

**ANTI-AMERICANISM AND AMERICA'S ROLE IN  
CENTRAL ASIA**

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## Executive Summary

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Rajan Menon (2003: 193)

Anti-Americanism in the Middle East...should be understood in relation not to the strength of American power in the region but to its relative weaknesses.

Timothy Mitchell (2004: 100)

When the United States led a coalition that removed the Taliban from power in Afghanistan in 2002, many believed that the US was poised to become *the* crucial great power actor in the region for years to come. Agreements with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to host military bases in those countries (as well as a variety of other arrangements with neighboring Tajikistan and Kazakhstan) and increasing US economic strength (unrivaled by Chinese and Russian economic power) seemed to imply a strong US presence and potentially enduring impact.

By 2005, the picture had changed dramatically. Uzbekistan had abruptly ended its basing contract with the US (Cooley 2008), Russia had begun to reassert control over its historical sphere of influence (largely via its reemerging economic prowess), a new Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) had become increasingly interested in pushing back against the US, and the United States was bogged down in a guerilla war in Iraq. By 2007 US power in the region had declined precipitously.

Was the US powerful in Central Asia, as Menon's epigraph suggests, or was it rather weaker, as Mitchell's epigraph describes regarding the Middle East? In this paper, I argue that the influence of the United States should not be reduced to its military presence, its traction in

geopolitical standoffs, or its access to economic resources. Rather, I want to suggest that the US role is both more diffuse and more recursive than usual discussions of foreign policy allow. I consider the role that the US plays by addressing the emergence of anti-Americanism in Central Asia and argue that by viewing the US as a *symbolic* actor, we gain crucial analytic leverage on US influence in the region. “America” is of course a geographic term that encapsulates much more than the United States; I use “America” to emphasize the symbolic power of the image. For many in Central Asia, as is true elsewhere, “America” was a term filled with mythic content—positive for some, negative for others—with identifiable political influence.

This paper makes a three-fold argument. First, the typical ways of thinking about great power foreign policy in Central Asia are incomplete, at best. Second, the Central Asian experience since 1991 gives the lie to much thinking about anti-Americanism. Third, anti-Americanism is usefully viewed as a master frame that enables and constrains various social movements in Central Asia. These social movements, in turn, have an impact on how US foreign policy is conducted in the region.

## **Introduction**

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<sup>1</sup> On the SCO as an instrument of Chinese foreign policy, see Karrar (2006).

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This paper makes a three-fold argument. First, the typical ways of thinking about great power foreign policy in Central Asia are incomplete, at best. Second, the Central Asian experience since 1991 gives the lie to much thinking about anti-Americanism. Third, anti-Americanism is usefully viewed as a master frame that enables and constrains various social movements in Central Asia. These social movements, in turn, have an impact on how US foreign policy is conducted in the region.

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<sup>2</sup> Nye’s (2004) discussion of “soft power” comes closest to what I have in mind.

## **Diffuse Foreign Policies, Secular Changes**

At the margins of the Western gaze since the invention of the steamship radically curtailed overland trade routes, Central Asia was suddenly thrust into the spotlight in 2001 (even if its extractive resources had garnered some attention in the 1990s) with the US campaign against the Taliban in Afghanistan. Suddenly, analysts and practitioners scrambled to mobilize categories that would make sense of the region's complexities and its rapidly changing developments.

The usual metaphor deployed to examine Central Asia was the “Great Game”—as if Central Asia were experiencing a replay of the great power competition of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the Great Game metaphor, developments in Central Asia were presented to be a function of great-power jockeying for resources and geo-strategic advantage. If the original Great Game pitted tsarist Russia against Great Britain in a rivalry for regional dominance, the reascent version had a weakened Russia (and perhaps China and Iran, as well) against the United States—a more distant but presumably more powerful actor.

Our analytic lenses are often (if not always, as Ido Oren [2003] has expertly documented) captive to our prior thinking and to our normative predispositions. As Katherine Verdery (1996, 204) once put it, “What we can understand of something depends on how we think our way into it in the first place.” And whatever its first-cut analytic value,<sup>3</sup> the metaphor had crucial shortcomings. First, by focusing on external forces, it reserved no space for Central Asians' own agency. They were depicted as acted *upon*, the victims or beneficiaries (as the case may be) of an overdetermined battle for resources and power on the part of regional and global powers.

