

In the Tracks of Tamerlane: Central Asia's Path to the 21st Century¹

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While there is hardly a corner of the world that has not been affected in one way or another by the events of September 11, the repercussions are especially evident in the region known as Soviet Central Asia.² The countries and people in this region were already in the process of adjusting to the major changes in their status brought about by the breakup of the Soviet Union a scant ten years before, when they were plunged into the international spotlight. Even though proximity to Afghanistan and the hiding place of Osama Bin Laden was the catalyst for this most recent round of attention, the fact that the region sits astride some of the largest known gas and oil reserves in the world already had brought the area a fair amount of notoriety.

Though interest in Central Asia appears to be a fairly recent phenomenon, this should hardly be the case. Throughout history, the area, bracketed roughly by the Caspian Sea and China, has served as the crossroads of Asia and Europe and been home to succeeding waves of migrating populations as well as the great Silk Road. Empires have risen and fallen, only to rise again in different forms; groups have been dominant and then been assimilated by succeeding dominant groups. Although history is filled with the names of these groups and their leaders, ranging from the armies of Alexander the Great to the Arabs and the Turks, the ones best known in the West are the Mongols and Tartars who, under Tamerlane, spread their influence to the gates of Europe in the late fourteenth century.³ After the death of Tamerlane, the region fell under succeeding outside influences, most notably Russian and British, in what Kipling referred to as "The Great Game." Yet even as the object of the game rather than a player, Central Asia retained an importance to those around it.

Today finds the countries of Central Asia in a period of rebirth, not only in terms of outside interest, but also in their own self-awareness of their potential importance on the global scene. Almost no one would be willing to predict that any single country from the region, or even the region as a whole, is going to rise up and attempt the type of political dominance exerted by Tamerlane 600 years earlier. On the other hand, through their control of hydrocarbon resources, the countries of Central Asia stand poised to exert an influence far beyond what anyone might have expected as little as a dozen years ago. Following in the tracks of Tamerlane, the countries of the region are seeking to carve a path that will define the nature of their existence well into the twenty-first century and beyond, a path whose repercussions will be felt throughout the world. With this in mind, it seems appropriate to examine where the tracks of Tamerlane's successors may lead.

Picking up the Trail

Before one can successfully follow any trail, it is necessary to be familiar with the land on which it is located. Central Asia roughly can be considered bounded in the west by the Caspian Sea, which separates the region from the Caucasus. From west to east, the region stretches over 1500 miles, encountering few natural obstacles until the mountains of western China. These mountains, the Tien Shan, literally "the Roof of the World," run southwest into the Himalayas making up a large portion of present-day Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, before turning south into Afghanistan. The remainder of the southern border becomes desert in what is present day Turkmenistan. The bulk of the territory is arid grassland or steppe, which stretches from the desert and mountains in the south to the Siberian forest or "Taiga" of Russia that forms its northern boundary. Overall, the area comprises more than a million and a half square miles.⁴

The land contained in this region, for the most part, is a vast plain. The soil, while fertile, suffers from a continental climate that does not guarantee sufficient moisture for most crops; as a result, the people in this area traditionally have been nomads. Substantial runoff from the mountains is carried to the region by several rivers, primarily the Amu Dar'ya and Syr Dar'ya, which fill the Aral Sea in the east-central part of the plain. Those areas without sufficient water have reverted to desert, as found in Turkmenistan. The climate, without the benefit of the moderating influence of an ocean, tends to be harsh, with temperatures ranging from 120 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer to minus 40 and below in the winter. Although less than ideal for agriculture, the land possesses tremendous

mineral wealth in addition to the already mentioned supplies of gas and oil. Almost every strategic metal can be found in Central Asia, especially in the mountains of the south, and new deposits continue to be discovered.

As might be expected, the geography of the region has influenced its history and development. With few natural borders to define or protect it, the region has been subject to the influences of wave after wave of tribes and peoples who have crisscrossed the landscape. Those who stayed to occupy the land for any time tended to be nomadic, grazing their herds on the abundant grasslands and then moving with the seasons, the weather, or at the prodding of their neighbors. While the original inhabitants have been all but lost in history, it can be determined that waves of Mongols from the east, Persians from the south, and Turkic peoples from the south and west all dominated portions of the region at one time or another, intermarrying with the local populations and making their contribution to the existing cultures. Arab invaders in the tenth and eleventh century brought with them the Islamic faith, which continues to be the dominant religious influence, though its practice tends to be far from the stringent form found in other parts of the world.

