

Problems in Central Asian Security

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Central Asia's importance to the United States is rooted in the following three facts; its proximity to Afghanistan and thus the seat of the Taliban and al-Qaida that have attacked us and will do so again; its proximity to key states like Russia, Iran, China, and the Indian subcontinent; and its large energy deposits which are becoming critical for Europe. These facts have led every administration since 1993 to advance the following broad geostrategic goals for Central Asia. First it is critical that the threat posed by the Taliban and its allies in Al-Qaida and other associated terrorist groups be eradicated. Second, we seek to preclude the rebirth of any Eurasian empire and thus guarantee that Central Asian states retain their full sovereignty to choose their own path in world affairs without being subordinated to any one state. Third, we seek equal access for Central Asian states to global energy markets rather than dependence upon one exclusive intermediary like Russia. Therefore we correspondingly seek equal access to their markets, including energy, for our own companies. Lastly, in practice, despite rhetoric to the contrary, democracy promotion has always come in fourth behind these objectives and that remains the case today.

Those objectives and interests are at risk today from a combination of factors that place the security of Central Asian states at risk. Security and the threats to it in Central Asia are both multidimensional. The most urgent of the threats to regional security is, of course, the war in Afghanistan. But that war itself comprises multiple threats to the region while it exacerbates the risks posed by all the other existing threats to Central Asia. In some respects the threats posed by Afghanistan are classical or old-fashioned ones: e.g. the threat of a war spilling over Afghanistan's boundaries to engulf neighboring countries or should the Taliban and its allies win, the threat of terrorism

spreading into Central Asian countries. In that event these terrorist movements would no doubt soon try to overthrow the ruling governments of Central Asia, most likely in Uzbekistan since the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) is an already existing organization. But Uzbekistan would likely not be the only state in which we would see such action as terrorist and insurgent groups would also probably try to incite hostile action against the other governments in Central Asia.

Indeed, all the Central Asian governments have acted consistently upon the belief that all opposition to them is by definition Islamic, fundamentalist, and/or terrorist, and have therefore harshly repressed those phenomena whether that assessment is true or not. As a result the field has been left open only for such opposition movements to thrive. Therefore should the Taliban win in Afghanistan there would be, so to speak, ample dry timber lying around for them to ignite in their quest to spread their message and their politics. Thus the long-established threat of a revolutionary movement supported from abroad but finding sources of replenishment in neighboring states could become a genuine threat to regional security. But the threat potential embodied in this quite possible outcome becomes more likely by virtue of the existing shortcomings in these states' security systems.

If we look at their domestic politics it becomes clear that only Kazakhstan is relatively (and I emphasize relatively) secure and likely to flourish in the near future. But it suffers from an ever-growing democratic deficit and its economy greatly depends on the price of energy and other commodities. Nonetheless under these conditions of autocracy and widespread corruption it is creating an educated middle class and striving to bring authentic prosperity and sustainable economic growth to the country. Given its

proximity to Russia and China we can also assume that they would react quite vigorously to any genuine threat to Kazakhstan's security. Nevertheless its democratic deficit, uncertain succession picture, and the fact that its politics, like that of its Central Asian neighbors, is dominated by familial, clan, and factional politics are all negative signs concerning its prospects for future stability. Moreover, because Kazakhstan also aspires to a degree of regional leadership in Central Asia, it cannot stand aloof from regional issues and could be well drawn into potential future conflicts of the type discussed below.

Turning from Kazakhstan, we find that the situation everywhere else is nowhere near as promising as in that case and in some cases much worse. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are either failing states or perilously close to it. Turkmenistan is a repressive autocracy (if not quite as much as under Sapirmurad Niyazov who died in 2006) with a limited state capacity and a virtually complete dependence upon gas. Uzbekistan is no less repressive and has been dominated by President Islam Karimov since it became independent in 1991. It too depends heavily upon commodity prices for energy, gold, cotton, and Karimov has repeatedly brutally stifled any sign of opposition. In all four of these states, and possibly to a greater degree than Kazakhstan politics are largely those of family, faction, and clan leading to highly corrupt regimes even if it were not for the influence of the pervasive problems caused by the huge importation of narcotics from Afghanistan. In Tajikistan President Ermomali Rahmonov has built himself a \$300 million palace worth about half as much as the country's annual budget of \$700 Million and appointed his daughter to be Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs. Similar phenomena are also visible in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan where the president's daughters exercise enormous powers.

