

THE CHANGING SECURITY ENVIRONMENT IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Introduction

In ancient times Central Asia, spanning the Eurasian landmass, was considered the centre of the world. As late as the nineteenth century Sir Halford Mackinder, the founding father of modern geopolitics, would describe Central Asia as the political centre of the world because it enclosed more frontiers than any other region. Whoever controlled Central Asia would wield enormous power: "It is the greatest natural fortress in the world, defended by polar ice caps, deserts, and table land and mountain ranges".¹

The opening of new sea lanes changed the importance of landlocked Central Asia and it became a tempting pawn in the rivalry between the Russia and Great Britain, who expanded their empires in the Asian landmass. Then the area was the buffer zone between an eastward-expanding Russian empire and a nervous Britain that feared the Russians had designs on British India. After the Russian Revolution, this region became a strategic backwater, firmly entrenched in the Soviet Union, which considered the area as an appendage to its Russian empire.

The fact that an enormous territory in Central Asia, twice the size of Western Europe, had also been liberated from Soviet rule in the beginning of the nineties remained relatively unnoticed for some years after the collapse of the Soviet empire. The disintegration late in 1991 of the world's territorially largest state had created a 'black hole' in the very center of Eurasia.²

But since the mid-nineties, a struggle has been under way for economic and political influence in this southern rim of the former USSR; a struggle termed by some as a renewed 'Great Game'. The Central Asian states - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan - have become the focus of attention from neighbors and other interested parties because of the potential for great wealth.

The collapse of the Soviet Union, the rise of Muslim fundamentalism and the world's ever-increasing thirst for oil, have all contributed to a new kind of strategic significance for Central Asia. Russia continues to play an important role in Central Asia, but the United States also stepped in, forcing rapid geopolitical shifts in the foreign policies of the newly independent Central Asian states. Big power rivalry emerged with the competition to exploit the oil and gas resources of the Caspian Sea and Central Asia.³ As a result, the Central

¹ Milan Hauner, *What is Asia to Us ? Russia's Asian Heartland, Yesterday and Today*, Unwin Hyman, London 1990, p.73

² Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard, American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives*, Basic Books, New York 1997, Chapter 4 (The Black Hole), p. 87-123

³ John McCarthy, *The geo-politics of Caspian oil*, in: *Jane's Intelligence Review*, July 2000, p. 20-26

However, to counter non-traditional security threats through military reforms is not enough. In light of rampant corruption, official collusion with criminal organisations, lack of discipline as a result of low wages and lack of financial resources to ensure reforms are carried through, reform processes do not present short- or medium-term solutions.

But while the greatest security threats are internal - political repression, inequitable distribution of income, corruption, ethnic and tribal unrest - their leaders focus instead on external threats. Due to security concerns and the threat of extremist incursions, governments have been diverting funds that could be used for social programs and development projects to purchase military equipment and to train border guards in order to bolster security. All this creates a breeding ground for extremist groups to curry favour with disenchanted and poverty-stricken segments of society. So if the primary goal is to remain the elimination of terrorism, measures to bolster the national security of these states will be inseparable from the process of political, social and economical reform.⁵

Geopolitics

Focusing on the geopolitical significance of Central Asia nowadays, geography is still critical. The five former Soviet republics and Afghanistan together constitute a zone of weak states in the middle of a neighbourhood that includes Russia, Pakistan, India, Iran and China, whose western-most province, Xinjiang, borders Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In this setting, what happens in Central Asia can have wide repercussions.⁶

Oil and gas have enhanced the region's strategic value. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan sit atop vast quantities of both. Geologists keep raising their estimates of Kazakh oil reserves as more becomes known about the oil fields beneath the Caspian Sea. That the people of Central Asia are predominantly Muslim has also become a geopolitical factor. Throughout the 1990s governments in the region had been nervous about the rise of Islamic militancy. This anxiety turned into stark fear after 1998, when a charismatic young Uzbek from the populous Fergana Valley, using the nom de guerre of Juma Namangani, established the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) with the stated aim of overthrowing Karimov's government. In 1999 armed men under the banner of the IMU, operating from Afghanistan, invaded Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. They failed in their goal to reach the fertile, densely populated Fergana, but they sent a shudder of fear through these countries. In 2000 the IMU invaded again, this time reaching the mountains northeast of Tashkent.

