops and civilians.⁵⁵ The details of the Andijon events have been obscured by the poor quality or complete lack of independent investigation, due to the Uzbek government's refusal to give access.⁵⁶ With a profound absence of anything approaching 'established facts', judgements have been drawn strictly along ideological lines. The Uzbek authorities have declared that 187 soldiers and militants died in the fighting. However, the accounts of human rights groups and journalists estimate between 500-1,000 deaths, including many innocent bystanders.⁵⁷ The OSCE, which may offer the nearest thing to a balanced assessment, yet one clearer much nearer to that of Western governments, has suggested that between 300 and 500 were killed.⁵⁸

⁵² 'Assessing the Russian-Uzbek Rapprochement', RFE/RL Central Asia Report, Vol. 4, No. 24, 23 June 2004

⁵³ 'Islam Karimov excludes possibility of 'colour' revolution', Op. Cit., Ref. 36

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ For a discussion of the details of the event see, Daniel Kimmage, 'What really happened on Uzbekistan's bloody Friday?', *RFE/RL Central Asia Report*, Vol. 5, No. 18, 17 May 2005

⁵⁶ The exception is Shirin Akiner's 'independent investigation' of the Andijon uprising which will be discussed later in this article.

⁵⁷ For example, the International Crisis Group suggests 'possibly as many as 750' victims. International Crisis Group, 'The Andijon Uprising', Asia Briefing No. 38, Bishkek./Brussels, 25 May 2005

⁵⁸ OSCE/ODIHR, 'Preliminary Findings on Events in Andijan', Warsaw, 20 June 2005, available at: http://www.osce.org/documents/odihr/2005/06/15233_en.pdf,

Criticism of Uzbekistan began on the day itself. White House press secretary Scot McClellan condemned 'the indiscriminate use of force against unarmed civilians' and called for both an international investigation and 'more open and responsive government' on the part of Uzbekistan.⁵⁹ Others were more openly critical. On May 29, following a visit to Uzbekistan, the high-profile Senator John McCain reported the Andijon events, 'to be shocking but not unexpected in a country that does not allow the exercise of human rights and democracy.'⁶⁰ With increasing domestic pressure President Bush himself repeated calls for an investigation on May 31.⁶¹ These testimonies clearly continue a long US tradition of speaking out on human rights abuses, yet the magnitude of events dictated that these representations were made both at a higher-level and with greater frequency than they might otherwise have been. Two over-arching factors are also important in constituting an official American condemnation of the Karimov regime. Firstly, the role of European allies, particularly the UK, seems to have been significant. The recently re-elected UK government, having received a greatly-reduced majority largely due to mistrust of its foreign policy, led the European Union call for an 'independent investigation' and, following a meeting with Rice, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw was outspoken in his criticism.⁶² The EU imposed a deadline of 30 June 2005 for Uzbekistan to authorise such an investigation and, when it was ignored, eventually imposed sanctions on 3 October 2005. Secondly, the period 2004-2005 was the apex of US democratization discourse in the Middle East. US policy-makers battled to justify the war in Iraq, represent Lebanon and Libya as victories in attempts to democratise the 'wider Middle East', and keep European allies on board with the venture by emphasising its promotion of human rights in the region. In such a context, it is difficult to imagine how the US could not have come out in condemnation against the Andijon killings.

The Uzbek government was deeply offended by this response and refused to even consider the call for an international investigation. Such a climbdown

⁵⁹ John C.K. Daly, Kurt H. Meppen, Vladimir Socor and S. Frederick Starr, *Anatomy of a Crisis: US-Uzbekistan Relations, 2001-2005*, Silk Road Paper, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, February 2006, pp.96-97

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.98

⁶¹ Ibid., pp.98-99

⁶² 'Straw visits US amid Uzbek crisis', BBC News, 17 May 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/4553937.stm

would shatter the public representation of the state as absolutely sovereign over its own territory. Tashkent had presented the presence of American troops on its soil as a matter of national prestige, an act of state-to-state cooperation which illustrated Tashkent's importance for the international community. Thus, Karimov responded bitterly to the American reaction in a press conference a few days after the massacre. He couched his comments in terms of the supremacy of national sovereignty:

Uzbekistan is a sovereign state. ...I can even say in advance what [the international investigators'] conclusions would be. The conclusions would be no different from those in Chechnya and other countries. We would be responsible for it for the rest of our lives, as if we were a guilty country and, as a poor thing, [be obligated to] beg them for forgiveness.⁶³

While these comments are obviously emotive they exhibit a particularly exclusive conception of national sovereignty. 'Uzbekistan,' he noted, 'has never been and will not be directed by anyone's policy [*idti v farvatere chey-libo politiki*], by any power, however great they are.'⁶⁴ Such testimonies are born out of a political imaginary which idealises an authoritarian conception of 'stability'. Thus, the illusory 'partnership' quickly became elusive. The 'reforming Uzbekistan' (for American policy-makers) and its 'American partner' (for Uzbek elites) quickly ceased to exist.

Post-Andijon: irretrievable ambiguity?

As agent choices are mediated by discourse, so the reproduction of discourse is mediated through agent choices. Several key academic- and policy-practitioners played key roles before and after Andijon in conditioning Western responses. Some reflected the contrasts in Uzbek and US narratives, others challenged them. Pressure from Former UK Ambassador to Uzbekistan Craig Murray clearly embarrassed the UK government and led to it eventually coming to an

⁶³ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 'The Plight of Sovereignty in Uzbekistan', *RFE/RL Central Asia Report*, Vol. 5, No. 20, 2 June 2005

⁶⁴ Ferghana.Ru, 'Karimov at Press Conference: "Uzbekistan is not directed by the USA"', [*'Karimov na Brifinge: "Uzbekistan ne idyot v Favatare S.S.H.A."*'], www.ferghana.ru, 18/05/05, 8.26am.

unequivocal criticism of the killings by the Uzbek government. Murray, who had been outspoken against the human rights abuses of the Uzbek government, was widely publicised by the UK media leading up to and after his removal from the post in 2004. He subsequently ran against Jack Straw in the May 2005 general election, just a week before the Andijon uprising.⁶⁵ UK foreign policy seems to have had a key role here in triggering US calls for an inquiry. On the other hand, some prominent academic experts in the West, in particular Shirin Akiner and Frederick Starr, argued for the continuation of the partnership and a representation of Uzbekistan as reforming.⁶⁶ Unfortunately for those who had ‘staked their credibility, and in some cases their careers, on the validity of this proposition’⁶⁷, their ‘independent’ advice had been drowned out by the storm of events.

Tashkent quickly found allies among its post-Soviet neighbours who offered it a new home to perform its particularly post- or neo-Soviet discourse of sovereignty. Central Asia once again provided a place for Uzbek officials to stand up in defence of a more dominant, even transcendental, vision of the state. Similar accounts of Andijon were found across the region. Political analysts in Russia widely endorsed the Uzbek government’s version of the Andijon events. For example, Migranyan argues with some satisfaction that American strategies in support of revolution may have worked elsewhere but, ‘it was in Uzbekistan that, for the first time in the post-Soviet world, “coloured” revolutions [sic.] received a short, sharp shock.’⁶⁸ Reaction from Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and even ‘revolutionary’ Kyrgyzstan also reflected this fear of coloured revolution and instability across the region. Discourse tended to link the events in Uzbekistan with those in Kyrgyzstan as challenges to legitimate authority and stability in the region. This is maintained even though the differences between the two are arguably greater than the similarities: one was a popular change of political power which was of only limited violence, and the other was an extremely violent, localised and unsuccessful uprising.

⁶⁵ See, Craig Murray, *Murder in Samarkand*

⁶⁶ Akiner, Shirin, ‘Violence in Andijon, 13 May 2005: An Independent Assessment’, Silk Road Paper, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, (July 2005); John C.K. Daly, Kurt H. Meppen, Vladimir Socor and S. Frederick Starr, Op.Cit, Ref. 56.