If there was one unifying influence at any time in the region's history, it would be the period of conquest and domination by Tamerlane, or Timur as he is known locally. Born outside of Samarkand in the fourteenth century, Tamerlane claimed to be descended from the great Mongol leader Genghis Kahn, though other evidence exists that he was, in fact, of Tartar origin.⁵ After securing a local base of operations, he began a quarter of a century of conquest that has few rivals in history. He conquered Persia and the lands now comprising Iraq, Azerbaijan and Armenia. He then invaded Russia and moved west of the Ural River before being called back to put down a revolt in Persia. After conquering Mesopotamia and Georgia, he turned his attention to India, storming Delhi and advancing into the Himalayan foothills before withdrawing. He then turned west again, capturing Syria, defeating elements of the Ottoman Empire, and receiving tribute from both Byzantium and Egypt. Only his death en route to invading China in 1405 stopped the expansion of his empire to an area greater than that achieved under Genghis Khan.⁶

While successful on the battlefield, Tamerlane failed in creating a governing structure that could perpetuate his empire, and it soon broke up into a collection of tribes, *khanates*, and independent city-states after his death. This patchwork of entities exerted control over various portions of the territory, without any one being able to control the whole. However, starting with the rule of Peter the Great in Russia in the late

seventeenth century, external influences began to make their presence felt. The Russians spread their influence from the northwest at the same time the British influence began spreading from India in the southeast. Central Asia was caught between these two great empires. Given the competition between Russia and Great Britain, Central Asia became the buffer, with each nation vying for the type of influence that would give it an advantage over the other. The consequences of this arrangement for the local population are brilliantly described in the works of Peter Hopkirk.⁷ The collapse of Tsarist Russia did little to change this situation in the twentieth century, as the Bolsheviks were quick to establish themselves in the region, and continued to perform the same basic functions as the previous regime.

Although Russification meant that the local populations were, at best, second-class citizens with local rulers co-opted by, or at worst token figureheads for, Russian domination, there were benefits. Literacy was brought to the region, so that by the end of the Soviet rule better than 90 percent of the local populations could read and write. Health standards were improved, and while agriculture continued to be the primary source of revenue, fledgling industries were introduced. Though the area's mineral wealth was exploited, the necessity of introducing the infrastructure needed for this exploitation provided the region with essential communications and transportation facilities. In addition, security in the region was insured on two levels. Externally, the region's borders were secured by the Soviet military; internally, the organs of the Soviet State provided stability. While possibly not an ideal existence, it was one that the local populations, for the most part, seemed willing to embrace.

Independence – Old Wine in New Bottles?

It has often been commented, and not without justification, that the states of Central Asia did not seek independence in 1991, but instead had it thrust upon them.⁸ Leaders such as Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbaev argued strongly for the continuation of some sort of union, which among other things would ensure the continuation of the power and perks enjoyed by the ruling elite. This elite was a mixture of local ethnic and Russian nationals, who were all products of the Soviet system and were less than enthused to see it go. Still, these leaders had gotten to the positions that they occupied by being astute politicians in the sense of reading the prevailing trends and being ready to jump on the train (or caravan) wherever it might lead. While it is sometimes commented that local national leaders were merely figureheads who did their Russian masters' bidding, this is an oversimplification of an extremely complex working relationship.

Moscow, for the most part, had recognized the need for ethnic leaders as a way of ensuring the complacency, if not the loyalty, of the local populations. Those times when this lesson was forgotten, as when Gorbachev tried to appoint an ethnic Russian as head of the Kazakh republic in 1996, resulted in massive unrest.⁹ In truth, these local leaders were likely to be zealots in their allegiance to Moscow, since they owed their positions to “the center” and not to any local movements or activity. Having said that, local leaders already had developed their own local support structures, based among other things on family, tribal or clan affiliation. In this sense, the Soviet system actually had adapted and grafted itself onto the existing ruling patterns already in place in Central Asia.

With independence and without the need for vetting from Moscow, the local structures came into greater prominence, though it can be argued that this was more a matter of visibility than any great shift in the existing order. Russians who had been part of this structure either departed to return to Russia or were moved to less visible positions, allowing local ethnic populations to occupy a greater share of the leading roles. This did not occur overnight, as there were often not enough qualified locals to fill all these positions; however, there were sufficient numbers so that the predictions of social collapse due to removal of ethnic Russians from the existing order never materialized.¹⁰

The situations facing the newly independent states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan were strikingly similar in both number and nature. All of the countries shared a common geo-strategic location in the world, manifested among other things, by lack of access to the sea and general remoteness from established world trade routes. All of the republics were controlled by a small elite that had been molded by years in the communist party and a socialist (or what passed as socialist) system. As a legacy of that system, all of the republics had high rates of literacy and a body of trained workers, especially in comparison with other developing areas of the world, though the quality of that education and the skills possessed by those workers may have left something to be desired. Each country also inherited a crumbling infrastructure, in terms of industry, transportation and services, yet what was there did provide the rudiments required for a civilized society to function. A dependency on raw materials, both natural resources and agricultural products, was the basis for the economies in all of the new states and provided the majority of their income. One major aspect of these economies, closely related to the dependence on natural resources, was a legacy of environ-

mental problems stemming from the exploitation of these resources under the Soviet regime.

