

Friends Like These: Defining U.S. Interests in Central Asia¹

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It is clear the United States will stay involved in Central Asia. It is less clear to what extent and in what ways. At a time when U.S. forces are deployed to this region in comparatively large numbers, it is worth remembering that if Central Asia is new to most of the soldiers and airmen who find themselves there, it is not new to the U.S. military as a whole. American forces have provided training assistance to several Central Asian states over the past 10 years, and the U.S. government has built ties with the leaderships of these countries since they first gained independence.

This is not to say, however, that the present U.S. involvement in the region is a direct outgrowth of past activities. In fact, it is not. Past U.S. efforts in Central Asia were very limited and contacts with the leaderships of these countries were best described as “stop and go,” due to concerns about the reliability, human rights records, and various foreign and domestic policies of these regimes—as well as, quite simply, fairly limited perceived U.S. interests in the region.

Operation *Enduring Freedom* (OEF) created a more immediate need for U.S. military involvement, and the U.S. government did a masterful and precedential job of attaining access to several remote locations where American forces had never been before. At these sites, they set up facilities and promptly began successful operations. The extent to which prior contacts helped make this happen, as some have argued they did, is unclear. Doubtless, it was useful to know whom to talk to in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, countries where the United States had built military contacts in prior years. However, such contacts had not been built to anywhere near the same extent with, for example, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, and both of those states also were willing to provide access to U.S. forces. If anything, prior contacts influenced U.S. decisions to ask for access more than they did regional states’ willingness to grant it. This willingness had

more to do with regional powers' support for the U.S. effort to defeat the Taliban in Afghanistan and the hopes that U.S. presence would translate into tangible benefits for the country and the regime.

This experience has implications both for U.S. policy on access related issues² and for short and long term U.S. policy towards Central Asia. Beyond OEF, U.S. interests in this region are amorphous and predominantly non-military. Caspian energy, often touted as a justification for closer U.S. ties with Central Asia's often unsavory regimes, is largely a matter of oil that will be sold on the global market (and not so much of that as to significantly affect prices and thus engender particularly strong U.S. interest), and gas that will be sold locally, thus having no particular impact on the United States. Other economic interests are minimal. America has little trade with these countries and few reasons to expect this to change in the foreseeable future. In terms of security concerns, the United States has few traditional strategic reasons to build and maintain closer ties with the five Central Asian states. Those who argue for stronger relationships say that U.S. ties could help stem Russian, Chinese, or Iranian influence in the region. Even the greatest proponents of close relations had, before OEF, tended to see Central Asia as low on U.S. priority lists, arguing that other allies, such as Turkey, could advance U.S. interests just as well. Finally, the dismal human rights records of many of these regimes continue to create difficulties in justifying with the U.S. Congress and general public the contacts that do exist.

This is not to say, however, that the United States has no interests in Central Asia. In fact, the experience of OEF has demonstrated not only that the United States can access this region, but also that the region is critical for battling a broader, more complicated set of threats. The region's porous borders and proximity to Afghanistan have made it a key transit route for the narcotics trade and other criminal activities including human, weapons and other illegal goods trafficking. These problems must now be understood as part of a larger family of transnational threats to which global terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) belong. As the United States and others learn how to combat these threats, Central Asia may become a key battleground for it is an epicenter (unfortunately one of several) for these problems. The way to fight in this realm, however, may not be by means of military influence, but rather through a range of economic development and security assistance; not through competition with other great powers, but via cooperation with them to achieve common ends; and not by finding quick solutions, but by committing to long-term involvement and engagement. This would, of

course, require a qualitatively different approach in Central Asia than the United States has taken in the past.

Background

Prior to September 11, U.S. interests in Central Asia were limited. The relatively low level of energy resources assessed by most estimates meant that although U.S. firms were involved, and the U.S. government was fairly vocal in its support of “multiple pipelines” for Caspian oil, Caspian energy was not a top priority for Washington. Strategically, the region appeared to be of little significance. Thus, U.S. interests in Central Asia were secondary economic concerns; interests derivative of the goals of others, such as concern about Russian imperialism or support for Turkish efforts to build influence in the region; and ideological goals such as democratization.

This did not mean, however, that the United States was not involved in Central Asia. As America sought to define national interests in the seemingly non-threatening global environment of the 1990s, it sought to prevent threats from emerging and to pursue ideological and humanitarian goals it felt it could afford. These included global peacemaking efforts, as well as the pursuit of democratization in a variety of regions.³ To a lesser extent, in part because solutions were difficult to define or implement, the United States sought to mitigate the non-immediate but dangerous threats of WMD proliferation, terrorism and international crime.