⁶⁷ Starr, Op.Cit, Ref.22, p.5

⁶⁸ Quoted in Daniel Kimmage, ‘Central Asia: Is regional turbulence a return of the great game?’, RFE/RL Central Asia Report, Vol. 5, No. 27, 21 July 2005

These contrasting representations constructed conflicting policy-practices between the US and regional governments. The Russian government arrested and made arrangements to extradite those the Uzbek government accuses of participation in Andijon, while the UN and Western governments put pressure on the Kyrgyz government to allow several hundred refugees to leave the region. At a June 2005 gathering of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) in Moscow, members states explicitly declined to support the US and EU's call for an independent investigation into the Andijon events.⁶⁹ Two weeks later – at a Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit of 5 July 2005 – Russia, neighbouring states and China again defended Uzbekistan's actions and came out against calls for an investigation. 'In the sphere of human rights it is necessary to strictly and consistently respect historical traditions and the national customs of every people,' noted the summit declaration, 'as well as the sovereign equality of all states.'⁷⁰ At the same time they made a joint call for the US to consider removing its bases from Central Asia. The Russian Foreign Ministry noted that such forces were 'non-regional' and 'must be rolled back [*dolzno byt svernuto*]'.⁷¹ On 29 July, the final speech act of the unwinding of the partnership was made. The government of Uzbekistan wrote to the US embassy in Tashkent demanding the removal of the US airbase at Kharshi-Khanabad within six months. The last U.S. flight out of the airbase took place in November 2005 as Uzbekistan signed a further strategic cooperation agreement with Russia.

Implications for (the study of) Central Asia: enduring representations

The evidently powerful role of representation in deconstructing the US-Uzbekistan strategic 'partnership' ought to cause us to question how both Central Asian and international policy-makers actually make foreign policy. How do understandings and representations of sovereignty and space intersect with the known calculations of officials to affect strategic policy? An analysis based in

⁶⁹ Sergei Blagov, Eurasia Insight, 'The Geopolitical balance in Central Asia tilts toward Russia', 06/07/05, available at: <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/pp070905.shtml>, accessed: 24/07/05

⁷⁰ Cited in Ibid.

⁷¹ Vladimir Socor, 'The Unfolding of the U.S.-Uzbekistan Crisis,' in John C.K. Daly, Kurt H. Meppen, Vladimir Socor and S. Frederick Starr, *Anatomy of a Crisis: US-Uzbekistan Relations, 2001-2005*, Silk Road Paper, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, February 2006, p.49

critical geopolitics would seek to reveal how such representations of ideas and identity privilege the continuation of geopolitics as normal. Strikingly, despite their evident failure to explain the US-Uzbek alliance and divorce, a very familiar set of assumptions are being deployed in the aftermath of Andijon to explain away the turn of events in both the United States and Uzbekistan. The breakdown of the partnership and subsequent developments highlight two broad implications for both the region and our study of it.

Geopolitics in Central Asia: the power of 'insiders'

The first implication relates to the social construction of geopolitical space. Classical international relations and geopolitical theory draws its primary spatial distinctions in terms of 'internal' politics 'inside' a sovereign state, and 'external' international politics 'outside' and 'between' states. Both representations of the partnership broadly reproduced this distinction yet they did so in quite contrasting ways. For most US policy-makers, sovereignty is both more limited and contingent. Moreover, the normative dimension of American discourse justifies international intervention in cases of extreme human rights violations. Uzbek elites, by contrast, have a much more limited conception of what the 'international community' is or should be. This most certainly does not extend to the use of external investigations and sanctions against sovereign states. Thus, in the social construction of geopolitical space it tends to distinguish between 'inside' actors of the 'former Soviet' or 'Heartland' space, and 'outside' actors such as the EU states and US. The primary implication here is that a seemingly territorial boundary of the region is in fact socially constructed. The differences are not natural but continually reproduced under the weight of habit and precedence.

