



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Without strong pressure and excessive expectations – New US policy in Central Asia



The five Central Asian countries, formerly part of the USSR, now constitute the first refuge for most of the problems that Russia has faced since it invaded Ukraine a year ago.

Russia views Kazakhstan and its four smaller neighbours as its "inner courtyard", regardless of the fact that they have been independent states for three decades. Russia expects loyalty from them during the difficult days of its aggression against Ukraine.

However, that loyalty has been absent, at least in the form that Moscow expects. A year ago, in the UN General Assembly vote, Kazakhstan and other ex-USSR Central Asian states abstained from voting for a resolution condemning Russian aggression against Ukraine and demanding the withdrawal of the Russian army.

Somewhat shyly, taking refuge in the comfort of restraint, these countries did not stand by the almost three-quarters majority in the UN that condemned Russia, but still dampened Moscow's expectations of their full loyalty.

This was followed by moves to distance themselves from the Russian military campaign. Last May, Kazakhstan decided not to organise a traditional military parade on May 9, Victory Day.

This enraged Moscow. One of its most influential propagandists, Tigran Keosayan, threatened Kazakhstan with a "Ukrainian scenario".

A new US approach to the region

During his visit to the region last week, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken did not display any ambition to bring the former Soviet republics into a bloc that actively condemns Russian aggression or helps Ukraine's defence.

That would be an unrealistic expectation from countries that walk a fine line between

dissatisfaction with Russian policy and caution against its vengeful repercussions.

Blinken spoke in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, with partners from the so-called G5+1 group, which included the foreign ministers of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

These talks confirmed that the region is no longer important to the US as a secondary, logistical function for operations in Afghanistan. With the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Central Asian states have obtained their own identity in US politics.

According to last year's US National Security Strategy, this region has been considered exposed to an "immediate threat to the free and open international system", and "the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance that objective" - Russia and China, respectively.

Sovereignty and sanctions

That is why Secretary Blinken emphasised the US commitment to the region's sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence in talks with Central Asian officials and contrasted that with Russian efforts in Ukraine.

This is the message that the region wanted to hear, because the US did not set expectations they could not fulfil.

The message appeared to convey support for their main concern regarding their independence and integrity when squeezed between the influence of Russia, but also China, and, in part, Turkey.

An important point of Blinken's visit was to ensure the implementation of sanctions against Russia, given that the Central Asian states, along with those in the Caucasus region, have been the first address to which Russian financial operations moved, seeking a detour to violate sanctions.

The countries of the region are still vitally connected to financing from Russia, considering that billions of dollars of remittances are still arriving from Russia to local families, sent by family members working in Russia.

Blinken tried to ease their concerns about any possible exposure to secondary sanctions, saying that the US together with regional governments was “looking to see what we can do to mitigate the negative effects that they’re feeling”.

This particularly includes issuing licenses for trade and investments in helping the region diversify its trade relationships, said the US State Secretary.

Licenses had been granted “for companies or entities in countries that are engaged with sanctioned Russian companies so that they have time to wind down those activities and cut their ties with Russia”, said Blinken at a press conference with Kazakh Foreign Minister Mukhtar Tileuberdi.

The region would not choose a side

It was this announcement that caught the attention of the media in Kazakhstan as a promise that the US would compensate the losses of local companies that would suffer sanctions as a consequence of Russian trading partners.

This is an important part of the new US approach in Central Asia, where it should not be expected that states would choose sides easily on the issues of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and also in relation to China.

Minister Tileuberdi said in front of Blinken that his country is not threatened by Russia.

“Kazakhstan is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union, Collective Security Treaty Organisation, Commonwealth of Independent States with other states surrounding Russia.

So we consider our relationship as an alliance in the framework of all these multilateral structures”, said the Kazakh minister.

However, he noted that Kazakhstan has been the main partner of the US in Central Asia, where the trade exchange last year exceeded 3 billion USD, was a third higher than the year before, and that US investments exceeded 62 billion USD.

For the new US post-Afghan policy in the Central Asian region, this seems to be quite enough. It could be quite disappointing for Moscow, as a continuation of gestures of disloyalty.

“US strategy needs to focus on ways to support the region’s independence in the new geopolitical context of 2023. Blinken’s trip is a step toward finding a new right-sized role for the United States in a post-Afghanistan war, post-Ukraine invasion world”, assessed Gavin Helf, a senior expert on Central Asia for the United States Institute of Peace (USIP).