Thus, the United States built military and political relations with the Central Asian states, seeking to influence regional governments in a variety of strategic and ideological directions. U.S. policy focused first on the elimination of nuclear weapons from Kazakhstan, which were seen as the most significant security threat in the region. It then sought to build low-level military-to-military contacts with the Central Asian states, both on a bilateral basis and through NATO’s Partnership for Peace (PfP) program. It provided democratization and economic assistance and sought to support U.S. firms, particularly energy companies, that were investing in the region. These activities also were intended to limit the capacity of Russia to strong-arm the Central Asian states, without directly confronting Russia in the region, by steering clear of promising security guarantees to the local regimes.⁴

Military cooperation in the period leading up to 2001 focused particularly on Special Forces joint training with Uzbek, Kazakh and Kyrgyz armed forces, as well as providing non-lethal military equipment.⁵ After Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) incursions in 1999 and 2000, the United States provided some support to Kyrgyzstan to enable it to better

respond to such threats. Assistance was also provided by Turkey, Russia, and Uzbekistan at this time.⁶ The United States built a significant program of military cooperation with Kazakhstan, which began with Cooperative Threat Reduction assistance to eliminate the Soviet legacy of WMD and evolved into a more general program of cooperation with International Military Education and Training (IMET), export and border controls, and so forth.⁷ Such cooperation was limited in the wake of revelations of Kazakh arms sales to North Korea.⁸ Cooperation with Tajikistan was restricted significantly first by its Civil War, which lasted through much of the mid 1990s, and then by the limited capacity of the new government to support such programs. Turkmenistan in its increasing isolationism was also a difficult partner, with the result that few contacts and activities emerged.

The regional states welcomed or rejected U.S. involvement and cooperation for a variety of reasons. Tajikistan's civil war left it, in essence, a Russia protectorate and prevented much discussion of further ties with the United States. Turkmenistan rejected U.S. aid, as it did cooperation with other states. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan all welcomed U.S. assistance, although for different reasons. Kazakhstan felt its interests were best served by maintaining good relations with both the United States and Russia as well as, insofar as possible, China, Iran, and others, and it had little interest in playing one off against another. U.S. support for multiple pipeline routes for its oil and gas aided Kazakhstan's goal of ensuring economic independence from Russia, but Russia's proximity and a large ethnic Russian population made complete estrangement from Moscow impossible. Kyrgyzstan, too, sought friendship and assistance from a variety of countries, although where Kazakhstan was motivated by wealth, Kyrgyzstan, being small and economically and militarily weak, could not afford to alienate any of its neighbors or other interested parties. Uzbekistan, however, took a very different tack. President Islam Karimov made it a central facet of his foreign policy to turn away from Russia and to demonstrate Uzbekistan's independence from Moscow's control. He hoped in part to do this through closer ties with the United States, an effort that was limited by U.S. concerns about Karimov's human rights record and Uzbekistan's relatively low value to Washington at the time.

The OEF Experience and Subsequent Bilateral Ties

After the September 11 attacks, Washington moved quickly to expand its options in Central Asia. It rapidly secured permission from the states of the region to overfly their territories for humanitarian missions in Af-

ghanistan. Some also granted overflight permission for combat missions, although of the Central Asian states, only Kyrgyzstan did so openly. The United States set up substantial bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan after looking at facilities there as well as in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. It also set up a refueling mission in Turkmenistan. As it had in the past, Washington did not make any security commitments to these states, but it did sign an agreement with Uzbekistan that pledged Washington to “regard with grave concern any external threat” to Uzbekistan.⁹

In exchange for access, the United States promised, and delivered, a variety of assistance.¹⁰ Uzbekistan rapidly moved to the top ranks of U.S. aid recipients, picking up both economic and military aid packages. Among the things Uzbekistan either received or expects to receive are: patrol boats to be used on the Amu Darya River, language training, radios for communications, helicopter upgrades, Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) training support, a military modeling and simulation center, psy-op training, airport navigation system upgrades, and reportedly, joint construction of Il-114 aircraft.¹¹