US analysts and policy-makers have continually mistook the nature of local geopolitical imaginaries, and reproduced an orientalist vision of Central Asia as a battleground of essentially similar great powers for essentially despotic places in desperate need of democratic reform. Writing after Andijon, Blank contends that such turbulent events are indeed proof of the geopolitical importance and instability of the region. 'The overlay of ideological and strategic rivalry,' he notes, 'thus creates conditions in Central Asia not just of a great game but also of

a strategic bipolarity reminiscent of the Cold War in the Third World.⁷² Such testimonies reproduce the Central Asian other, a region on the periphery, more akin to the colonial frontier of Afghanistan than related to the Slavic states of the Former Soviet Union. Revealingly, this has even been reflected in the re-organisation of the US state department. By late-2005, the department of European and Eurasian affairs had lost responsibility for the Central Asian region which had been incorporated into a South and Central Asian section. In itself this bureaucratic change reflects US thinking about Central Asia as a region apart from the Former Soviet Slavic states. The move is a particularly fascinating one which reveals much about how discourse shapes even the structure of foreign policy-making institutions. Such representations of geopolitical ‘reality’ reaffirm the status of the United States as an ‘outsider’ power which fails to perform sovereignty in a manner conducive to the imaginaries and interests of regional elites.

Such orientalist representations of central Asia are vehemently opposed by regional elites who often see themselves as more European than Asian. Ironically, it is this elite representation of a ‘European’ Uzbekistan – for secularism, modernisation and closeness to Europe – which might have helped build the illusion of strategic partnership from 2001. For example, the long-term usage of the term ‘civil society’ in official discourse indicates an aspiration of a ‘European’ society, yet its articulation via formal, state-led processes exhibits decidedly neo-Soviet ethics.⁷³ Thus, Uzbekistan’s European sympathies never meant that it accepted ‘European’ standards of human rights but rather that it wished to represent Uzbekistan as undergoing a ‘European’-style of development which could be represented in terms of neo-soviet maxims of ‘stability’ and ‘authority’. This illustrates the post-Soviet nature of the Uzbekistani elite: aspiring to capitalist, ‘European’ modernisation yet doing so via neo-Soviet registers of discourse and thought. This tension is important as its ambiguity can be either a constructive or deconstructive basis for ‘partnership’ with the US. US and European responses, post-Andijon forced an alternative representation of what it means to be both ‘European’ and sovereign onto an Uzbek elite. They effectively

⁷² Stephen Blank, ‘Making sense of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation’s Astana summit’, *Central Asia – Caucasus Analyst*, Wednesday July 27, 2005, available at:

http://www.cacianalyst.org/view_article.php?articleid=3504; accessed: 09/10/05

⁷³ ‘Islam Karimov excludes possibility of ‘colour’ revolution’, *Op. Cit.*, Ref. 36

ended constructive ambiguity and dispensed with the illusion that the US and Uzbekistan might actually be talking about the same kind of relationship that had kept the partnership going.

A further irony of these (mis)representations of Uzbekistan and Central Asia is that they have served to push regional political elites eastwards, towards Russia and China. Throughout 2006, Uzbek foreign policy has continued to focus on relations with Russia and SCO member states. It has included a strong performative element, in rejoining the CSTO in August activities such as military exercises in Krasnodar in September⁷⁴, which would have been difficult from 2001-2005 when Tashkent was trying to manage the representational ambiguities of a partnership with the US. The Putin government, in particular, also imagines itself in 'European' terms and similarly performs its sovereignty according to 'neo-Soviet' practices. Such representations are common across the member states of the SCO. The major pre-Andijon trend continued here is the rise of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation as what Allison calls a 'macro-regional organisation' for balancing against the United States.⁷⁵ Similar to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and numerous other central Asian regional organisations it must firstly be seen as a body for the performance of regional ideas about sovereignty and international relations rather than a functional organisation for cooperation or integration. The 'Shanghai Covenant on the Suppression of Terrorism, Separatism and Religious [Extremism]', for example, is significant as a means of re-producing regional understandings of fighting terror.