Despite the similar situations faced at the outset, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan each have struck out on their own path since independence, leading each to come up with different approaches to deal with the problems they collectively faced. That such differences exist should hardly be surprising, since in spite of their similarities, each country has elements that make it different from the others, ranging from geographic and cultural peculiarities to those relating to the personalities of their leaders and composition of their elites. Parts of these differences are tied to their relations with each other, for each is unique in terms of the neighbors with whom they must deal. In Soviet times these differences were present, but had less significance under the overarching template put in place by Moscow. Now, with decision-making effectively decentralized to the respective regional capitals, the perspective has changed from the one that Moscow provided. Thus, to gain an appreciation for these differences in perspective, it is necessary to look at each of these countries in turn before returning to examine the region as a whole.

Kazakhstan

As the largest of the five former republics in terms of landmass, Kazakhstan's location as the northernmost country in Central Asia gives it the distinction of being the only former republic in the region with a shared land border with Russia. In truth, it can be argued that Kazakhstan, on at least its northern portion, should not be equated to the rest of the area. Commentators during Soviet times would use the phrase Central Asia and Kazakhstan, indicating that the two were somehow different. During the 1930s, when the borders of the republics were drawn, it has been said that Stalin specifically included a large portion of what had traditionally been considered Russian lands, so as to ensure the loyalty of the region. Whether true or not, the result was that at the time of independence only 40 percent of the population were ethnic Kazakhs, with another 40 percent Russian, and the remainder comprised mostly of other Slavic ethnic groups. This led to an early concern that the northern, ethnically Russian portion of the country would move to break away from the new state and attempt to reintegrate with Russia. While there have been scattered incidents caused by Russian nationalist groups, the majority of the Russian population seems resigned, if not content, with their current situation. This can be attributed to the fact that stories coming back from Russia

indicated that conditions there were worse than those in Kazakhstan.¹¹ In addition to other mineral resources, Kazakhstan possesses the largest oil reserves in Central Asia, with some estimates indicating that these reserves may make the country the new Saudi Arabia.¹² Thus, the country's future is inexplicably tied to the development of these reserves.

Externally, Kazakhstan's security concerns were perhaps best described by the country's Defense Minister, who on several occasions has commented that with Russia to the north, China to the east, Islamic fundamentalism to the south and disputes over the Caspian to their west, Kazakhstan finds itself in a tough neighborhood.¹³ Still, with an external border of approximately 6,000 miles, only the portion with China is guarded, representing the concerns of the Kazakhs themselves.¹⁴ In the south, Kazakhstan shares borders (and border disputes) with three of the other Central Asian States, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Of these, relations with the Kyrgyz are the most cordial, most strained with the Uzbeks, and fall somewhere in-between these two with the Turkmen. Kazakhs and Kyrgyz are extremely close ethnically, and the marriage of the daughter of Kazakh President Nazarbaev to a son of Kyrgyz President Askar Akaev led to speculation that the two would eventually merge into one.¹⁵ This situation is reversed with Uzbekistan, which is viewed as a rival in terms of being the dominant power in the region. The border with Turkmenistan is composed largely of desert and is of little concern.¹⁶ What is of concern is the eventual division of sovereignty over portions of the Caspian Sea and the tremendous energy deposits there. Indeed, the division of the Caspian Sea and the oil wealth associated with it may be one of the thorniest security issues the country faces in the future.

Though less openly discussed by the Kazakhs themselves, there exist several equally telling concerns that may affect the long-term security of the country. In addition to the normal problems associated with a weak economy, the inability to generate sufficient jobs, especially outside of the large cities such as Almaty, has led to staggering levels of unemployment. In cities such as Termez, the only real option for young people to obtain money is to enter into the illicit drug trade, a growing concern throughout the region. Not only does this represent yet another level of illegal activity in a society known for corruption, but drug use among young people has skyrocketed as availability has increased.¹⁷ Also related to the weak economy is the inability of the government to address effectively the myriad of environmental problems left from Soviet times. The diversion of waters from the Aral Sea for irrigation use and contamination left at sites associated with the Soviet nuclear program are but two examples of large-scale

problems that impact both the economy and health of the population, and add further burdens to a system unable to cope with either the scope or the costs of correcting such problems. Finally, the ruling establishment, beginning with President Nazerbaev, actively has taken measures to stifle dissent and ensure the continuity of their rule. While effective in the short term, by allowing no outlet for the frustrations arising from internal problems such as those described, this may create a situation in the long term where dissent turns violent and the fragile social structure of the country is torn apart.

Kyrgyzstan

In contrast to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan is the second smallest country in Central Asia in land size and population, and some would argue the least significant. Roughly 80 percent of its territory is taken up by the Tien Shan Mountains, limiting the amount of land available for agriculture. It also lacks the energy reserves of its sister states, and while the country does possess some mineral wealth, it is extremely difficult to extract at a profit. The one resource that it does possess, water flowing from runoff in the mountains, is a two-edged sword. Although the potential exists to harness this water for the production of badly needed energy, any interruption of the flow also has the potential of bringing the country into conflict with its downstream neighbors, especially Uzbekistan, which depends on this water for irrigation. In addition to Uzbekistan in the west, Kyrgyzstan shares borders with Kazakhstan to the north, China to the east, and Tajikistan to the west and southwest. There are border disputes with all of these countries, the most contentious of which center on the Ferghana region in the southwestern part of the country.