Similarly in Kyrgyzstan President Kurmanbek Bakiyev has just appointed his son to be head of the Central Agency for Development, Investment, and Innovation. The government of Kyrgyzstan is also shot through with criminality and corruption and like all the other Central Asian states has been relentlessly snuffing out all possibilities for liberal or democratic politics. Like Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan has been hard hit by the current economic crisis and suffers from serious energy shortages. In all these states as well the scourge of narcotics has grown to alarming proportions following what appears to be an iron law that states through which drugs traverse as they go to market invariably end up by becoming havens for large-scale use of drugs as well. Apart from the wasted lives and huge social and health costs by this epidemic of drug use, the drug trade only adds to the pervasive corruption in these countries.

Thus in all these countries misrule, nepotism, corruption, clan, faction, and family-based politics, a high degree of poverty, difficult economic conditions, and political repression are pervasive and the stuff of daily life. This lethal cocktail of security challenges offers the Taliban and Al-Qaida numerous opportunities for recruitment, especially as Islam is the only credible language of socio-political expression if all others are repressed. Should they win in Afghanistan their ability to exploit regional security challenges will grow commensurately. But the security deficits of the region go beyond this list of pathologies. There is no basis for regional security cooperation, quite the opposite. Uzbekistan is at odds with all of its neighbors and has repeatedly waged economic warfare against them or closed its borders. Neither is there any serious effort at regional economic cooperation so most countries compete with each other rather than seek ways to cooperate with each other for their mutual benefit. Indeed, Kazakhstan and

Uzbekistan are quite openly rivals for leadership here and that rivalry only mirrors the greater absence of regional cooperation that we find here. Every security organization set up that involves Central Asia was initiated by an outside power or powers like the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) or the Russian and Chinese-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). But it is quite uncertain what degree those organizations can actively maintain security in Central Asia should a determined challenge emerge.

And we should understand that sooner or later such a challenge will emerge, for example through a possible succession crisis, a highly plausible scenario. When Niyazov died the regional and Russian expectation was that such a crisis could break out leading to military conflicts. Thus a new crisis could evoke that same expectation or actually become a conflict and it is by no means clear how well prepared anyone is for such a contingency. The CSTO is a defense pact but it is hardly truly collective as Russia provides most of the troops and it is mainly an organization that can allow Russia to maintain bases in Central Asia. Although it claims it will not intervene in members' domestic affairs, it is quite possible that it is there precisely to quell local insurgencies or opposition movements since it is very doubtful that Russia could fight off a terrorist movement successfully based upon its utter failure in the North Caucasus or that it has the manpower and quality of forces needed to do so.

Similarly the SCO is explicitly not a defense or hard security organization. Rather it is a means for regulating Russo-Chinese relations in Central Asia, resolving earlier border problems, working together to counter democratic ideas and the US presence where it insists upon democratic reforms. It also is an organization that allows

Central Asian states to voice their collective needs of a material nature in regard to security to both China and Russia and induce them to transfer resources to those governments to provide for such security as such actions are seen as being in everyone's common interest. Its cohesion is untested and Uzbekistan periodically breaks with the SCO and CSTO to insist upon going its own way. So its potential as a security provider is untested and probably limited. Thus all regional security mechanisms are untested and could easily turn out to be unreliable.