US Foreign Policy in central Asia: the limits of the 'outsider'

The crisis with Uzbekistan has profound implications for US foreign policy. It illustrates the dire need for humility on the part of policy-makers about the limits of US power. Today, the US position in the region is precarious. Since the last flight by US military aircraft from Kharshi-Khanabad in November 2005, US

⁷⁴ Sergei Blagov, 'Russia seeks closer military ties with Uzbekistan', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Monday, September 25, 2006 -- Volume 3, Issue 176; Roger N. McDermott, 'Karimov prioritises Russian Armaments', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Monday, September 25, 2006 -- Volume 3, Issue 176; *RFE/RL Newslines*, Vol. 10, No. 152, Part I, 18 August 2006

⁷⁵ Roy Allison, 'Regionalism, regional structures and security management in Central Asia', *International Affairs*, 80, 3p.478

policy-makers have begun to look, thus far unsuccessfully, at possibilities for a rapprochement with Uzbekistan. Yet the inquest prompted by the events of 2005 seems to have led to very little introspection. In August 2006, on the first official American visit to Tashkent since the Andijon massacre, the Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher, reasserted that the US would continue to 'take necessary steps' in defence of human rights in Uzbekistan.⁷⁶ Moreover, he remarked in his 2006 testimony to congress:

Central Asia faces numerous threats to its stability, including Islamic extremism, a population that remains poor and has little economic opportunity, the post-Soviet legacy of authoritarianism, public perceptions of injustice, and high levels of corruption.⁷⁷

Discursively underwriting such outlooks is the assumption that 'they' ought to be more like 'us' – that is, more like who we imagine ourselves to be. Thus, Giragosian notes, 'what is essential for Central Asia is a continued and even greater US commitment', as opposed to regional cooperation through organisations such as the SCO.⁷⁸ Furthermore, to suggest that Central Asian states 'simply followed' Putin in the SCO statement of 5 July 2005, as some have⁷⁹, fails to acknowledge that they have political imaginaries of their own which might be closer to those of the Putin government.

Where introspection has occurred it has been limited. So-called realists who had long argued that the democratisation agenda must be downplayed in order to maintain the strategic partnership argue that the US was not being 'real' enough. Starr notes,

As U.S. and European pressure increased in the area of democratisation and human rights, both Russia and China were able to dangle before Tashkent alliances based on a less rigorous standard in these areas, yet promising greater rewards than were forthcoming from Washington. Both were pursuing long-term

⁷⁶ Bruce Pannier, 'Uzbekistan: US Assistant Secretary of State offers cooperation, criticism,' *Eurasianet Insight*, 8/10/06.

⁷⁷ Cited in Michael Mihalka, 'Counterinsurgency, Counterterrorism, State-building and Security Cooperation in Central Asia', *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2006, p.133

⁷⁸ Giragosian, Op.Cit., Ref.2, p.152

⁷⁹ Socor, Op.Cit., Ref.71, pp.47-50

strategic objectives, which they could present as less threatening to Tashkent than the U.S.'s preoccupations.⁸⁰

However, to speak of American 'preoccupations' with democratisation and Russian and Chinese 'less rigorous standards' on human rights fails to grasp the constitutive nature of democracy-promotion to the American self-image, and the equally important place of 'authority' and 'stability', in varying ways, in the political imaginations of Russian and Chinese policy-makers. It is the realists here that are simply not real enough.

Reality is much more complex. The US has maintained a normative dimension to its policy towards Uzbekistan over its fifteen years of independence yet it is difficult to see what difference this has made to the nature of government in the country. Whilst this 'political imaginary' was a vital part of the constitution of a 'strategic partnership' with Uzbekistan, this very ambiguity necessitated the simulation of reform rather than the meaningful practice thereof. Pressure for reform ended this ambiguity and thus the 'partnership' which represented the illusion that reform was possible without radical change in Uzbekistan. Limited cooperation between the US and Uzbekistan may be renewed, yet – without substantial political change in Uzbekistan – this will pale in comparison to the extent or 'quality' of partnership which can be achieved with Russia and China. No amount of cajoling and threatening can sustain a long-term strategic relationship with Karimov's Uzbekistan without a substantial retreat from the normative dimensions of US foreign policy. This is not unprecedented – as the case of Saudi Arabia would seem to show – but it is unlikely. For both American policy-makers and voters this would constitute a fundamental shift in how they see America's role in the world. Strategists who seek to expunge US foreign policy of its liberalising zeal overlook how both liberalism and zealousness are intrinsic to American identity and thus the legitimacy of its government. It may be that in this sense, American foreign policy is more about 'US' than 'Them'.⁸¹

In short, the US-Uzbek crisis provides critical implications for both the nature of regional international relations and the study thereof. Firstly, Central

⁸⁰ Starr, Op.Cit., Ref.22, pp.11-12.