For reasons that Gramsci would have recognized, many Central Asians uncritically

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<sup>3</sup> See Menon (2003) for a well-considered use of the metaphor.

accepted this perspective, painting themselves as pawns in global battles. For example, in the aftermath of the so-called Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, some ascribed the outcome to long-term US influence in funding and sustaining the vibrant NGO sector that played some role in the 2005 ouster of Akaev. In the simplest version of this argument, Akaev was the latest victim of Western forces that had first acted in Serbia, then Georgia, and then Ukraine.<sup>4</sup>

To take another example: the major sides involved in the Tajik Civil War (1992-7) routinely referred to Russia's role in both instigating hostilities and in ending them, forgetting that Tajiks themselves were involved in most of the atrocities.<sup>5</sup> To take one final example: the region's authoritarian rulers regularly describe radical Islam as if it were foreign (e.g., the product of Saudi influence), ignoring that many radical and militant Islamists were home-grown Central Asians. Rendering all that is noxious as "foreign" is a normal way by which communities ritually ensure their purity (Douglas 1966), but it does not make for good analysis.

The approach I take in this paper is intended to recover a perspective by which Central Asians are themselves agents. Of course, they are not actors who operate without constraints. No convincing account of Akaev's ouster, of the Tajik civil war, or of Islamism in the region would ignore external influences, and on occasion external actors weigh heavily on domestic outcomes in the region. However, any convincing account of events must also be true to how external influences are mediated, interpreted, and refracted through the prism of Central Asian power relations in particular, domestic contexts.

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<sup>4</sup> For a more nuanced and convincing account that centrally considers the role of Western training and funding, see Beissinger (2007). See also Marat (2006).

<sup>5</sup> Author's fieldnotes, May 2006 and May 2007, Khujand, Kulob, and Dushanbe, Tajikistan. As Rakhim Masov (2005: 186), a Tajik historian wrote in the midst of the 1991 civil unrest in Dushanbe, "Let the memory of our great ancestors conquer [our] enemies...Let our history and culture conquer them. Let our majestic mountains and ancient cities conquer them. Let them be damned for all times!" Masov likely had in mind Uzbeks and/or Uzbekistan, since he singled out the state elite of the latter for particular contempt in his other writings.

The second problem with Great Game perspectives is that they paid insufficient attention to *recursive processes*. I have in mind that is not enough to recognize, as Peter Gourevitch (1978) and others since him have, that domestic politics is affected and transformed by regional and global actors and that domestic politics also *affects* and *transforms* regional and global actors. My point is more fundamental—i.e., that the usual social scientific language of “outcomes,” “independent variables,” and “dependent variables” is inadequate for capturing the rapidity with which flows of power move in both directions—to and from Central Asia, to and from global and regional powers, transforming the landscape of each.<sup>6</sup> I am convinced that not all social scientific problems are amenable to research that uses this vocabulary and logic.

The third problem with the Great Game metaphor is that it left in shadow the longer-term, secular changes that all societies undergo. These changes may or may not be noticeable before they come to have a noteworthy, cumulative effect. I will suggest that the quiet changes that occur at the margins of international and domestic politics can ultimately have serious implications.

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<sup>6</sup> This is similar to what constructivists have in mind when they discuss mutually constitutive relationships. See, for example, Pouliot (2007).

## **The Ambivalence of “America”**

Popular anti-Americanism<sup>7</sup> is one of these recursive phenomena that are quietly co-constituted by both domestic and global pressures. It is not—as I wish to emphasize this point—that Central Asians were typically anti-American. Quite to the contrary, most Central Asians most of the time harbored positive views of the United States, even as they became distinctly critical of US foreign policy under the Bush administration.<sup>8</sup> But the rise of some degree of anti-Americanism since the mid-1990s is worthy of note. Moreover, this seemingly marginal phenomenon had the potential for disproportionate impact. It created what Anna Seleny (2006) calls a “reverberation effect”—the political amplification of what would normally be a fairly modest social or political development.

