

# US Foreign Policy Agenda: From AfPak and Central Asia to the Caucasus

Richard Holbrooke's mission

By [M. K. Bhadrakumar](#)

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United States AfPak special representative Richard Holbrooke enjoys a fabulous reputation, no matter the current prospects of the Afghan war. The Eurasian space knew him as a potential Nobel winner who evicted Russia from the Balkans. The world at large expects him to take over if and when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton steps down to enter the US presidential election ring in 2012. Holbrooke's tours abroad inevitably get noticed.

His maiden tour of Central Asia and the Caucasus last week was no exception. A State Department spokesman drew attention to it as a significant happening in US regional policy. The tour turned out to be somewhat more than symbolic; it wasn't altogether bereft of result.

The result actually came at the end of Holbrooke's tour. His halt in Tbilisi came as a morale booster for Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili. In comparison, his tour of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan merely underscored that diplomacy is a seamless affair and that Holbrooke is at liberty to exceed his hitherto narrowly focused AfPak brief.

Saakashvili has been low on morale following the demise of the Orange revolution in Ukraine, US President Barack Obama's manifest disinterest in color revolutionaries and the growing unease in the West over the Georgian leader's governance style, marked by cronyism, corruption and authoritarianism. To be sure, Holbrooke's unannounced visit perked him up.

Saakashvili summarily dropped any tentative ideas apropos some sort of "normalization" with Moscow, which the Europeans have been counseling him to undertake. He told a nationwide audience that Georgia, which survived the "despotic rule of Persian emperor Shah Abbas in the 16th century, would also endure [Russian Prime Minister] Vladimir Putin - ... Georgia will never kneel down before its enemies".

Holbrooke's visit convinced Saakashvili that despite the rhetoric of a "reset" of US-Russia ties, the Obama administration hasn't quite abandoned the strategic vision of Georgia's North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) membership.

Conceivably, Georgia falls within Holbrooke's diplomatic turf. The country provides a 600-strong military contingent for fighting the 25,000-strong Taliban militia, but it is not the numbers that count. Holbrooke said the Georgian contingent was destined to play a major role in the world's victory over terrorism. Saakashvili responded that not only the fate of the world but of Georgia's too depended on the success of the NATO mission.

Holbrooke insisted his visit “had nothing to do with Georgian-Russian relations”, but the reality is that Washington hopes to incorporate Georgia as a vital link in the proposed NATO supply chain leading to Afghanistan from Europe, which will bypass Russian territory. Clearly, NATO is gearing up to cross over from the Balkans, across the Black Sea, to the Caucasus in an historic journey that will take it to Central Asia via Afghanistan.

Clinton also made it clear in her hard-hitting speech at a NATO strategic concept seminar organized by the Atlantic Council in Washington last Tuesday that “there can be no question that NATO will continue to keep its doors open to new members ... We are already working with many of these nations in Afghanistan. And we must find ways to build on these efforts ... We have already determined the need for a NATO that can operate at strategic distance. We need to cultivate strategic relationships in support of that goal.”

Later, the US’s permanent representative to NATO, ambassador Ivo Daalder, amplified: “We’re not going to change the way we do business. We believe that an enlargement of the alliance is a stabilizing factor. We believe that NATO’s door must remain open to new members. We believe that no country [read Russia] can have a veto over which other sovereign country can or cannot join an alliance. That reality will remain.”

Taliban pose no threat

Equally, Holbrooke’s mission to the Central Asian capitals was an opening gambit. He got mixed results, which was only to be expected since the Central Asians are no more babes in the woods of international diplomacy. There are longstanding problems between the Central Asian states, but the region doesn’t present a geopolitical vacuum.

Holbrooke thumb-sketches a futuristic security scenario for the region in the nature of an al-Qaeda threat. As he put it, “I think the real threat in this region is less from the Taliban than from al-Qaeda, which wants to train international terrorists.” He said this in Dushanbe after meeting with Tajik President Emomali Rahmon.

On the one hand, Holbrooke gently eased Central Asian concerns regarding the US’s expected reconciliation with the Taliban. At the same time, he calmed the Central Asian mind regarding the Taliban’s extremist ideology.

This is not the first time that Central Asian leaders have heard from a visiting US official a projection of the Taliban as a benign movement. Holbrooke echoed what US diplomats almost routinely propagated in the 1996-97 period as the Taliban came to power in Kabul.

Holbrooke added, “For ethnic and geographic and strategic reasons, Tajikistan is the country of immense importance if one wants to have a peaceful outcome in Afghanistan.” These are profound remarks. It is the sort of description that fits only one other country in Afghanistan’s neighborhood – Pakistan. Dushanbe has a complex relationship with Afghan Tajiks. The ethnic Tajik population in Afghanistan is numerically bigger than Tajikistan’s, but it has lacked leadership since the assassination by al-Qaeda of Ahmad Shah Massoud in 2001. At any rate, Tajik nationalism is a can of worms – almost as much as Pashtun nationalism.

Holbrooke also revealed that he “talked [with Rahmon] especially about energy and water and about Tajikistan’s capabilities to help deal with the water crisis in other parts of the region, especially Pakistan and India.” This is an extremely controversial subject that

concerns many regional powers, where Tajik and Uzbek interests, in fact, collide. How the US will eventually “balance” Tashkent and Dushanbe will bear watching.

No doubt, Washington sees Tashkent as the prize catch of its Central Asian diplomacy in the recent past. But Uzbek language is highly nuanced and according to state media, “The leader of our nation ... expressed Uzbekistan’s firm determination to further develop US-Uzbek relations in a constructive way in light of efforts to bring lasting peace and stability to Afghanistan.” Holbrooke was quoted as responding that he, too, wanted to “strengthen cooperation with Uzbekistan over security”. The American Embassy refused to confirm or deny reports on whether he brought up the reopening of an air base in Uzbekistan from where the US was evicted half a decade ago.

In sum, Holbrooke heard many vague promises of support, but they fell short of any visible outcome. There were missteps too. His trip to Turkmenistan was canceled at the last minute due to “scheduling conflicts”. A joint press briefing with Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in Bishkek was abruptly canceled without explanation. His public appearance in Dushanbe was unnaturally terse and he wasn’t even open to questions and answers.

There was indeed a noticeable lack of concrete results. On the other hand, Holbrooke was merely wetting his toes in an enigmatic region that puzzles even brilliant minds. What cannot be overlooked is that Holbrooke decided to take a look at the region at all. The summit meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which is due to be held in June in Tashkent, can be expected to have “maintenance of peace and stability in Afghanistan” as a key agenda item.

Strictly speaking, Central Asia is not within the purview of Holbrooke’s AfPak brief. As far as the logistics of the Afghan war are concerned, US Central Command chief General David Petraeus regularly visits Central Asian capitals. Conceivably, Washington would like to measure how the regional powers – especially Russia, Iran and China – react to Holbrooke’s appearance in Central Asia at a time when the Afghan war appears set to spill over into the region.

English Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote, “If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?” If Holbrooke comes, can he be far behind in returning?

*Ambassador M K Bhadrakumar was a career diplomat in the Indian Foreign Service. His assignments included the Soviet Union, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Germany, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Kuwait and Turkey.*

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