The Ferghana Valley is an extremely fertile area shared with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Besides containing some of the richest, and therefore most desirable land in the region, it is home to the most fervent brand of Islam found in Central Asia. While this in itself might not be a concern to the Kyrgyz, the area has served as a base of support for movements such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and has been tied with outside radical groups, such as the Taliban. In 1999, IMU forces moved through Kyrgyz territory and engaged Kyrgyz security forces during an attempt to escape attack from Uzbekistan. This, in turn, sounded alarm bells in Bishkek, and President Akaev was quick to join in the chorus of other Central Asian leaders decrying the threat fundamentalists posed to stability in the region, not to mention their own positions of power.

Domestically, Kyrgyzstan suffers the same problems as the other Central Asian countries, though the way these problems combine is unique to the Kyrgyz situation. Ethnic Kyrgyz constitute a little more than 50 percent of the population, with Russians the next largest group at 22 percent. Uzbeks constitute 12 percent of the population, making them the largest Central Asian ethnic minority outside of their home territory and a concern for the Kyrgyz government, which has several disputed border areas with their far larger and more powerful Uzbek neighbor. Although the country suffered a severe economic downturn tied with the collapse of the ruble in 1998, the fact that a large number of people still owe their existence to subsistence agriculture meant they did not starve. In terms of domestic politics, President Akaev is the only Central Asian ruler who was not a party apparatchik at the time of independence. A university professor and physicist, not only was he popularly elected, but his early rule was marked by hopeful signs of genuine political and economic reform. Unfortunately, time and pressure from his neighbors have made him more politically repressive. This, in turn, has begun to radicalize the opposition, a trend that does not bode well for future stability, something that the country desperately needs.

Uzbekistan

Though Kazakhstan is the largest of the Central Asian states in terms of landmass, the largest in population and arguably the most dynamic is Uzbekistan. Geo-strategically located in the center of the region, it is the only country that shares a border with each of the other states. This allows it to claim concerns with regard to the affairs of all the others since they have the potential of affecting its own interests. Sitting astride internal lines of communication and commerce also places Uzbekistan in a position to exert influence to see that its concerns are addressed. At the same time, with the exception of a small border area with Afghanistan, Uzbekistan does not share a border with any of the external regional actors, specifically Russia, China or Iran, and thus is insulated from the sort of pressures that can be mounted on its neighbors. While not possessing the quantities of oil and gas that Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan do respectively, Uzbekistan does have sufficient energy reserves to be independent of outside sources, unlike Kyrgyzstan. If there is an external dependency, it is on water from Kyrgyzstan, which is used for the irrigation of cotton, the country's primary cash crop.

This favorable turn of geography has allowed Uzbekistan a fair amount of leeway in its relations with its neighbors, as well as with other

states in the region. Uzbekistan has been the most fervent of the five in asserting its existence as an entity separate from Russia. With no shared border and only eight percent of its population ethnic Russians, the political leadership has felt free to institute a number of measures to separate itself from its former “big brother,” ranging from refusing to participate in Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) functions to eliminating the use of the Cyrillic alphabet.¹⁸ Likewise, Uzbekistan is far enough away from China to not feel particularly threatened. Within the region, Uzbeks believe themselves to be superior and often adopt an arrogant attitude in their relations with other states and people.¹⁹ This is particularly irksome to the Kazakhs, who openly resent their treatment as “country cousins.” Not surprisingly, Uzbekistan has border disputes with all of its neighbors. Although to date the Uzbeks have not resorted to the use of force to resolve these disputes, their size and economic potential, combined with their attitude, has led the other states to believe that the Uzbeks might resort to force if they felt it in their best interests. The Uzbeks themselves believe that they should be the dominant power in the region and give the impression that they are willing to take issue with anyone who does not share this belief.

While Uzbekistan seems to have been dealt a favorable hand in terms of its external security, this has not been the case with regard to its internal affairs. President Islam Karimov has established a regime that is one of the most repressive in the region. In an effort to insure no opposition to his rule, Karimov not only has silenced what little legitimate opposition there was to his regime, but gone on to suppress potential opposition in the form of new Islamic groups. Though nominally claiming to be a Muslim, Karimov views the more conservative variants of the faith who refuse to bend to his every whim and decree as representing a threat to his rule. His response has been to ruthlessly crack down on what he calls the threat of “fundamentalism” and arrest more than 7,000 dissenters. This, in turn, has only served to act as a catalyst for an actual Islamic opposition to form, the IMU. This movement has been blamed for the 1999 bombing of government offices in the capital of Tashkent and is responsible for an armed insurgency in the southern part of the state centered in the Ferghana region. Although Karimov has been quick to try to tie this movement with al Qaeda and the Taliban, it appears to be a domestic opposition movement that only has grown with efforts to repress it. Parallels have been drawn between this process and what took place in Iran under the Shah, where increasingly harsh efforts to suppress conservative Islamic leaders led to public discontent and the eventual overthrow of royal rule. Whether the

same outcome will come to pass in Uzbekistan is yet to be determined; however, in spite of warnings of the possible consequences, Karimov has shown little or no inclination to change his policies.