This factor, on top of regional domestic problems listed above, is of considerable significance since it makes regional cooperation and conflict resolution much harder and such conflicts are already brewing. The states possessing energy deposits lack water and vice versa. Therefore water usage issues, particularly as many actors have continued disastrous Soviet environmental practices relating to water, irrigation, and the use of water for hydroelectric power have become a source of constant friction and could yet lead to conflicts among these states in the absence of any kind of regional or international supra-national authority. We see this in the constant rivalries among Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan that have led to a breakdown of previously existing regional accords. But it also is the case that China and Russia have also pursued beggar they neighbor water policies relating to waters of importance to Central Asia that have or soon will have disastrous environmental impacts upon the region. As the issue of climate change and the melting of ice from the mountain ranges in Central Asia become more critical issues, those trends could even aggravate the already profound threats from the erosion of the Aral Sea and local rivers and the selfish and misguided water policies of states leading to conflict over basic issues of water and electricity. Arguably Central

Asia is one of those regions where a war breaking out over resource and environmental issues is quite conceivable.

All these issues should engage us because this region's importance is growing. This growing importance is not only due to the consequences of Afghanistan's war but also because of the significance its energy resources has for Europe and Asia. Moscow has shown that it will do whatever it can to keep these states from selling energy independently to Europe or at high prices to Russia. Moscow's openly neo-colonial policies here are crucial to maintaining its autocratic economic-political system at home and frustrating reform of its own energy and overall economic policies and thus the political system. Those policies of controlling these states' pipelines and supporting their anti-liberal regimes is equally crucial to the prospect of Moscow's preserving an exclusive sphere of influence here and of dominating European economies and politics by control over the provision of gas and to a lesser degree oil. Control over Central Asian energy and politics is critical to Russia's larger strategic goal of forestalling European integration along democratic lines both in Central and Eastern Europe and with regard to Georgia and Ukraine, and thus the Caucasus, if not Central Asia itself.

Russia has made clear that while it talks a good game about cooperation in Afghanistan its government is not really ready to provide it, having allowed just one flight to date under the terms of its agreement with the Administration. Otherwise its bureaucracy has obstructed all other attempts to get more flights going. Similarly Moscow tried to bribe Kyrgyzstan and threaten it at the same time to kick the US out of its air base at Manas, hardly signs of a desire for genuine cooperation. But Russia also wants to control Central Asia in order to prevent China from supplanting it as a customer

for energy and/or a major economic power and security provider there. That effort goes on for despite the rhetoric of cooperation a Sino-Russian rivalry for influence continues there with Russia seeking to limit Central Asian states' ability to sell China energy directly through pipelines from the area built by them and China. However, Chinese economic power is proving to be too much for Russia under the conditions of the present crisis and Moscow even had to say it welcomed Chinese investment there. But we should also understand the magnitude of Chinese efforts here.

To give a few examples, recently it lent members of the SCO \$10 Billion and has also recently announced major energy and infrastructural initiatives in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan. China granted Turkmenistan, \$3 Billion for developing a new gas deposit at Yuzhny Iolatan. China also announced its intention to invest over \$1 Billion in hydroelectric energy, power transmission, and transport projects in Tajikistan that will tie Tajikistan's infrastructure much closer to China. Finally, China's Export-Import Bank is lending the state-owned Development Bank of Kazakhstan \$5Billion, and CNPC is lending Kazmunaigaz, Kazakhstan's state-run gas company, another \$5Billion. Moreover, China National Petroleum Corporation is buying a 49% minority holding in Kazakhstan's company AO MangistauMunaigaz from Kazmunaigaz National Co. And we can expect further deals of this magnitude.

According to some members of US non-governmental organizations, China also told the Kyrgyz government that if it the US did not offer it enough money to keep the Manas air base (now a transit center) open China could furnish the money, demonstrating its willingness to play a broker's role and gain leverage with both Washington and Bishkek. These sources also quoted German diplomats who noted that China is now

committed to truly big investment projects and will not invest in Central Asia for less than \$5Billion. Neither do these deals exhaust China's ongoing and prospective investments in Central Asian energy and infrastructure.

This capability flows directly from China's huge cash reserves and willingness to spend in a time of economic crisis to gain political leverage globally and not just in Central Asia. Since the US will not invest such sums and in many cases, especially those tied to support of the war in Afghanistan, is legally debarred from doing so, and Russia will promise but not deliver the goods, China, who will deliver without strings concerning recipients' democratic credentials stands poised to reap an enormous geopolitical harvest in Central Asia.