How should we understand anti-Americanism and its manifestations in Central Asia? There are two opposite pitfalls in the study of anti-Americanism. The first is what I will call the fallacy of inherency, the second the fallacy of reasonableness.

It is tempting to view the potential for anti-Americanism as inherent to particular political cultures or particular civilizational blocks. Work by Bernard Lewis, Barry Rubin, Samuel Huntington, Ernest Gellner, and others implies an essentialist understanding of various geographic regions. Scholars of Islam regularly mine the Koran or the Sunna for evidence of anti-liberalism. The problem is that the Koran, like any other sacred text, does not point in a straight line towards any particular political ideology. Just as some passages from the Koran, taken alone, seem at odds with the liberalism that the US champions,<sup>9</sup> other passages (e.g., those

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<sup>7</sup> I am not concerned with elite anti-Americanism, which, I am convinced, has a different dynamic than the one I identify here.

<sup>8</sup> For excellent work that disaggregates views of the United States, demonstrating their complexity, see Chiozza (2007).

<sup>9</sup> That the actual commitment of the US to liberalism sometimes falls short of the rhetoric is a different matter.

that emphasize equality before God) have potentially far-reaching implications for the rule of law.

Moreover, even if we could agree on an “objective” characterization of the sacred texts *on the whole*, Muslims live in real-world contexts that differ greatly and often resemble quite little the abstract injunctions found in the sacred texts. The absurdity of a monolithic Muslim civilization becomes clear if one gains even a passing knowledge of how Islam is practiced in Indonesia (Hefner 2000), West Africa (Villalón 1995), or indeed Central Asia (Khalid 2007). And the so-called Arab world exhibits similar diversity that usually overrides pan-Arab solidarity. Persistent Sunni-Shia hostilities are one example.

More to the point, even if one provisionally posited some unity of perspective among Muslims, cultures change. Consider this quotation from a great religious figure:

And, since where religion has been removed from civil society, and the doctrine and authority of divine revelation repudiated, the genuine notion itself of justice and human right is darkened and lost, and the place of true justice and legitimate right is supplied by material force, thence it appears why it is that some...dare to proclaim that ‘the people’s will, manifested by what is called public opinion or in some other way, constitutes a supreme law, free from all divine and human control...

The implication was clear: the naturalism implied by constitutional democracy was incompatible with truth and morality; society required God-given rules to guarantee a good society. This religious figure was not a Muslim scholar. He was Pope Pius IX, writing in 1864.<sup>10</sup> Catholicism, once thought uniquely hostile to liberalism, is no longer so viewed.<sup>11</sup> Inherency arguments founder when considered over the medium- and long-term, even if they may resonate

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<sup>10</sup> Pope Pius IX, “Quanta Cura: Condemning Recent Errors,” Papal Encyclical of 8 December, 1864 available from: <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius09/p9quanta.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> Many observers once assumed that Catholic populations, because of their uncritical acceptance of hierarchy, were particularly inhospitable terrain for democratization. On the “Catholic wave” of democratization, see Philpott (2004).

with the popular mood at particular historical moments.

Most serious analysts of anti-Americanism have moved away from such thinking, but it occasionally returns through the back door. For example, a recent volume edited by Peter Katzenstein and Robert Keohane (2007) usefully disaggregates anti-Americanism—something that represents a quantum improvement over other accounts. But, an interesting thing happens on the conceptual front when the editors offer their definition and typology of anti-Americanisms. Anti-Americanism is defined as a “psychological tendency to hold negative views of the United States and of American society in general” (Katzenstein and Keohane 2007: 12). Katzenstein and Keohane produce a typology of anti-Americanisms, in which “the further one moves from pro to anti, the more one works on the register of affect rather than reason.

That is, systematic bias takes over from distrust or simple opinion” (Blyth n.d.: 8).<sup>12</sup> In such an analysis, as Blyth elaborates, pro-Americanism is depicted as natural and reasonable, whereas anti-Americanism is painted to be the product of a psychological (i.e., pre-cognitive) tendency. Whether the inherency is viewed to be rooted in pre-cognitive structures, in cultures, or in long-enduring institutions, it is not a reliable guide to how views of the United States evolve.