It was their safe haven in Afghanistan that made the IMU's exploits possible. The Afghan connection with Islamic militancy in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan alarmed all three governments. But until September 11, their warning about the threat of the Taliban were mostly ignored by the rest of the world.

The U.S. intervention has been most important for the Central Asians because it has eliminated the obvious transboundary threats to their own security. The United States and its partners in the international coalition against terrorism removed the Taliban and all but wiped out Al Qaeda and the IMU.

⁵ Tamara Makarenko, Crime and terrorism in Central Asia, *Ibid 3*, p. 16-18

⁶ Martha B. Olcott, Central Asia and the United States After September 11th, in *Proceedings 12th Annual International Control Conference*, Sandia National Laboratories, Albuquerque 2002, p. 178-185

Afghanistan still presents problems for its neighbours. Water supply is one. The Amudarya River, an important and already overused source for Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, demarcates the Tajik-Afghan and Uzbek-Afghan borders for hundreds of miles. Now that international donors have promised to rebuild the Afghan economy, including its agriculture, increased Afghan use of the Amudarya is inevitable, according to officials in the region.⁷

How stable is Central Asia?

Looking now at the stability in the region, the states of Central Asia have a history quite distinct from that of the Middle East and Turkey. The Soviet Union was not a colonial situation as commonly defined, but as viewed from the centre, a multiethnic, highly ideological state. Central Asia is a part of the Islamic world and is influenced by its 'global trends'. Parts of Central Asia were converted to Islam during the Arab conquest, and the region was a centre of learning during the Islamic empire, so the roots of Islam run deep. As a result, the contention between traditional and radical forces within Islam has long been a feature of the landscape of Central Asia.⁷

In light of the apocalyptic forecasts made by foreign analysts following the collapse of the Soviet Union, not to mention the proximity of the region to the continuous state of turmoil in Afghanistan, the past decade has nevertheless been characterized by a to some degree unexpected stability. In fact, the region managed to weather both the gruesome civil war in Tajikistan, which failed to spread itself out to other states as had been initially feared, and the onslaught of seditious ideas, arms, and narcotics brought about by the collapse of the Afghan state. Unfortunately, it was precisely this external instability, which I mentioned before, that allowed the states of Central Asia to avoid dealing with their own internal problems.

Moreover, these states have failed to address many of the problems facing the region as a whole. Difficulties surrounding border demarcation, water rights, and access to energy supplies are all a part of the Soviet legacy that has yet to be effectively resolved. When Soviet planners set up the region's hydroelectric grid, and oil and gas pipeline system, they did so in what appeared to them to be a cost-effective way. Little if any, thought was given to making the various Soviet republics energy self-sufficient. As prices crept up, debts piled up as well.

Most of the interstate debt owed by the Central Asian states to their former neighbours is for energy, and the settling and restructuring of these debts has been a slow and oftentimes acrimonious process.

Russia

Looking at the two key actors in the region, Russia and the United States, Russia is for obvious reasons still an important actor in the field of Central Asian security.⁸ Under

⁷ Svante E. Cornell and Regine A. Spector, Central Asia, More than Islamic Extremists, in: *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2002, p. 193-207; and Ahmed Rashid, *JIHAD. The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, Penguin Books, 2002

⁸ Dmitri Trenin, *Central Asia's Stability and Russia's Security*, Program on New Approaches to Russian Security Policy Memo Series, Memo No. 168, Harvard University, November 2000; and Rajan Menon, Yuri E.