Recommendations for the Obama Administration.

All of the aforementioned factors should normally impel the US government to regard this region as a whole as one of growing importance for the United States. But it appears that our interest remains almost exclusively focused on the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) through Central Asia that has been set up to relieve logistical pressure on our forces in Afghanistan near Pakistan. Of course, the establishment of the NDN has also led the Taliban to start moving north and attacking it, not surprisingly since so many of its successful attacks have been directed against our other logistical networks through the Khyber Pass. But those attacks against the NDN have contributed to mounting anxiety in Central Asia about the war spilling over into their territories and attacks by homegrown insurgents encouraged by or otherwise supported by the Taliban and Al Qaida. Yet while we must defend the NDN we seem to have overlooked the importance of other issues in Central Asia. High-level visits do not occur unlike the case in Russia,

China, etc. The Administration has apparently opted to forego public discussion of the region's democratic deficits as it has also done with Russia and China, in my opinion, a wrong decision even if it is an understandable one.

Likewise, there does not seem to be any strong push by senior officials above the Ambassadorial level to get Central Asian energy moving through Nabucco or other pipeline plans offered by the EU. Even if the EU and not the US is the author of the Nabucco pipeline, surely the stakes involved here are such that we should be moving openly and vigorously to support it, line up financing for it, and convince Central Asian governments to commit to it by giving them assurances that they will not suffer negative consequences for so doing. Also there is no public sign of awareness of the seriousness of the region's energy, water, and environmental issues or any truly strong push for enhanced US trade and investment programs to counter the Russian and Chinese quests for lasting influence here. In other words our Afghanistan strategy appears to remain incomplete, an Af-Pak (Pakistan) strategy rather than an overall regional strategy that embraces the entire region and sees all of its dimensions in their true strategic importance.

As I have previously written, Central Asian governments' interest in maintaining the maximum amount of flexibility and independence in their foreign relations coincides neatly with both U.S. capabilities and interests. It obviously is in Washington's interest that its logistical rear in Afghanistan be stabilized especially at a time of prolonged economic hardship in the region and mounting conflict in Afghanistan. The intended supply road can and hopefully will provide a major boost to local economies by giving contracts to local companies and hopefully provide employment to some of the

unemployed in these countries. But the Obama Administration should not stop there. America especially with European support, can leverage its superior economic power to regain a stronger position in the region and help prevent these embattled states from falling further prey to Russia and/or China who cannot compete at that level with the US or with the US and Europe together. In any case Russia's answers to Central Asian issues consists of maintaining the status quo against all changes, leaving these states as backward states dependent on their cash crop and with little or no possibility of cooperating amongst themselves. In other words, the Russian approach over time enhances their vulnerability to challenges stemming either from the Taliban, the global economic crisis, or a confluence of the two phenomena.

Meanwhile the business community is playing a bigger role in Central Asian states besides Kazakhstan, the regional economic leader. And that role is going beyond energy investments. Although Washington cannot offer state-backed loans and elaborate project credits, as does Beijing, it supports WTO membership for all Central Asian states and has established a U.S.-Central Asia Trade and Investment Framework Agreement. Accordingly there is an opportunity here for the Obama Administration to enlarge upon this foundation with a considerably larger and multi-dimensional program of trade, aid, and investment throughout Central Asia to accomplish the standing US objectives of enhancing these states' economic independence, economic security, and opportunities for their independent participation in the global economy without a Russian or Chinese filter.