Tajikistan

Of all the countries in the former Soviet portion of Central Asia, Tajikistan comes the closest to claiming the title for being the first “failed state.” Though sharing borders with two other Central Asian states, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, as well as with China and Afghanistan, the country’s primary security concerns have been domestic rather than external. Part of this can be explained in the territory it occupies; the terrain is extremely mountainous with more than 50 percent of the country above 10,000 feet altitude.²⁰ While occupying a crossroads of sorts, the country is also extremely inaccessible to the outside world and difficult to travel even internally. The arable land is composed mostly of valleys running between the various mountains, which, with runoff from mountain snows, possess sufficient water for agriculture. The Tajik people themselves are descended from Iranian speaking people, making them the only republic in Central Asia not sharing a Turkic heritage. The Tajiks comprise 62 percent of the population of roughly 6.2 million, with Uzbeks in the northern part of the country making up the next largest group, 23 percent, and Russians filling in approximately seven percent.

Historically, based on their Persian background, the Tajiks occupied a type of elite status within the region. Yet always subject to the influence of regional actors, the area of Tajikistan was at one time controlled by the Emirate of Bukhara in Uzbekistan, the Afghanistan government, and eventually the Russian Empire, though control is used in the loosest sense, since both the terrain and the independent nature of Tajik mountain tribes were less than hospitable to outsiders. This became particularly apparent when Soviet forces tried to reestablish control of the region after the Bolshevik revolution, leading to the Basmachi revolt that was put down in 1924. With Kyrgyzstan to the north, China to the east, Afghanistan to the south, and Uzbekistan to the west, Tajikistan has long found itself in a far from enviable situation with regard to geo-strategic location. Only the ruggedness of the terrain, as well as its isolation, has served to preserve its sovereignty.

Neither of these, however, have been enough to ensure domestic stability. Falling prey to clan politics and animosities, Tajikistan rapidly degenerated into a protracted civil war between various domestic factions after independence, and the Russian military forces remaining in the

country were left to try and preserve some semblance of order. This conflict, while originally not centered on religious differences, became more so as the losing side sought support from Islamic factions outside their borders, in particular from Afghanistan. This turn of events worried both Tajikistan's Central Asian neighbors and Russia, which maintains the 201st Motorized Rifle Division in the country in an attempt to stem the influx of fundamentalist forces from the south. A ceasefire and power sharing agreement reached in 1997 brought an uneasy truce to the fighting, which continues to flare up now and again. As a result, President Imomali Rakhmonov, who first came to power in elections in 1994, continues to preside over an assembly of factions and clans whose sole unifying tenant would seem to be that everyone is exhausted from the continual fighting that has marked the country since the breakup of the Soviet Union.

Turkmenistan

Of all the former Central Asian republics, Turkmenistan is the one that, paraphrasing Lenin, has taken "two steps back" since independence, but has yet to take a step forward, and in fact may be continuing its backward path. A large but sparsely populated nation (4.5 million in an area equal to California plus half of Oregon), most of the country is occupied by the Kara Kum or black sand desert. Turkmen were originally nomads who drove their herds in search of forage; only with the coming of Russian rule and irrigation projects during the Soviet period did agriculture develop in importance, and this mostly tied with the cultivation of cotton. While hardly the type of environment that would at first be cause for optimism, the country sits astride some of the largest natural gas reserves in the world and early prospects for development fueled by the profits from gas sales seemed bright. Instead, Turkmenistan has found itself a prisoner, both of its geography and of a political regime that has been described as mirror imaging all of the worst aspects of Stalin's cult of personality.

Externally, Turkmenistan's problem is with finding a secure route to send its gas to world markets. Bordered in the north by Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, in the east by Afghanistan, in the south by Iran, and in the west by the Caspian Sea, the primary existing pipelines used for Turkmen gas flow through Russia, which controls both the amount of this flow and its destination.²¹ To avoid this Russian chokehold, Turkmenistan has attempted to negotiate routes to the south and west. The former, involving Iran, has been frowned on by the United States, without whose support financing is all but impossible. The other alternative, some sort of trans-Caspian route exemplified by the long heralded Baku-Cheyhan line, has

yet to get far beyond the drawing board. The gas that does make it to market via Russia is often routed to countries such as Ukraine, which are renowned for not paying for their energy supplies. Complicating this situation, in the early 1990s Turkmenistan borrowed heavily in international finance markets against profits from future gas production. Now these debts are beginning to fall due, and with still no reliable way to get their gas to market, Turkmenistan is increasingly finding itself in a cash-flow crunch.