If thinking of anti-Americanism as inherent to particular world regions, religious traditions or the like is not useful, the opposite—thinking of anti-Americanism as necessarily reasonable—is little better. The position, taken especially by the North American political Left and many French intellectuals, suggests that anti-Americanism is deeply rational. It is depicted to be a reasonable response on the part of publics throughout the world to US military, economic, and cultural dominance. Timothy Mitchell, Noam Chomsky, and others espouse various

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<sup>12</sup> Thanks to Mark Blyth for permission to cite his unpublished paper.

positions in this vein.

The problem with the reasonability perspective is that attitudes about the United States do not change in lock-step with US policies. Rather, they become sedimented in domestic cultures, institutions, and contexts. Any given US foreign policy action is interpreted through schemas that themselves are the product *inter alia* of earlier imaginings of the United States (Lynch 2007; McAdam 2007). Path-dependency is at work; while critical events can move political developments from one path to another; this is unusual and requires explanation (Pierson 2000).<sup>13</sup>

Between these two mischaracterizations lies the actual dynamic of America as a symbol in Central Asia. Contrary to the reasonability position, Central Asian attitudes about the US do not change in tandem with US foreign policies. One of the things I have done for this project is code public statements (both from government and societal actors), as they appear in media coverage of the ex-USSR, looking for expressed attitudes about the United States. The quantitative data are clear; I find a clear secular trend over the course of the 1990s: attitudes about the US become on average much more critical by the late 90s than they had been in the earlier part of the decade.<sup>14</sup>

The qualitative data are equally clear. In the early 1990s, articles tended to appear that embedded positive assumptions about the United States, about American life or products, or about the US role in international affairs. A few examples illustrate. One 1991 article from the Kyrgyzstani newspaper *Delo Nomer* lauded American-style economic liberalism as a model for the agricultural sector, saying:

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<sup>13</sup> In a way, this returns us to *some notion* of culture, but not the culture described in the inherency arguments above. Like Wedeen (2002), I prefer to consider culture as an anthropologist would.

<sup>14</sup> See Schatz n.d.

The only defense that the American farmer has from economic fluctuations [*ot ekonomicheskikh vetrov*] is knowledge. If you know how to produce a good harvest but keep poor finances and do not know how best to sell your produce, do not count on being successful. The freedom that we here talk so much about and lack is a freedom of choice: to act. On this choice depends no more and no less than the well-being of the family.<sup>15</sup>

An article from a 1991 issue of *Kazakhstanskaia pravda* attempted to trace Americans' economic success to their childhood, arguing:

Child psychologists consider that the foundation of the American psyche [*osnovy amerikanskogo kharaktera*]—and of its characteristics such as industry, freedom of thought, an ability to take on reasonable risk—emerges in the cradle. This occurs because no shackles are placed on the child's hands or feet, and thus virtuous activities at such a tender age are not prohibited.<sup>16</sup>

Whatever the descriptive accuracy or inaccuracy of these passages, they capture an infatuation with America that generally characterized the period.

Voices mildly, though clearly, critical of the US began to appear in the mid-90s, even in government publications—which typically take a more measured approach to their coverage of the US, since governments rarely risk alienating such a powerful external actor. So, for example, *Narodnoe slovo*, the parliamentary newspaper of Uzbekistan, on 29 January 1998, wrote that, “Americans spend much money on restaurants and little on reading. This is apparently explained by the habit of Americans to learn the main news from the radio during their commute [*vo vremia avtomobil'nykh poezdok*].