Scholars have long realized that it is the construction of infrastructural projects that can overcome Central Asia's centuries-long isolation from major international trade routes and provide not just lasting economic growth but also access to new possibilities

for political action and integration, not just into regional blocs but into the wider global economy. Meanwhile, changes in transport facilities and communication devices that began in Soviet times and that have continued since then to the present are exercising a decisive influence upon emerging geostrategic and economic realities in Central Asia. Specifically the nineteenth century vision of an integrated network of rail lines connecting the former Soviet and Tsarist empires, Iran, India, and Europe is becoming a reality. Equally importantly market access varies inversely with transport cost. To the degree that Central Asian energy costs more to transport to world markets the less access it will have. But conversely to the extent that roads and other forms of travel, transport, and communication are built into Central Asia that lower the cost of transporting people, goods, and services it can be more integrated with the broader global economy. Surely such ideas lie behind various Russian and Chinese projects for such developments as well as the rivalry over pipelines to send Central Asian energy to Europe and Asia. Thus the NDN project falls squarely into that category of exemplary infrastructural projects that may serve purposes other than economic stability and global or regional integration but which ultimately can facilitate those objectives and outcomes. Therefore our investment policies should build upon the NDN to invest in further large-scale infrastructural projects to help develop the region, create jobs, generate progress, and advance regional economic integration.

Beyond that, the necessity of supplying troops with large amounts of potable water suggests a second benefit from this road. Perhaps it can galvanize greater cooperation among Central Asian states, if not to increase the amount of water they consume, then at least to upgrade their quality for the benefit of all of its users. There is

no doubt that water shortages are a real threat to the stability of some of these societies and a cause for unrest in them.

Therefore such infrastructural and environmental projects could provide a spur for a much needed but still obstructed regional economic integration or at least enhanced cooperation. There is no doubt that at least some, if not all these states are receptive to the idea of greater cooperation against the Taliban. Shared participation in a major logistical project that brings mutual benefit while supporting the war effort could lead to spillovers that foster still more cooperation in other areas like water. While it is true that the US budget is strained and has many claimants upon its resources, this is a region where relatively small sums given the totality of U.S. budgetary outlays could make a substantial geopolitical difference. Moreover, it might be possible to arrange matters so that the budget is not busted here while redirecting existing programs towards a more holistic and integrated, i.e. multidimensional understanding of regional security needs and thus towards greater effectiveness. Certainly neither Russia nor China could compete with a truly serious investment of U.S. resources and time here.

But we should not think that we can do this on the cheap. **The lessons of Manas are clear: If the United States seeks a policy position in Central Asia commensurate with the requirements of victory in Afghanistan then it will have to pay for it by investing the resources necessary to do the job. Otherwise its regional credibility will steadily diminish.** We cannot pretend that a geopolitical struggle is not occurring in this increasingly critical region of the world. Since “power projection activities are an input into the world order,” Russian, European, Chinese, and American force deployments into Central Asia and the Caucasus and economic-political actions to gain

access, influence and power there represent potentially competitive and profound, attempts at engendering a long-term restructuring of the regional strategic order.

Specific Recommendations

Specifically the U.S. government under President Obama should consider and act upon the following recommendations and policies in order to facilitate the aforementioned strategic goals of victory in Afghanistan and the enhanced independence of Central Asian states.

- First it must continue the Bush Administration's emphasis upon regional integration of Central Asia with South and East Asia in regard to energy electricity, and other commodities. But it should also expand its horizons to foster greater US-European cooperation so that these states can trade more openly with Europe and the United States as well. Greater involvement by the EU that parallels NATO involvement would therefore contribute to this latter enhancement of existing US policies. And it should invest in capabilities that can help overcome regional energy and water issues, perhaps by encouraging Army Corps of Engineers and private engineering firms to work in the region with local governments.

- Second, it must build upon that foundation and conceive of the road it now seeks to build for logistical purposes to supply US forces as also being a powerful engine for regional economic development and integration. This aspect of the policy called for here as part of the overall strategy for winning the war in Afghanistan and stabilizing Central Asia must be a multilateral project with as many local and other key partners (NATO, Russia, and China) as possible.

•Third, it must not detach the NDN from other parts of U.S. policy. Instead the Administration should see it as the centerpiece of a coordinated policy and policy actions to integrate together existing programs for trade, investment, and infrastructural projects, particularly with regard to water quality and increasing water supplies for all of Central Asia in order to lay a better foundation for the lasting economic and thus political security of Central Asian states, and indirectly through such support, for their continuing economic-political independence and integration with Asia and the global economy.

