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U.S.-Central Asian Security

Balancing Opportunities and Challenges

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Conclusions

- The newly independent states of Central Asia exhibit relative stability although economic progress is slow. While their greatest security threats are internal—political repression, inequitable distribution of income, ethnic and tribal unrest—their leaders focus instead on external threats such as hostile neighbors and the spill-over of Islamic extremism (especially in Afghanistan).

- The potential wealth anticipated from the region's as yet untapped energy resources may be greater than the actual return from oil and gas deposits. The resources will help diversify world energy supply, but will not replace Persian Gulf oil or gas.

- Neighbors—Russia, Iran, and China—worry about U.S. military intrusion in the region and encirclement by hostile European, Western, or NATO forces. They are also competing for access to and control over pipelines exporting the region's gas and oil.

- The Central Asian states are comfortable with the current U.S. level of engagement in the region, but the growing momentum of economic interests, diplomatic ties, and military relationships risks unintended consequences. Leaders of the Central Asian states may interpret U.S. military and diplomatic initiatives as a commitment to regime survival and preservation of the regional status quo, policy decisions the United States has not yet made.

Central Asia as a Work in Progress

In the seven years since the collapse of the Soviet Empire, the five states that comprise the predominantly Muslim states of Central Asia—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—have made significant progress in their search for political independence and economic stability. Their independence is established and their northern neighbor is unlikely to be able to reestablish domination. Their regimes are relatively stable if not democratic. Most practice a repressive, autocratic-style of political rule with symbolic elections, few true political parties, and no succession mechanisms. With some variations, these are leader-dominated systems with few opportunities for citizen voices to be heard and little tolerance for opposition or political critics. Most credit their stability to strong control from the top; many of the governing elite cite the civil war that convulsed Tajikistan

until last summer as proof that democratic changes and Islamist political activism can destabilize society. They are restructuring their economies, moving hesistantly toward market systems. They export commodities or natural resources, and two of them—Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan—could become very wealthy from oil and gas exports. Their societies have ethnic and religious fault lines but no open conflict at present.

The Five Republics

Each of the five Central Asian states has different political leadership styles, resources, and needs.

Kazakhstan has huge oil reserves. Western oil companies are major investors in the area, but China has small oil field investments and talks about financing an 1,800-mile pipeline to Xinjiang. American companies are the largest commercial actors in the Tengiz fields in western Kazakhstan, as well as in the consortia that are developing undersea Caspian oil (primarily in Azerbaijani territory). A large Russian population lives along the northern border.

Kyrgyzstan is a poor, mountainous country with few resources. It depends on foreign assistance, and is politically more progressive than its neighbors.

Tajikistan, also poor, saw ethnic and political unrest between Islamists and old-line secularists from 1992 through 1996. A Russian military force of 18,000 monitors the 1997 peace agreement.

Turkmenistan hopes to gain wealth from its huge natural gas deposits; but it has no outlets and needs pipelines to exploit its natural gas fields.

Uzbekistan is self-sufficient in gas and oil, and an exporter of cotton and gold. It sees itself as the Islamic center of Central Asia, although the current regime has repressed religious activities.

Ties that Bind

The Central Asian states face daunting economic problems. Rich in energy and other resources, they are land-locked—dependent on the goodwill of neighbors for export routes. Energy exploitation is expensive, access to markets difficult, and demand, at least in the near term, uncertain. Their fragile economies have not recovered from the collapse of the Soviet Union with its highly centralized, bureaucratic business practices. Since the collapse, the GDP of these states has dropped 15-20 percent, resulting in lower standards of living and fewer jobs. These states are seeking foreign investment, new markets, and multiple distribution routes to export their gas, oil, and other commodities. Among the alternatives, they prefer multiple political allies and trade routes rather than depending on new forms of Russian political and economic domination. They see the United States as a lever against Russian dominance, and a source of investment capital and technology. Moreover, they are aware that the greatest risk to regime well-being could arise from the economic uncertainties which fuel ethnic violence, religious-secular clashes, and the failed-state syndrome.

Whose Great Game Is It?