A 1994 article from the Kazakhstani newspaper *Panorama* reported the position of the Kazakhstani Ecology Minister, who minced no words, asserting that American specialists who

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<sup>15</sup> Anastasiia Kupriianova, “Amerika nam pomozhet?” *Delo No. 23* April, 1991, p. 5

<sup>16</sup> O. Kovalenko, “Po odezhde, ili chtoby vygliadit' O'Kei,” *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, 30 January 1992, p. 4

had come to the Semipalatinsk former nuclear test site were “actively collecting information on the use of plutonium, and not environmental activities” and were conducting “espionage.”<sup>17</sup> A further article from the liberal newspaper *Respublika* in 1999 criticized US financial assistance to Kyrgyzstan, arguing:

One cannot fail to notice that western [financial] assistance was governed by good intentions, the assistance was given to support democracy [*pod demokratiuu*], and the result achieved was exactly the opposite. In all the countries of the CIS, including Russia, authoritarian regimes were consolidated. So, it turns out that the continuation of assistance strengthens the economic and political strength of the established regime, feeding corruption. As a result, this assistance and the role of international financial institutions in the reform process [*v prodvizhenii reform*] once and for all discredits itself.<sup>18</sup>

Anti-American voices were not dominant, nor were the criticisms usually harsh in the official press. The important point is that the change is clear, and it *pre-dated* any serious involvement of the US as an actor in the region.<sup>19</sup> It is not that there was a lag in reaction to US policy; there was little palpable US policy in the region about which ordinary Central Asians would have been aware. Popular attitudes changed in ways that were largely independent of any direct US policy in the region.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, it would be inaccurate to describe changing attitudes as irrational. The discourse that came from opposition newspapers and emerged in focus groups in the mid-90s

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<sup>17</sup> “Pravitel’stvo Soedinennykh Shtatov oprovergaet sdelannye ministrom Medvedevym zaiavleniia,” *Panorama*, 9 July 1994, No. 27, p. 12

<sup>18</sup> Azat Akchokoev, “Investitsiia zapada – istochnik korrupsii,” *Respublika*, 30 November 1999, p. 1. It is worth noting in this instance that negative assessments of US policy were not limited to those with anti-liberal sentiments. At least in some cases, liberals criticized the US for failing to promote genuine liberal democracy in the region. Again, the factual (in)accuracy here does not concern me; the mood change that these articles suggest does.

<sup>19</sup> Some were critical of the US in the early 1990s, but they were in the minority.

<sup>20</sup> My argument, of course, is not that the US was completely uninvolved in Central Asia in the 1990s, but rather that its material role was fundamentally modest. For discussions of US policy in the region, see Akbarzadeh (2005) and Cooley (2008).

offer a sense of the disappointment with moral degradation, economic decline, and poor human rights protections—developments associated in the public imagination with the United States. Focus groups conducted by the State Department in the mid-1990s reveal a striking ambivalence about the US.<sup>21</sup>

Popular attitudes about the US may have been unsophisticated and conclusions about the US overblown. Is it “natural” for these sentiments to emerge in a Muslim world region? To the extent that similar expressions of disappointment occurred in Russia, as well, it would be a mistake to characterize a varied multi-cultural continent as irrational. Moreover, if Central Asia is Muslim, it is Muslim in some contextually specific sense that is not usefully viewed as a deviation from the “authentic” Arab version (Khalid 2007). Contrary to what inherency arguments would predict, Central Asian popular attitudes towards the United States shifted from being strongly positive to being ambivalent well *after* the collapse of the Soviet Union—that is, in the mid-to-late 1990s.<sup>22</sup> Activism in the name of Islam for the most part emerged *after* attitudes about the US had already undergone significant change.

### **Framing the Possibilities**

Since anti-Americanism dwells in the realm of symbols, it is usefully understood as containing both rational and irrational dimensions. Rather than using the language of rationality and irrationality, I suggest that we understand anti-Americanism as a *master frame* in the sense that social movement theorists use the phrase—as an abstract, interpretive schema that potentially links on-the-ground, local activists’ goals to larger-scale (even global) imperatives. It

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<sup>21</sup> See Dobson (1995).

<sup>22</sup> This conclusion is based on the author’s database of media reports.

is a schema in that it contains both cognitive and pre-cognitive elements. Substantively, the anti-American master frame is based on the assumption that the global influence of the United States ought to be curbed. Behaviorally, it becomes meaningful during mobilization efforts, forging a temporary, though potentially powerful link between recruiters and recruited, between mobilizers and mobilized. Understood this way, anti-Americanism's power in any given domestic context resides in its ability to affect recruitment efforts for various social movements.

