

A not-so-quiet American: New York Times reporter writes on Central Asia

Alex Lantier
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Recent weeks have seen a flurry of articles on two energy-rich former Soviet republics of Central Asia, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, in the *New York Times*. They focus on the “persona” of Turkmenistan’s new president, Garbanguy Berdymukhammedov, and the ouster of Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbayev’s son-in-law, Rakhat Aliyev. One’s attention is drawn to the byline of the articles, which bear the name of *New York Times* Moscow correspondent C.J. Chivers.

An examination of Chivers’s military and journalistic history lends an interesting insight into the personnel who prepare and organize public opinion for the various twists and turns of the US government’s foreign policy.

Chivers graduated from Cornell University in 1987 and joined the Marine Corps. His unit fought in the 1990-1991 Gulf War against Iraq and reportedly returned to the US for police operations in Los Angeles after the 1992 riots sparked by the beating of motorist Rodney King. He then went to Columbia University’s journalism school, and in 1996 got a job on the police and organized crime beat at the *Providence Journal* in Rhode Island.

In 1999, Chivers’s career took a quick upwards turn when he joined the *New York Times*’ crime section. This was a time when, under then-New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani, the police were a major element of the city administration. After the September 11, 2001 attacks, he was embedded in US forces in Afghanistan and then, in 2003, in the US invasion forces in Iraq.

While in Iraq, he wrote articles suggesting that US forces might be finding the nonexistent weapons of mass destruction (WMD) used by the Bush administration to justify its invasion of Iraq—for example, “Paratroopers Find Suspicious Warheads and Rocket Parts in Kirkuk” on April 23, 2003—and what can only be described as politically convenient evidence of Saddam Hussein’s atrocities—for example, “Atrocities: Huge Gravesite Is Found in Northern Iraq” on April 18, 2003.

After his Iraq coverage, his career made another major leap: he was named Moscow correspondent for the *New York Times*. He soon developed a specialty for praising US-backed “color revolutions” in former Soviet republics—the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia, the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, and the failed 2006 Denim Revolution in Belarus.

To select one example, on December 27, 2004 he wrote an article (“Pro-West Leader Appears to Win Election”) in which he attacks the pro-Russian premier, Viktor Yanukovich, for attracting the backing of “oligarchs” who run Ukraine. He also accused Yanukovich of perpetrating massive electoral fraud. The article essentially accuses Russian President Vladimir Putin of backing a candidate guilty of

corruption, while dismissing a “small but fiercely fought argument in the West” about whether the challenger, Victor Yushchenko, was receiving US help.

The fact that Yushchenko was elected with the support of natural gas oligarch and billionaire Yulia Tymoshenko, whom he later named prime minister, did not bother Chivers. Nor did he report the funding that was, in fact, funneled to the “Orange Revolution” operatives by the US State Department.

On January 17, 2005 Chivers also published an insider’s account of how top Ukrainian generals and intelligence officials collaborated to prevent a government crackdown on the Orange Revolution operatives. The article, titled “Back Channels: A Crackdown Averted; How Top Spies in Ukraine Changed the Nation’s Path,” did not mention any US sources. It is unclear from whom Chivers obtained such detailed information on the workings of the Ukrainian military-espionage apparatus.

In Belarus in 2006, he dismissed the Russian-aligned government as a “police state” and “Soviet anachronism” and expressed his hope that US-backed candidate Alexander Milenkevich would bring “civil society” and “human rights.” The attempted “Denim Revolution” failed, however. The incumbent, Alexander Lukashenko, was widely acknowledged to have won the election, and a few hundred pro-Milenkevich demonstrators in Minsk were quickly arrested by the police.

Chivers’s failure to write anything about the failed March 24, 2005 “Tulip Revolution” in Kyrgyzstan is, if anything, more telling. For one month—from March 18 to April 14—he wrote nothing in the *Times*, though normally he contributes one article every two to three days. The byline of his first major article after the Tulip Revolution, a May 18 criticism of Uzbek President Islam Karimov, placed him in Osh, Kyrgyzstan, the headquarters of the US-backed Kyrgyz opposition. One wonders what Chivers was doing there.

Chivers’s most revealing article concerning the “color revolutions” was perhaps a July 12, 2005 article criticizing Karimov’s suppression of an uprising in Andijan, located near Osh and across the border in Uzbekistan (“Crackdown in Uzbekistan Reopens Longstanding Debate on U.S. Military Aid”). He interviewed US military commanders who had developed links with the Uzbek army and were furious that they had not heeded US recommendations to stand aside during the uprising.

He quoted Lt. General Walter Sharp: “We did some training with the [Georgian] military before the Rose Revolution, and when it came down to the day of the parliamentary elections and the demonstrations, the military said, ‘We’re not going to put the people down.’... It was a key factor that the military understood what their

role was.” In other words, a “key factor” was that the US army ordered the Georgian army to back the “revolution.”