⁸¹ David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States foreign policy and the politics of identity*, Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1992.

Asia is a spatial, discursively constructed international political space where China and Russia are written as 'insider' powers. Thus, the United States is understood as a qualitatively different actor in the region than Russia or China. It is an 'outside' actor which must downplay its outsiders' expectations and representations and construct an illusion of 'partnership'. US policy-makers and analysts who wish to leave some American democratisation baggage at the door partially understand this puzzle. Socor, for example, notes that 'Washington allowed itself to be caught in a false dilemma, strategic security versus democracy, regarding Uzbekistan, and began to single out that country for a one-sided resolution of that false dilemma'.⁸² Such analyses are empirically correct in recognising the problem that these normative stances cause for a state such as Uzbekistan. However, I would argue this is not a 'false dilemma' but an inherent and irresolvable contradiction in US policy towards Central Asia in the contemporary era. That the US is essentially equivalent to Russia and China is an illusion sustained by traditional geopolitical analysis. Moreover, it is qualitatively less powerful in the region than either of its rivals, and will remain so whilst regional governments continue to imagine politics according to neo-Soviet 'insider' ethics.

Conclusions

The primary implication of the crisis for the study of the region is that classical geopolitical accounts of Central Asia, favoured by most influential analysts, distort the nature of international affairs in the region. By such accounts objective national interests derived from physical and material realities trump subjective ideas and identities. An analysis of critical geopolitics, such as that followed in this paper and elsewhere⁸³, illustrates how such ideas and identities are intrinsic to both US and Uzbek foreign policy. If US policy-makers cease to stand up for human rights, then they cease to represent 'America'. If the Uzbek government ceases to be the final arbiter of what constitutes 'human rights' or 'democracy' in Uzbekistan then that country as we know it will cease to exist. Thus, such geopolitical analysts are theoretically inadequate. They fail to grasp the

⁸² Socor, Op.cit, Ref.71, p.64

⁸³ Nick Megoran, 'The politics of using Mackinder's geopolitics: the example of Uzbekistan', *Central Asia and The Caucasus*, Special Issue, No.4 (34), 2005

intrinsically illusory nature of ‘partnership’, the irreconcilable differences between state actors, and the implications for Central Asia in international politics.

This paper has argued that the partnership was always an illusion in that it was built on quite contrasting representations of each other and what the partnership did and did not entail. Whilst at first these contrasts lead to a formal vagueness and a constructive ambiguity, this particular ambiguity was made unsustainable by the combination of the precipitous nature of its representational contrasts. Collision, which was always probable, became inevitable with the Andijon uprising. However, this collision has not caused a fundamental rethink of the forms of representation which keep the US on the ‘outside’ of Central Asia and China and Russia on the ‘inside’. Political imaginaries have proved enduring and a combined with a traditional geopolitical analysis to preclude any substantial reflexivity or critical inquiry. For Uzbek policy-makers the ‘otherness’ of the United States was confirmed by its curious commitment to human rights, which must – it was assumed – conceal ‘real’ geopolitical objectives to overthrow government through a ‘coloured revolution’. For US policy-makers the ‘otherness’ of Uzbekistan was confirmed by its ‘Asian’ approach to dissent and which confirmed their representations of the nature of the ‘territory’ which constitutes the ‘Heartland’ and hosts the ‘New Great Game’. That such policy-makers *really* practice geopolitics this way, however, does not make this the *real* nature of geopolitics. Rather, such practices demand our critical attention to the construction and deconstruction of geopolitical space in and about Central Asia.