•Fourth the US should offer much more overt and vigorous economic and political support to the Nabucco project either with the EU or directly to Central Asian states who might wish to take part in it in the form of investment, exploration assistance, building pipelines, providing insurance and financing, etc. A policy that neglects this has directly negative repercussions in both Central Asia and Europe and only strengthens a Russia that by both word and deed has indicated its disinterest in genuinely serious policy cooperation in Central Asia.

•Fifth it must, at the same time, reform the interagency process which was universally regarded as broken, in order to pursue security in this region and in individual countries in a holistic, multi-dimensional, and integrated way that enhances all the elements of security, not just military security. While we do not espouse any particular course of reform of the interagency process, there are several points that can and should be made here. First, the strategy and policy outlined here is not purely or mainly military. Second, it therefore should optimally not be led by the U.S. military but include them under civilian leadership as an important, but not dominating element in that strategy for Central Asia. While in Afghanistan actual hostilities requiring a military

strategy are required, it is also accepted that an important component of our policy and strategy there must be to improve governance and economic conditions for the population. The overall strategy must shun the previous procedures and lack of integrated planning for both hard and soft power elements of U.S. strategy in Afghanistan that has led to “stovepipe efforts that do not achieve full and efficient results and effects in areas of operations.”

Instead as one recent paper on the subject of reforming this process notes, if the US system is to address the ever increasing level of complexity in providing security at home and abroad, “indeed if it is to operate as a system at all rather than a collection of separate components – then security reform must stress unity, integration, and inclusion across all levels.” And this new process must take a long-term view of the problems with which it will grapple, especially in the light of our own financial crisis. Within that call for reform there are several common themes in recent works and statements on this subject that emphasize as well the need for multilateral support for such programs.

Furthermore, in all our efforts, whether they are regional or within a particular country, experience shows the absolute inescapable necessity that the operation to provide such multidimensional security must be organized along lines of unity of command and unity of effort to succeed. Whether the format is one of a country team led by the ambassador that pulls all the strings of U.S. programs together or a Joint Integrated Task Force (JIATF) is almost a secondary question. The paramount need is for well-conceived plans that can be implemented under the principle of this unity of command leading to a unity of effort.

•Sixth, a key component of an expanded, integrated, and holistic approach to security in both Afghanistan and Central Asia must entail a vigorous effort to combat narcotics trafficking. This is not just because it is a scourge to both Afghanistan, and the CIS, but also because it is clear that the Afghan governments either incapable or unwilling to act and is more concerned with blaming others for its deficiencies here. Furthermore, such action will convince Central Asian states and Russia that we take their security concerns seriously and facilitate their cooperation with our policy and strategy.

Conclusions

Arguably it is only on the basis of such an integrated multi-dimensional and multilateral program that a strategy to secure Central Asia against the ravages of economic crisis and war can be built while we also seek to prosecute the war in Afghanistan in a similarly holistic way. It has long since been a critical point or points in U.S. policy for Central Asia that we seek to advance these states' independence, security, and integration both at a regional level and with the global economy. U.S. experts and scholars have also argued for such a perspective as well. Thus the NDN project could and probably should serve as the centerpiece of a renewed American economic strategy to help Central Asia fight off the Taliban and cope simultaneously with the global economic crisis. An integrated program of economic and military action in Central Asia is surely called for given the scope of our growing involvement and the stakes involved in a region whose strategic importance is, by all accounts, steadily growing. Especially as we are now increasing our troop commitment to Afghanistan and building this new supply road, challenge and opportunity are coming together to suggest a more enduring basis for a lasting US contribution to Central Asia's long-term security. In effect the present crisis

has brought matters to the point where the United States has obtained a second chance in Central Asia even as it is becoming more important in world affairs. It is rare that states get a second chance in world politics. But when the opportunity knocks somebody should be at home to answer the door.