Kyrgyzstan, too, has received military communications equipment worth over \$1.4 million and a variety of other systems, such as night vision devices. The Kyrgyz Foreign Minister has praised this aid, saying it is “extremely useful for the Army in guarding the country’s borders.” The cooperation program between the United States and Kyrgyzstan calls for continued military-technical cooperation and high level visits, such as that of U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in November 2002.¹² Kyrgyzstan also is receiving military medical assistance, education slots at the Marshall Center, and help in training NCOs. A joint exercise, *Balanced Knife*, had Kyrgyz forces and U.S. troops affiliated with OEF practicing mountain fighting and combat medicine in March 2003.¹³ Plans in 2004 call for more joint exercises for special troops, rapid reaction forces and peacekeepers, as well as assistance with counterterrorism training and military reform.¹⁴ Both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan also have received assistance in the form of upgrades to the facilities that U.S. forces are using in those countries. Kyrgyzstan receives fees for each take off and landing by coalition aircraft at Manas. Informal joint exercises take place at Karshi-Khanabad between U.S. forces and Uzbek Air Force personnel as well.¹⁵

From a U.S. perspective, the experience in both of these states, which have provided the bulk of the access and basing support, has been worthwhile, although it remains frustrating and difficult to “get things done” in these post-Soviet republics. Negotiating for the use of Karshi-Khanabad was a painful process. Uzbek authorities wanted to negotiate a new Status

of Forces Agreement (instead of using the one in place for Partnership for Peace activities), and wanted the U.S. base to have as low a profile as possible (hence the choice of Karshi-Khanabad, which is relatively isolated). The Uzbeks also were concerned about ensuring the security of U.S. forces, another argument in favor of the Khanabad base. The base does, indeed, appear quite secure, with multiple rings of Uzbek and U.S. security forces encircling it.¹⁶

With regards to the current assistance program, U.S. personnel are concerned that Uzbek officials are seeking flashier equipment and assistance, rather than more effective or needed materiel and training, and report consistent difficulties with the lack of decision authority on the part of their interlocutors in the Uzbek Defense Ministry. However, the bases continue to be useful for the OEF mission, and to a large extent, the assistance packages, which fall far short of any long-term commitment or statement of strategic alignment, are perceived as “payment” for access.¹⁷

The United States also has developed its military relationship with Kazakhstan in the wake of OEF. While Kazakhstan was willing to provide base access to U.S. forces, their bases were not used. The offer itself, however, set more than one precedent. The base offered, Lugovoi, was one which Kazakh officials had refused to allow U.S. personnel access to in the past. An agreement that the United States could use Kazakh facilities in an emergency never resulted in any actual activity. However, permission to overfly Kazakhstan was appreciated by OEF planners, and the willingness of Astana to support the mission was noted. The United States continues to provide assistance with border security and the relationship with Kazakhstan has to some extent been reinvigorated.¹⁸ For example, U.S. experts have been working with the Kazakhs to develop an elite peacekeeping battalion.¹⁹ It is worth noting that in Kazakhstan, as well, U.S. personnel report frustration with interlocutors who remain very much products of the Soviet military system. Secrecy, bureaucracy and incompetence continue to be problems in the Kazakh military.²⁰

Tajikistan also offered its bases to the United States and coalition forces for use in OEF. While some members of the coalition have reportedly used Tajik facilities, U.S. forces did not conduct any major operations from that country. The OEF experience did, however, pave the way for the beginnings of a cooperation program with Dushanbe. Although less ambitious than the assistance programs underway with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan, the United States is providing a variety of assistance, much of it humanitarian, to the Tajiks, and has offered to help the Tajiks and the Kyrgyz improve their permanent communications so that they can

better pass on warnings. There were complaints from Kyrgyz authorities that during the 1999 and 2000 IMU incursions, Tajikistan did not provide timely and effective warning.²¹

Turkmenistan, which provided facilities but has been leery of accepting aid, has presented a different set of circumstances. Based on past experience, the United States did not initially expect much in the way of Turkmen support for OEF. It hoped overflights would be allowed, and that Turkmenistan would cooperate in the seizing of al Qaeda assets. It also was hoped that there might be some support for humanitarian assistance. In fact, Turkmenistan agreed to host U.S. forces for a refueling mission for humanitarian support purposes and President Niyazov appointed his national security advisor and intelligence chief as the primary liaison with America in regards to OEF relief operations.

