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Anti-Americanism and America's Role in Central Asia

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Abstract

American power has been projected, apparently for the long term, into Russia's southern flank...Russian assessments are shaped by the downward spiral in all forms of Russian power in a world of unrivalled American supremacy...

--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.