Vladimir Putin, Russia's policy in Central Asia runs roughly along two tracks. The first track is the pursuit of economic opportunities, first of all in the fuel and energy sector. Here, Kazakhstan is by far the principal factor. The second track of Russian policy is shoring up regional stability by means of buffer building. There Tajikistan represents Russia's forward position and Kyrgyzstan the flank, with Kazakhstan again being of vital importance. However, it is independent-minded Uzbekistan that is the strategic lynchpin and the pivot of the region. Common to both tracks is the desire to keep the Central Asian states within Moscow's orbit, and to minimize, to the extent possible, outside influence in the region. In Moscow's policies, geopolitical logic is overriding. The minimal goal is to preserve Central Asia as a buffer zone between Russia and the forces of militant Islam.

Russia has been seeking to reinvigorate the 1992 Collective Security Treaty through frequent consultations at the level of defense chiefs and security council secretaries. This Treaty received a new lease of life with the approval of the 'memorandum on the intensification of effectiveness of the Collective Security Treaty and its adaptation to the current geopolitical situation'. CIS security arrangements focus on two major issues: 'soft security' and air defense compliance. CIS summits and high-level meetings concentrate on efforts to combat international terrorism, crime and extremism.

For a decade, Russian officials have held a generally suspicious view of US policies in Central Asia and Afghanistan. While Washington has declared that it only sought to make sure Kazakhstan was nuclear-free and that the other 'stans' generally followed the path toward a free market and democratization, Moscow believed that – same as in the nearby Caspian region – America's real agenda was displacing Russia as the region's hegemony.

However, Moscow's preoccupation with international terrorism in the wake of the second Chechen war and the change in Washington's attitude toward the Taliban as a result of the 1998 embassy bombings laid the ground for increased US-Russian cooperation on Afghanistan. Following the joint statement on Afghanistan of the 2000 Moscow summit, a working group was established that hold regular meetings ever since. By eliminating the Taliban and the terrorist groups they harboured, the US intervention after September 11 achieved precisely what the Russians had long been attempting to do themselves.

The decline of Russia in Central Asia

Nevertheless, the US presence in Central Asia since September 11, brought a definitive end to the domination of the region by Russia and allows these states from their post-Soviet status to some identity that is more of their own making. However, while Russian influence in the region was waning in advance of September 11, Russia clearly does not intend to allow itself to be marginalised in Central Asia. In December last year, for example, it signed a military agreement with Kyrgyzstan that provides for the stationing of 20 aircraft (fighter jets and bombs) and up to 1.000 troops at the Kant airbase, east of Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan's capital. The aircraft will bolster the 5.000 troops from Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan that will constitute the 'rapid-response force' that these countries agreed to establish in November 2002 in order to empower the Collective Security

Fedorov, and Ghia Nodia (eds.), *Russia, the Caucasus and Central Asia, the 21st Century Security Environment*, EastWest Institute, New York/London, 1999

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Organisation that they organised at Russia's initiative. However, Russia appears consigned to cooperating in the erosion, bit by bit, of its position in Central Asia.⁹

United States

This other key actor in the region, the United States, became increasingly involved in Central Asia since the mid-nineties. U.S. oil companies have played a leading role in this region.¹⁰ During the 1990s the United States began to quietly build influence in the area. Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan were added already to the area of responsibility of the U.S. Central Command before the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, on 1 October 1999. USCENTCOM is the unified command responsible for U.S. security interests in more than 25 nations that stretch from the Horn of Africa through the Arabian Gulf region into Central Asia. The theater strategy which is built around the mission of US Central Command (CENTCOM) had as its first element: providing access to the energy resources of the region, which considers the US as a vital interest.¹¹ Since September 11, the combat of terrorism has become the main activity of this Command.