Further compounding these problems is the nature of the Turkmen regime itself. Headed by Saparmurat Niyazov, Turkmenistan's Communist Party head at the time of the breakup of the Soviet Union, the government has evolved into an autocracy that bends to the every whim of the ruler. As just one example of the control exerted by Niyazov, a referendum held in 1994 on whether to extend his term in office to 2002 was passed by a margin of 1,959,408 for, to 212 against.²² Since that time, Niyazov has declared himself President for Life and has taken on the moniker of Turkmenbashi, roughly translated as father of the Turkmen people. Along with autocratic rule at home, he has adopted a policy of positive neutrality in his foreign relations. This policy can best be summarized as the forswearing of all foreign alliances and connections, resulting in an almost isolationist stance that has not helped attempts to gain outside assistance for development in Turkmenistan. Recently, this policy has been modified somewhat. While initially shunning contacts with Russia and other former Soviet republics, the fear of Islamic fundamentalism has brought Turkmenistan into regional security consultations with its neighbors. Likewise, in the aftermath of September 11, some agreements have been reached with the United States to allow the use of Turkmen facilities in the war against terrorism. Still, these negotiations have done little to soften the harsh nature of the Niyazov regime, whose sole concern appears to be its own self-perpetuation.

The Security Situation Post-September 11

Although much has been said and written about the effects of September 11, September 14 may well prove to be a more important date for Central Asia. On that day, the first mention was made in the open press about the stationing of American forces in the region as part of the Global War on Terrorism. Along these lines, three of the five former Soviet Central Asian states, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, were approached about using their territory to support U.S. military operations. Uzbekistan, in particular, was of interest because of the shared common border with

Afghanistan and the presence of Termez, the former Soviet military base that had been a primary logistics staging area during the Soviet-Afghan war. While Tajikistan also shared a border with Afghanistan, the condition of facilities there required substantial work before they could be used. Kyrgyzstan, which did not share a border, did have a relatively modern airport and soon became the home to more than 3,000 U.S. Air Force personnel supporting air operations into Afghanistan. Kazakhstan, located further from the fray, also offered support to the Americans, while Turkmenistan, with the longest border with Afghanistan, continued its policy of positive neutrality, though making several pro “anti-terrorist coalition” statements and quietly allowing the transit of humanitarian assistance.

Though the speed with which this coordination was orchestrated was surprising to some observers, the groundwork for this effort actually had been laid throughout the 1990s. Shortly after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the United States established diplomatic relations with all of the former republics in Central Asia and opened embassies in each as soon as it was possible. Included in the embassy staffing were military officers, designated either as Military Representatives or fully accredited Defense Attachés. Their job throughout the 1990s was to establish ties with the host nation militaries, coordinate material assistance and military education programs, escort host countries officers on official visits to the United States, and perform an entire range of activities that fell under the Clinton Administration general policy of engagement. Central among these programs were: foreign military sales and assistance, International Military Education and Training (IMET), Partnership for Peace (PfP), courses offered at the Marshall Center in Germany, and the creation of a Central Asian Peacekeeping Battalion (CENTRAZBAT). While all these programs, as well as others, had specific goals in mind, the cumulative effect was to establish relationships and procedures for working with these countries, as well as to create a cadre of military within each of the countries involved who had experience in working with U.S. forces. Though difficult to quantify, there can be no doubt that these efforts facilitated establishing a U.S. military presence in Central Asia, once it was decided that this was necessary in the battle against terrorism.

Perhaps more surprising than the speed of this deployment, or even that it should have taken place at all, was the response of the Russian government to Americans operating in what had been traditionally a Russian sphere of influence. Though protests rapidly appeared from military leaders and opposition politicians in the Russian press, these were just as quickly countered by none other than Russian President Vladimir Putin,

who welcomed the American move as part of his overall support for the war on terrorism. While the changing nature of the U.S.-Russian relationship in the aftermath of September 11 is still being evaluated, it is enough to note that President Putin did much to stifle domestic criticism of U.S. deployments. Russians themselves seemed to be torn between the image of America as a former sworn enemy now conducting military operations on their very doorstep and the realization that American efforts would, in the long run, help Russia and the other countries of Central Asia counter what all now viewed as one of their greatest concerns—the spread of Islamic fundamentalism. For their part, U.S. officials, such as General Tommy Franks, the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) commander, emphasized that although the United States did not know how long forces would remain, it was not America's intent to maintain these forces and installations in the region on a permanent basis.