The Central Asian states are the focus of attention from neighbors and other interested parties because of the potential for great wealth and because of the risks that arise from dangerous circumstances. Neighbors have visions of playing "Big Brother" to the region, hoping that shared histories, ethnicity, language, or greed will help shape these states in the neighbor's image.

Turkey's regional vision stresses Turkish-style secularism and democracy. Ankara depends on the region for energy imports and hopes to make the East-West pipeline project from Baku to Ceyhan become a reality. It fears Russian expansionism but needs Russian trade (approximately $4 billion yearly), tourism, and expatriate earnings. To strengthen its links to the republics, Turkey sends educational and training missions, and sponsors an estimated 3,000 Central Asian military officers annually in its military academies.

Russia sees opportunity and trouble in its Near Abroad. Moscow views the Central Asian region as a natural part of its sphere of influence because of its contiguous borders, centuries of domination, and the large number of ethnic Russians living there. Russian nationalists fret over the loss of Russian control and prestige (posing a potential political problem for the Kremlin), but most Russians realize they have only a limited ability to compete economically or militarily with the West. Moscow participates in NATO Partnership for Peace exercises in Central Asia but it is uneasy about the expanding U.S. military presence in the region. Although Russia's primary security risk at present is its economy, it fears Islamist instability on its borders and views Central Asian states as a buffer zone.

Iran assumes it is the natural protector of Central Asia because of long historical, ethnic, linguistic, and religious ties. Tehran also worries that U.S. military links to Central Asian states are part of a global effort to encircle and isolate it. Tehran casts a covetous look at the region's energy resources with an eye both to the day when its own oil reserves are depleted and to the profit to be made from export pipelines passing through Iran to the Gulf. Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan would benefit from the development of oil and gas pipelines through Iran. Although Iran has meddled in the Tajik civil war, whatever ambitions it might have had to support Islamist extremists in Central Asia have probably been tempered by changes in Tehran's leadership, a lack of resources, and a fear of promoting ethnic backlash among Iran's Tajik and other ethnic minorities.

China may become a more important player in Central Asian energy politics. Once Asia's top oil exporter, China now imports half of its energy needs from the Persian Gulf and estimates suggest that could double within the next two years. Its rising energy needs are fueling investment in Kazakhstan's oil fields and pipeline projects. Beijing also keeps an eye on ethnic unrest among its Uighur minority on the borders with Kazakhstan.

Central Asian states view the turmoil in Afghanistan as a potential security threat and assume the Taliban, if successful, will eventually be in conflict with them. Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan have agreed to coordinate efforts, including military assistance, to defend their countries against the Taliban.

The Islamist Threat

Some Central Asian states, like Russia, emphasize the "external meddler" as a source of Islamic political activism—a viewpoint that minimizes the strength and appeal of indigenous Islam within the national population and tends to demonize it. Uzbekistan, for example, recently forged an alliance against "Wahhabi extremism" with Russia, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. However, Central Asia lived under Islamic rule for a thousand years, but under Soviet rule for only 70 years. Most people in the region are nominal Muslims, and clerics with a Turkish background, or Iranian, or Saudi support are vying for influence. The region is undergoing a surge in personal piety and interest in its Islamic history and

culture. Political leaders (most of whom came of age under Soviet tutelage) manipulate Islamic symbols to rally popular support, but they also use the specter of a menacing, externally supported religious extremism coming across their borders to bolster domestic power. Russia also uses this specter to justify its strategic interest in the region. Few observers of Central Asia expect Iranian-style Islamist revolutions in the region, but all agree that Islamic institutions offer a potential outlet for people frustrated by current social and economic ills.

U.S. Opportunities and Challenges

U.S. policy in Central Asia is based on the principles of engagement, mutual self-reliance, and self-respect. Publicly, the policy promotes the independence, sovereignty, and security of the states; encourages democratic government; develops free market economies; ensures world access to regional energy resources; prevents the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; and combats narcotics traffic. The more accurate drivers of U.S. foreign policy include securing access to the region's energy resources and pipeline investments for U.S. companies and reducing dependence on Persian Gulf energy supplies. Depending on the status of relations with Moscow, Ankara, and/or Tehran, U.S. policy interests in the region could also be shaped by a desire to contain one and reward another.