Chivers noted that US military collaborations with the militaries of former Soviet republics were often run at training facilities like the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, a German-American institution set up after the fall of the USSR. Chivers informed his readers that it is located in the famous resort town of Garmisch-Partenkirchen in the German Alps. Coincidentally or otherwise, his byline stated he was reporting from Garmisch-Partenkirchen.

The *Times*’ interest in the former Soviet republics of Central Asia—and particularly Chivers’s latest articles on Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan—comes at a critical time. The US ruling elite, unhappy with the Bush administration’s conduct of the Iraq war, is considering a partial withdrawal of troops from Iraq and, simultaneously, is seeking theaters where US forces could be more profitably employed. Recent proposals to increase US troop levels in Afghanistan—the southern gateway to Central Asia—must be seen in this light.

Though Chivers typically does not spell out in too much detail what is at stake, it is not hard for those with access to an Internet search engine to find out. According to a 2005 US Department of Energy report, Kazakhstan’s currently active oilfields total between 26 billion and 34 billion barrels of oil—worth between \$1.8 trillion and \$2.4 trillion at current prices. Turkmenistan has some of the world’s largest deposits of natural gas, according to the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, at 101 trillion cubic feet—worth substantially over \$1 trillion at current prices.

Nor are oil and gas the only attractions. The region is one of the world’s top producers of cotton and a paradise for mining companies (with substantial deposits of lead, zinc, copper, titanium, bauxite, gold and silver, among others listed by the CIA World Factbook). It sits along Afghan heroin export routes to Europe, estimated to be worth tens of billions of dollars annually.

The region is also of paramount military and strategic importance. It is located near many of Russia’s most sensitive military bases, which were located in south-central Russia and Central Asia (the center of the former USSR) in the Soviet era to force potential attacking US missiles to travel the longest possible distance.

It is also the setting for massive rivalry between all the world powers for control of pipeline routes to export Central Asian oil and gas to the world market. Russia controls a network of pipelines built during the Soviet era; the US and Europe view construction of competing westward pipeline routes through the Caucasus or Afghanistan as essential tasks. Central Asia is also of great importance to neighboring China, which hopes to use it as a link to its main sources of oil in East Africa and the Persian Gulf, and as a source of oil and an export market, as well.

Chivers’s articles themselves are very odd pieces of work. His latest article on Berdymukhammedov (“Seeking the Persona of the New Turkmen Leader,” July 5) desperately seeks something positive to say. He acknowledges that the new president “sits atop a personality cult” inherited via a rigged election from the recently departed president Saparmurat Niyazov, whom he describes as a “madman, sadist, freak, [and] thief.” He interviews several Turkmen on the streets, who speak of their hatred and distrust of the regime.

Chivers is not deterred: “In this uncertainty, everyone reads signs. Some are promising, others not.” He describes Berdymukhammedov as a “competent bureaucrat.” He cites Berdymukhammedov’s decision to reinstate 10th grade (Niyazov canceled the last three years

of high school after the collapse of the USSR), and a brief comment by Evan Feigenbaum, deputy assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asia: “By and large the trajectory is a positive one.”

A casual reader of the article could be forgiven for asking what Chivers saw in the new Turkmen leader. Perhaps it was Berdymukhammedov’s July 5 announcement, which Chivers did not mention, that he supports a plan for a natural gas pipeline from Turkmenistan south through US-controlled Afghanistan.

Chivers’s solicitude for the Turkmen president did not extend, however, to Kazakh president Nazarbayev. Nazarbayev recently beat back a political challenge from his son-in-law, Rakhat Aliyev, who claimed that Kazakhstan was ready for a “new generation” of leadership. Aliyev said in another context that republican rule did not suit Kazakhstan, and that he preferred that the leader of the “new generation” rule as a sultan. A former intelligence official who amassed a business empire in media, banking and sugar processing, Aliyev was exiled to the Kazakh embassy in Austria, then indicted on quite possibly trumped-up charges, and now faces possible extradition back to Kazakhstan.

Chivers’s latest article on Aliyev (“Former Son-in-Law of Kazakh Leader Says He Was Framed,” July 6) claims that Aliyev’s treatment raises “fresh questions” about Kazakh political life. The article does not explain how such a case is new or unusual for Central Asia, whose states are all widely acknowledged to be dictatorships run by former Stalinist apparatchiks. It does, however, present at length Aliyev’s claims of innocence and his desire to be reunited with his family. His sympathetic treatment of the would-be sultan of Kazakhstan does not prevent him from denouncing Nazarbayev’s “lust for control.”

Chivers thus reserves his criticism for a Central Asian president whose energy policy currently is tilting away from the US and towards Russia. On May 12 Nazarbayev signed an agreement with Russia to continue exporting all Kazakhstan’s natural gas through Russian pipelines and refineries, in return for a Russian commitment to increase its transport and refining capacity. Nazarbayev also recently signed a deal giving Russia access to Kazakh uranium reserves, as Russia creates a new nuclear energy conglomerate, Atomenergoprom.



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