However, even with this high-level support, problems remained. Turkmenistan did not want to negotiate a Status-of-Forces Agreement, arguing that this would violate its neutrality.²² Defining contractual relationships with civil aviation personnel was another hurdle, and despite clear language defining what the United States does and does not pay for, the Turkmen authorities have tried to bill the United States for items on the “not subject to billing” list.²³

Unlike its neighbors, Turkmenistan has expressed little interest in building on the current situation to develop closer relations or to receive assistance from the United States. Although the payments associated with refueling operations are no doubt welcome, the government has remained leery of closer ties. Over time, it has become more difficult to work with the Turkmen government. The official initially responsible for negotiating with the United States has been purged, making it far more difficult to address problems that crop up, and to ensure continued smooth functioning of the refueling effort.²⁴

U.S. Interests in Context

The bases and facilities set up in Central Asia in support of OEF have proven tremendously useful to the United States, and worth the cost of additional aid and payments. They are not, however, in and of themselves a reason for continued close relations with the Central Asian states beyond the present mission. Given other U.S. commitments, the current force posture in these countries is increasingly unsustainable. Refuelings in Turkmenistan have dwindled, as have supply flights through the other countries. Moreover, the OEF experience has demonstrated that, if necessary, the United States can set up shop in this part of the world with relative

speed, if not ease. Thus, the continued presence beyond the needs of the OEF mission does not seem justified by possible future missions, although some sort of relationship to ease the way for such needs is advisable.

Energy interests are also not a compelling reason for a continued U.S. military presence in Central Asia. Although in March 2003, the Kazakh foreign ministry cited the situation in the Middle East as a reason for increased U.S. interests in Kazakh energy projects, the estimates for Caspian oil vary widely.²⁵ Even at the high end the projections are that the region will produce perhaps one tenth of the world's oil. Low end estimates suggest that even one-third of that is optimistic. Moreover, even if the most positive assessments turn out to be accurate, it will be some time before this oil is accessed.

Beyond energy, however, the United States has very few economic interests in Central Asia. Due to the legal and bureaucratic constraints on investors in Uzbekistan, foreign businesses which thought the country presented some real opportunities in the mid-1990s have been cutting their losses and leaving. Turkmenistan never presented a friendly environment for Western investors; Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have had little to offer; and Kazakhstan's foreign investment is overwhelmingly tied to the energy sector. In fact, recent changes in the Kazakh government's attitude towards business, which have made it more difficult for investors to operate and have involved efforts to renegotiate some existing contracts in the oil sector, may lead investors to have second thoughts about their involvement in this country. Without massive reforms, it is unlikely much U.S. investment will occur in this part of the world, and such reforms appear increasingly unlikely, as Uzbek and Kazakh laws and practices become worse rather than better.

Despite the lack of potential economic gain, the United States has other interests in Central Asia. In the aftermath of September 11, U.S. national security agenda issues that had long been on the list of concerns, but had received little attention because they seemed insoluble rose to the top. Afghanistan presented a clear-cut illustration of the dangers of how state failure can create transnational threats, which when unchecked have the capacity to terrorize governments and populaces worldwide. Central Asia, with its combination of increasingly authoritarian regimes, limited central control, popular dissatisfaction, high levels of corruption, and criminal activity is both a waystation for and a source of these threats.

The solutions to these problems, however, are difficult to identify and implement. One thing that seems clear is that these problems cannot be solved through force alone. While security personnel and organizations

have a role in controlling borders, most of the security tasks are domestic, police tasks and many of the long-term solutions must be political and economic, rather than military. Perhaps somewhat ironically, after years of debate about whether the pursuit of democratization and human rights was a worthwhile U.S. security policy goal, it now appears that such efforts are, indeed, critical to “hard” security goals—even as the task of advancing them appears even more difficult than before.

Interests, Goals and Pitfalls

It is imperative for the United States to remain involved in Central Asia. However, Washington has neither a clear-cut approach for how to do this, nor the tools in place to make an effective start. While some might argue that the U.S. military presence helps support stability and provides incentives for regional regimes to democratize, it is unclear that the existing evidence supports these assertions. Although U.S. policy statements do continue to pressure Tashkent on political and economic reforms, some in Uzbekistan report that the U.S. presence actually has made the Karimov regime feel more empowered to crack down on opposition.²⁶ Similarly, some have argued that Tajik President Imomali Rakhmonov has used the Global War on Terrorism as justification for limiting the activities of the Islamic Renaissance Party, the main opposition force in that country.²⁷

The goals of the regional states themselves, and their own approaches to the United States, must also be considered in this context. In many ways, these have changed little from what they were prior to 2001. However, in the context of a greater U.S. interest, it is critical to understand exactly why Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan have been willing to grant access and pursue ties, and what they hope to gain from this cooperation. It is critical as well for U.S. policy planners to be aware of how these interests differ from those of the United States, and what the expectations of regional regimes are regarding U.S. behavior.

The example of Uzbekistan is apt, and perhaps the most telling in this regard. As already noted, the Karimov regime had long hoped for closer ties with the United States as a counterweight to Russia. In addition to Tashkent’s long-standing effort to distance itself from Moscow, it is important to note Uzbekistan’s role in Central Asia, where it has the most capable military of the five states and is viewed as a fairly dangerous neighbor by Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Indeed, as part of its campaign against the IMU, the Uzbek government has pursued suspected insurgents into neighboring states’ territories and laid landmines both on their shared borders with them and on the territory of the other states.