The need for a counterweight against Russia was an important consideration that led Central Asian regimes to strengthen its military ties with the United States after September 11. Therefore, Central Asian regimes eagerly signed security agreements with the United States. These agreements have allowed the United States for its combat of terrorism to build military infrastructure at Khanabad in Uzbekistan, where elements of the 10th Mountain Division are deployed, and at Kyrgyzstan's Manas airport, where F-15E and FA-18 tactical aircraft are based and facilities built to accommodate military transport aircraft ferrying supplies. There are also plans underway to train and equip local militaries and intelligence agencies.¹² Soldiers from Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have been trained by Americans. The militaries of all three countries have an ongoing relationship with the National Guard of a U.S. state. Kazakhstan with Arizona, Kyrgyzstan with Montana, Uzbekistan with Louisiana. These activities point to a deepening, long-term commitment in a new strategic theatre and could encompass Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, which do not want to be left out.

The U.S. also promotes programs devoted to democratization and market reforms, improved health care, legal reforms and housing through the Freedom Support Act. The professed interest of the US government is to integrate the key areas of the CIS fully into Western economic and military-political structures. The US State Department describes US policy in Central Asia since September 11 as 'enhanced engagement'. A fundamental US policy goal is precisely to prevent the emergence of a new Russian empire in Eurasia. Like Afghanistan, all five of the Central Asian countries need serious 'nation-building'. George W. Bush said during the 2000 presidential campaign that this should not be a U.S. vacation, but since September 11, 2001, it has become one.

⁹ Rajan Menon, The New Great Game in Central Asia, in: *Survival*, Volume 45 Number 2 Summer 2003, p. 191-195

¹⁰ See for a debate over the role of America in Central Asia: Charles Fairbanks, (Being there), and Andrew Bacevich, (Steppes to Empire), in: *The National Interest*, Number 68, Summer 2002, p. 39-55; and Pauline Jones Luong and Erika Weinthal, New Friends, New Fears in Central Asia, in: *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 81 No. 2, p. 61-71

¹¹ Adrian W. Burke, A U.S. Regional Strategy for the Caspian Sea Basin, in: *Strategic Review*, Fall 1999, p. 18-30; en Anthony C. Zinni, Challenges in the Central Region, in: *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Spring 2000, p. 26-32

¹² Robert G. Kaiser, U.S. Plants Footprint in Shaky Central Asia, *The Washington Post*, August 27, 2002

By pushing the Central Asian states toward free markets and democratic politics the United States tries to strengthen them against Islamic extremism and instability. However In the view of numerous academic Central Asian specialists, the situation is actually deteriorating.

None of the leaders in the region permits free politics or fair elections, and as a result all lack legitimacy. They are all 'guys who just were there', as leaders of their republics when the Soviet Union collapsed or soon afterward. They wield highly concentrated personal power in fledgling systems whose institutions range from weak to utterly ineffectual. The human rights situation is also considered as 'poor'.

U.S. aid budgets for this region have increased to a total of \$442 million. Americans are helping Central Asians learn to operate a market economy and teach English, train and deploy modern armed forces, develop independent news media and establish citizens' groups and a civil society.

For both the leaders of Central Asia and their new U.S. partners, regional stability is the overriding goal. But they define the term differently. The Central Asian presidents cite the need for stability to justify their crackdowns on domestic opponents. American diplomats argue, on the contrary, that stability will depend on tolerance for opponents and opportunities for them to compete for power. Ordinary people speak longingly of a stability accompanied by economic security and a sense of an orderly future. The powerful nations of the world with interest in the neighbourhood all see stability as the antidote to the tendencies they fear – Islamic extremism, violent opposition to sitting regimes, ugly contests for power and wealth.

But regional stability is also threatened by two potential security risks, namely the increasing scarcity of water and the disputes over boundaries.

Conflicts over scarce water in Central Asia

The countries in Central Asia are what is called 'water-stressed' countries.¹³ Growing scarcity of water holds a potential security risk. In the mid-1990's, military exercises sometimes even simulated battles over dams.