From the standpoint of the regional actors, the events of September 11 may have served as a catalyst in a number of respects. While the threat of Islamic fundamentalism spreading from the south long had been pointed to as a significant security concern, other problems and regional disputes, combined with a lack of outside recognition for these concerns, had resulted in few concrete steps being taken to address this threat. Prior to September 11, the formation in 1998 of the “Shanghai Five” (Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and more recently the addition of Uzbekistan, to make “5 plus 1”) was the most notable attempt to form a regional security coordinating body.²³ Since September 11, there has been a flurry of meetings, visits and continuing contacts designed not only to coordinate efforts in the war against terrorism, but also to take steps toward insuring regional security in the future. The most obvious result has been an increase in security assistance to the region, primarily from the United States, but from other nations as well. Though much of this effort is directly tied to the ongoing conflict, the attention focused on the region has brought about other assistance, such as the recent agreement signed between the United States and Uzbekistan to clean up the former Soviet biological testing site at Vozrazhdeniya (Rebirth) Island. However, assistance alone will not provide security. The greater significance in the long term may be that with a common cause uniting both the Central Asian States and the major external actors with interests in the region, a climate now exists where achieving a true cooperative security environment may be possible.

Some Thoughts for the Future

While outlining a comprehensive strategy for Central Asia is beyond the scope of this compendium, it might be worthwhile to point out the elements that must be considered as a starting point. It first should be noted that, in spite of the problem areas noted above, all of the states, to a greater or lesser degree, have achieved an element of success in orchestrating their affairs. All five continue to exist as sovereign states ten years after the breakup of the Soviet Union. At the time of the breakup, their viability as nations, and even their capability of continuing to exist, was highly questioned. With the exception of Tajikistan, all have managed to avoid major domestic conflicts, and while the form and policies of the governments that exist today may not be to our liking, the fact that they have been able to constitute and maintain themselves as sovereign states must be acknowledged. That the states did this with limited resources, little or no experience in governance, and in a geo-strategic environment that was less than ideal at best, speaks even more to the likelihood that with proper aid and nurturing the countries in this region can continue to exist and develop in the future.

To move forward will require several things. First, the states must possess sufficient means to ensure the continued integrity of their territory. All of the states inherited portions of the Soviet forces stationed on their territory, including a large number of armored vehicles and a force structure built along the Soviet model. Unfortunately, this has proven to be as much of a liability as a blessing. The forces they possess are not necessarily the ones they need. The money to maintain these existing forces uses up limited funding that would be better spent on meaningful military reform. All of the countries involved have plans for military reform that call for downsizing and modernization, with the goal of achieving small, high tech, and highly mobile force structures to act as deterrents to any outside threats.²⁴ Unfortunately, limited resources, opposition from the existing military (which feels it might lose its perks and privileges if such reforms were carried out), and bureaucratic inertia all stand in the way of such changes. Cooperative programs with foreign militaries, such as PfP with NATO, have made some progress, and the more members of the regional militaries are exposed to Western ideas and ways, the easier reform will be. Training programs for other institutions normally associated with state security, such as interior troops and customs officials, also will help. The ultimate goal in all of these efforts is to achieve a balance, so that each country believes it has the capability to defend its own territory against the

threats it perceives, without creating a force that is perceived as a threat by its neighbors.

Once stability and security can be guaranteed, the stage will be set for economic development. The long-term stability of the states in the region is not dependent on military capability as such, but on economic viability that ensures the well-being of the nation. One of the reasons often cited for the failure to attract the outside investment so desperately needed is the fear by such outside sources that regional instability will put their investments at risk. This is particularly true in the energy sector where large investments in infrastructure, such as pipelines and refineries, must be made up front. These types of facilities are extremely vulnerable to attack, both from external and domestic threats. Consequently, investors are reluctant to make long term commitments where they fear even a slight risk of regional conflict. If regional stability can be achieved, the area's wealth in minerals and energy will bring the capital that can serve as the engine for other forms of development, thereby increasing the well being of the populations and heading off domestic sources of discontent by offering the prospect of a better future.

With economic development must come political change and the issue of political reform. One of the debates that continues, not only with regard to the countries of the former Soviet Union but also with almost all developing states, is whether economic reform, designed to create a market economy, can be carried out at the same time as political reform, designed to achieve some type of representational democracy. While certainly the ideal, there are numerous examples, beginning with Russia, that would seem to indicate that trying to accomplish both at the same time is just "too hard." Focusing on political reform, while possibly more manageable, means that the creation of the economic basis to answer the needs of the people must be postponed. Any government pursuing such a policy places itself at risk no matter how democratically inclined and well intentioned. However, focusing on economics first brings its own set of problems, as seen in the number of dictatorships that have claimed to be ruling in the name of the people and stability, but ended up enriching their own pockets while doing whatever was necessary to maintain power for themselves. At best, advocates of the latter strategy point to examples, such as South Korea, where authoritarian governments were tolerated, but continually nudged toward democracy as economic conditions at home improved. At worst, the example of Iran under the Shah looms large, where toleration and support of an authoritarian regime was justified as

a strategic necessity, but ultimately resulted in catastrophic consequences for the United States.