Bilateral and multilateral programs for military contacts, training, and assistance have grown rapidly. The Central Asian states welcomed the U.S. commercial and diplomatic presence, and—after some initial hesitation—they have also welcomed contacts with our military and various forms of security assistance. Denuclearization, arms control, and help with defense conversion were important aspects of the early U.S. relationship with Kazakhstan. Military-to-military contacts began to expand after all but Tajikistan (because of its ongoing civil conflict) joined NATO's Partnership for Peace program. Through this mechanism, the Central Asian states' contacts with Western military officials multiplied, and they began taking advantage of opportunities to gain technical assistance, training, and equipment from the NATO states.

There are risks in pursuing U.S. policy objectives in Central Asia. Not all the states are alike. Each has a different set of problems and threat perceptions, and each needs to be addressed individually. Persistent political repression, especially if it targets Islamists, could radicalize large segments of the population and lead to political and social turmoil.

Moreover, rapid economic growth concentrated in the hands of the few, coupled with corruption and economic discontent, could provoke domestic unrest and a backlash against U.S. interests popularly perceived as supporting repressive and corrupt regimes. While the United States may be able to do little to affect internal rule or custom, our close ties to these regimes will imply greater influence than we

have.

Finally, if the oil fields and pipeline projects do not prove profitable, what happens to U.S. interests? The regimes have been encouraged to aspire to new levels of expectations and rewards in allowing foreign economic and commercial development. Disappointment and lowered expectations could provide new problems for the United States in the region.

Recommendations

To support growing U.S. regional interests, military and civilian officials have made a number of high-level visits, institutionalized political, economic, and commercial relationships, and participated in high-visibility joint military training exercises. Trade ties lag behind those with Eastern Europe, however, and the Central Asian regimes have yet to initiate the kinds of legal reforms and security protection that promote business confidence. Several issues need to be examined as the U.S. presence and interests expand in the region:

- Define the region. The United States has divided the region between CENTCOM (the five Central Asian republics) and EUCOM (the three Caspian states), leaving Russia unassigned. The division of responsibility should not be a problem for force posture and planning, but in a crisis resources would be thinly spread. The states view themselves in different alignments, depending on whether economic, strategic, trade, or pipeline issues are relevant. National self-interest will determine where they look for support; the ties that bind them together might affect U.S. operational activity.

- Assign priorities and determine levels of engagement. The United States needs to identify and prioritize its interests in the region and decide which policy instruments are best suited to pursue them. The interests—not in order—include energy diversity, commercial advantage, promoting security cooperation among the Central Asian states, internal and regional stability, political and economic reform, and nation building. The instruments are civilian diplomats and military and intelligence officers—all are developing contacts, and some have ill-defined missions. U.S. policymakers need to define what the United States would defend: oil? external invasion? internal unrest? Uighurs? Or none of the above? And against whom would the United States engage—Russia? China? Are there any internal circumstances that would trigger a U.S. reaction? Most observers of Central Asia see little risk of outside aggression but assume Russia would be the state most likely to intervene militarily in the region.

- Avoid false expectations. U.S.-Central Asian military-to-military ties have been our greates success. Local enthusiasm is high for the annual joint military exercises with the regional peacekeeping force, known as CENTRASBAT. Russia, Turkey, Georgia, Latvia, and Azerbaijan participated in the 1998 exercise "in the spirit of the Partnership for Peace." China and Pakistan sent observers. Central Asian leaders, however, may interpret U.S. military participation and diplomatic initiatives as a commitment to regime survival and preservation of the regional status quo.

- Manage the neighbors. To pursue our strategic objectives effectively in Central Asia, the United States needs to convince Russia, Iran, and China that our presence does not threaten their security. Rather, there are mutual benefits in energy development, economic investment, trade, military training exercises, and positive diplomacy.

- Review measures for force protection. While this is already a high priority for U.S. forces and

embassies, the pattern of terrorist attacks against U.S. facilities in Africa—where security is generally lax and buildings hard to isolate and protect—could repeat itself in Central Asia.

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