Water use has increased rapidly since the Central Asian states became independent in 1991 and is now at an unsustainable level. Tensions focus on the two main rivers of the region that both flow to the Aral Sea – the Syr Darya from Kyrgyzstan through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and the Amu Darya from Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

An annual cycle of disputes has developed between the three downstream countries – Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – that are all heavy consumers of water for growing cotton, and the upstream nations – Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Compounding the problem is the fact that both Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are extensively exploiting the river for irrigation, primarily for their vast cotton plantations. This in turn has contributed to enormous environmental problems around the Aral Sea, which has shrunk by more than half its original size over three decades. Since the fall of the Taliban in November 2001, there has been concern, as mentioned earlier, about the implications of efforts to rebuild agriculture in Afghanistan. Currently that country uses very little water from the Amu Darya but reconstruction of irrigation systems will put additional pressure on the river.

¹³ *Central Asia: Water and Conflict*, International Crisis Group, Brussels, 30 May 2002; and Ibragim Alibekov, *Central Asia's Water Future*, EurasiaNet, May 30, 2003

Four key areas of tension among the Central Asia nations can be identified: Lack of coherent water management; failure to abide by or adapt water quotas; non-implemented and untimely barter agreements and payments; and uncertainty over future infrastructure plans.

The Interstate Coordinating Water Commission (ICWC) that was set up in 1992 has failed to take into account changing political and economic relations. It is an inter-governmental body with little transparency that focuses almost exclusively on the division of water. The main issue is the lack of political commitment on the interstate level. There is no political will to find common solutions for cross-border water problems.

Borders

Another potential security risk are the borders.¹⁴ The leaders of each of the Central Asian states are aware of how artificial their current borders are, but have failed to strike an agreement on the issue. The existing national boundaries do not reflect natural geographic divides, nor do they closely reflect historic patterns of land usage. Moreover, they have been far from unalterable. The administrative boundaries of the Soviet republics were modified many times, and were designed to leave large irredentist populations scattered throughout the region. This in turn has made the question of national boundaries particularly contentious, all the more so because there were small enclaves of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan that are left from Soviet time in the neighbouring states. Independence for the Central Asian states reopened a Pandora's box of border disputes. Borders that were suddenly international, quickly took on major significance. Long-standing industrial and transportation links were disrupted. Control of territory meant control of resources and improved strategic positions. Ethnic populations that had long enjoyed access to friends and family just across borders were now isolated and often faced visa requirements and other access difficulties. Much of the population views these new restrictions with hostility and has felt the disruption in traditional patterns of commerce and society acutely. Nowhere are tensions higher than in the Ferghana Valley, where border lines delineated by the Bolsheviks in 1924 slice indiscriminately through Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Tension over borders is a further destabilising issue in a difficult political and security environment. Resolving these issues will require great persistence, difficult compromises, intensive international engagement and genuine creativity.

Final remark

There has been no lack of resolutions and initiatives to enhance the sovereignty, security and stability of Central Asia. Besides the Russian Federation and the United States as key actors, also NATO and its Partnership for Peace Program Activities, the EU's TACIS, the OSCE and its missions, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Economic Cooperation Organization, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia, Japanese, Canadian and other programs of aid and assistance, and United Nations mediation

¹⁴ Central Asia: Border Disputes and Conflict Potential, International Crisis Group, Osh/Brussels, 4 April 2002; and Zamira Eshanova, Central Asia: Border Issues An 80-Year-Old Headache For Region, RFE/RL, Prague, 18 October 2002

of conflicts, which all have a stated goal to enhance the political or economic viability of the region's new states, can be mentioned.

But the non-traditional security threats of terrorism, separatism, extremism, organised crime, water scarcity and border disputes are still pressing security issues faced by the region. The seeds for discontent are ripe across the region, giving rise to extremist movements. So in conclusion, while the security outlook for the Central Asian region is rather unclear at the present time, political, social and economic reform are most necessary to create a secure and stable environment in the region.