All of these concerns lead to the question of how the West in general, and the United States in particular, should approach Central Asia, so as to protect both its own interests and those of the people in the region. While there is probably no set answer to such a question, some general guidelines would seem apparent. First, the key to stability in the region depends on creating an environment where development of the area's resources proceeds relatively unhindered and where profits from that can be put back into development of the region as a whole. To do this requires that the countries in the area themselves understand that there is more to be gained by regional cooperation than with traditional animosities. That the leadership of these countries can work together when faced by a common threat has been proven by recent events and the combined efforts to combat the threat perceived from Islamic fundamentalism. If this cooperation can be expanded to other spheres, a large step in the right direction will have been taken. Next, some sort of agreement must be made between the outside influences vying to achieve access and influence in the region, primarily among the "great powers." The acceptance by President Putin of an American military presence in what has traditionally been Russia's "home turf" is again an example that can be built on, where the players involved accept that there is more to be gained by all from a stable and prosperous Central Asia, than one that is not. Finally, the regional leaders must realize that their legacy will be measured by the condition in which they leave their countries, as opposed to their own individual wealth and power. While Tamerlane created a mighty empire, it quickly disintegrated after his death because he failed to establish any viable structure for ensuring its continuation once he was gone. If this lesson is lost on those who would follow in the tracks of Tamerlane, they must constantly be reminded of it, lest history repeat itself and the region, once again, fail to take the place in the world order it is capable of achieving.

Notes

¹ An earlier version of this chapter was published in *European Security*, <http://www.tandf.co.uk>, Vol. 11, no. 3, Winter 2002.

² Though specialists disagree on exactly what comprises "Central Asia," this paper examines the five former Soviet Republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan.

³ For a concise summary of Tamerlane's accomplishments, see R. Ernest Dupuy and Trevor N. Dupuy, *Harper's Encyclopedia of Military History* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc. 1993), 424-425.

⁴ A complete listing of areas and distances cited here can be found in M. Wesley Shoemaker's, *Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States 2002*, (Harpers Ferry, Stryker-Post Publications, 2002).

⁵ Dupuy and Dupuy, 424.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 424-425.

⁷ Hopkirk's trilogy, which includes *The Great Game*, *Like Hidden Fire*, and *Setting the East Ablaze* (New York: Kodansha America, Inc. 1994, 1994 and 1995 respectively) combine to give the definitive history of the region from ancient times to the beginning of the twentieth century.

⁸ Shoemaker, 74.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 182.

¹⁰ For detailed breakdowns of the percentages of various ethnic groups, see individual country listings in Shoemaker, *Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States 2002*.

¹¹ In a conversation with the author, a member of the Kazakh Foreign Ministry noted that, while everyone pointed to the fact that two million ethnic Russians left Kazakhstan to return to Russia in the period from 1991-1994, very few noted that some 600,000 returned between 1995 and 1999. While his figures cannot be confirmed, a return of ethnic Russians to Kazakhstan has been noted by several sources.

¹² Martha Brill Olcott, *Kazakhstan—Unfulfilled Promise* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2002), 3.

¹³ The author was present when the Kazakh Defense Minister M. Altinbayev made this comment to Secretary of Defense Cohen during an official visit to Washington D.C. in 1998.

¹⁴ While formally maintaining that their goal was to have good relations with all of their neighbors, members of the Kazakh military, on multiple occasions, told the author that their greatest security concern relating to their neighbors was with China.

¹⁵ Though much speculation has surrounded this pairing, it appears that the two, who met while both were attending school in the United States, were genuinely in love. Unfortunately, as of this writing, the two have separated.

¹⁶ There have been discussions about closing this border, not because of any threat posed by Turkmen, but because Turkmenistan has no visa requirements on Iranians crossing their border, and several Iranians have been found to have entered Kazakhstan without documentation, in spite of Kazakhstan requiring such visas.

¹⁷ In a discussion with the author, one local official indicated that he believed up to 40 percent of the youth in his region were drug users. He further went on to say that, because unemployment in the area was 60 percent, the only work youth could get was in the drug trade, where they were paid with a portion of the drugs they were trafficking.

¹⁸ This made traveling in cities such as Tashkent extremely interesting in the early years after independence, when the Cyrillic street signs had been removed, but nothing was put up to take their place.

¹⁹ This type of attitude has been observed by the author on numerous occasions and is repeatedly noted by other Central Asian ethnic groups when describing Uzbek behavior.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 186.

²¹ It has been a longstanding Russian policy that Turkmen gas is routed for CIS consumption, while Russian gas is sent to hard currency customers. This leaves Turkmenistan in the awkward position of trying to collect from countries like Ukraine that have a habit of not paying for the gas they use.

²² Shoemaker, 194.

²³ C. Fairbanks, S. Frederick Starr, C. Richard Nelson and Kenneth Weisbrode, *Strategic Assessment of Central Asia* (Washington, DC: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 2001), 36.

²⁴ Recognizing the near impossibility of maintaining a force capable of defending the long borders involved, each country envisions the type of force that could be kept in the central part of their country and then be rapidly deployed to repel any outside threat.