This understanding of anti-Americanism gives rise to a fundamentally different way of thinking about the phenomenon and what evidence might exist to evaluate its role. Katzenstein and Keohane (2007: 275) conclude that, "it is surprising how little hard evidence can be found...that anti-American opinion has had serious direct and immediate consequences for the United States on issues affecting broad U.S. policy objectives." But the authors have constructed a particular kind of test for their hypothesis: evidence must be "hard" (a fraught adjective if there ever was one), and consequences must be "serious," "direct," and "immediate." Thinking of anti-Americanism as an interpretive schema opens up the possibility that consequences could be indirect and occur in the medium- or long-term.

What occurs in Central Asia lends plausibility to this line of thinking. "America" in Central Asia became a symbolic resource for Islamic activists. Whether abjuring or embracing radicalism and militancy,<sup>23</sup> Islamists could use "America" to connect their local struggles to larger movements and tap into the moral power of something transcendent. In this sense, anti-globalists, radical environmentalists, anarchists, survivalists, and so on might have something in common—a general *Weltanschauung* by which their local struggles are linked to a global

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<sup>23</sup> Radicalism is usefully distinguished from militancy. Whereas the former implies a striving towards ultimate ends that would be a fundamental change from the *status quo*, the latter implies a willingness to use violence as a tactic to achieve one's aims.

imperative. I use the term *meaningful* deliberately here, since we know from the New Social Movements literature that many people join and contribute to social movements precisely because it gives them a sense of identity and purpose in an otherwise alienating world.

Thus, the recruitment literature of Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan increasingly referenced the United States by the late 1990s, whereas the publications of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan in the early 1990s made virtually no references to the United States. Symbolic “America” held little recruitment potential in the early part of the decade but this had changed by the decade’s end.<sup>24</sup>

The opposite was true for human rights activists, who could no longer rely on the symbolic power of “America” as a pro-democratization actor. Being funded by USAID or the NED was—in the late 1990s—still quite necessary for human rights activists. On the other hand, in addition to the material benefits such funding brought, it could entail potential reputational costs.

Take, for example, the Polyton Discussion Club, a forum for independent analysts and scholars to discuss current events in Almaty, Kazakhstan. Polyton since 2000 has been funded by the National Endowment for Democracy and generated a reputation as a stimulating forum but one that was generally pro-West. It is unclear to what extent this reputation resulted from NED funding and to what extent it was a consequence of the progressive marginalization of opposition voices within Kazakhstani politics in general. Suffice it to say that the two processes were mutually reinforcing. When in May 2007 Kazakhstani President Nazarbaev’s compliant parliament passed a law exempting Nazarbaev from abiding by constitutionally mandated term limits for the presidency, a gathering of Nazarbaev critics at Polyton was anemic and did not

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<sup>24</sup> For a fuller discussion of these literatures, see Schatz (n.d.).

spill over as a public protest (as had occurred in the past).<sup>25</sup> In general, the backlash against the US and US funding for NGOs in the aftermath of the so-called color revolutions was the loud expression of what had already been occurring in the region in quieter ways.

In turn, the varying fates of these social movements—movements that are enabled and constrained<sup>26</sup> by anti-American master frames—have an effect on how the US (and other great powers) act towards the region. Thus, when US policymakers view Kazakhstan, they take the lack of a viable opposition as a starting point (in some cases as evidence of Nazarbaev’s popularity and legitimacy), rather than viewing it as the product of many forces—among which are the perception of US policies towards the region. Likewise, when US policymakers view the growing popularity of the radical group Hizb ut-Tahrir, they take it as a starting point (in some cases as evidence of a need to legally ban the group), rather than as the product of many forces—among which are the ways in which US policies are perceived. This recursivity is too seldom studied, but it is central to thinking about the nexus of geopolitics and domestic politics.

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<sup>25</sup> Author’s fieldnotes, May 2007, Almaty, Kazakhstan

<sup>26</sup> These social movements are *not* determined by attitudes about the US, but they are *affected* by them.

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