This, combined with its refusal to provide landmine maps to Kyrgyz and Tajik officials, has contributed to the deaths of numerous civilians.

The U.S. decision to place a substantial military force in Uzbekistan was taken by many in the Uzbek government as a clear demonstration of U.S. support. The Karimov regime sought to build on this by formalizing relations with new written agreements. While it wanted a low profile for the U.S. forces in Uzbekistan itself, it also wanted its neighbors and Russia to be aware of this new “partnership.” Uzbekistan also sought U.S. friendship by supporting the war in Iraq, even to the point of Uzbek experts telling television audiences that they had “ample” (if not actually presented) proof that Baghdad possessed WMD and had links to terrorism.²⁸ The heavily censored Uzbek press reportedly had been instructed to present the war from a “pro-U.S.” perspective.²⁹

Yet, it also seems likely that the Karimov regime has been disappointed in the actual benefits of the relationship with the United States to date. Although there have been real material gains in terms of defense and other assistance, America has clearly stopped short of any alliance-type commitments to Uzbekistan. Moreover, the U.S. government has been unable to deliver foreign investment while Uzbekistan continues to make the investment climate so hostile.³⁰

Repercussions from Uzbek economic and social policies can be seen in a sharp increase in disaffection on the part of segments of the population. Anecdotal reports that “everyone” in Uzbekistan knows someone who has had unpleasant run-ins with the Uzbek security forces creates worrisome parallels with Stalin’s Soviet Union or revolutionary Iran. With opposition political parties banned, the fastest growing unofficial movement is probably the Hizb-ut-Tahrir, which advocates the overthrow of secular regimes worldwide and the establishment of a global Caliphate. Moreover, while the Karimov regime’s oppression is not new, the effects of its economic policies, which have sharply curtailed trade with neighboring states, have recently become felt. Prices have risen throughout Uzbekistan, and disaffection in cities such as Tashkent continues to grow along with them. Protests against officials at a wide range of levels, including on rural farms, are increasingly common as people find themselves trying to survive on what is left of their earnings after leaders at various levels have taken their share through punitive taxes and corruption.³¹

In a country where the potential for significant unrest is on the rise, and with few mechanisms available for peaceful resolution of conflict, it is likely that if a given situation escalates, bloodshed will result. Moreover, with an autocratic regime so centered around President Islam Karimov, his

departure from the scene could well lead to potentially violent competition among those now in his inner circle, as well as those outside it, over who will take his place. Thus, with or without Karimov, Uzbekistan has a high potential for future trouble.

For its part, the United States may find itself in the difficult position of being perceived as supporting a failing and increasingly unpopular regime. This situation is exacerbated by Karimov's interest in tying the United States into such support, through public statements, assistance, and, insofar as possible, legal documents. The United States has wisely steered clear of the latter, but it must also be aware of the symbolic effects of the former two. Moreover, the potential for instability makes it particularly critical that the United States remain involved at some level and seek to find ways to improve the situation.

The other countries of the region are not in as critical a situation as Uzbekistan and are thus less worrisome in the near-term. Neither the Kyrgyz nor the Kazakh leadership seek U.S. assistance as a counterweight to other forces in the region, *per se*. Rather, they feel that the better their relations are with all powerful parties, the better their chances of survival and success. That said, the regimes in these two countries have become increasingly authoritarian and there is reason to believe that popular disaffection may be growing there as well. In Kyrgyzstan, in particular, the Hizb ut-Tahrir is said to be making inroads, and a series of popular protests with roots in both political activism and inter-clan conflict have occurred, resulting in a dangerous and complex situation. In Kazakhstan, increased difficulties for U.S. investors (albeit not to the extent of those in Uzbekistan) may yet lead the U.S. government to be increasingly at odds with Astana.

One point of note in Kyrgyzstan is the possible attitude of opposition forces in that country to the U.S. presence. On one hand, local complaints have surfaced about noise caused by takeoffs and landings at Manas and a traffic accident involving a U.S. servicemember, which reportedly injured two local women. On the other hand, some opposition leaders have spoken about the U.S. military presence as the solution to all of Kyrgyzstan's security problems, eliminating the need for cooperation with Russia.³² Both sides create concerns for U.S. interests.

If Uzbekistan is seeking strategic gain and Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan hope for strategic parity, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan perhaps come closest to having provided the assistance for OEF purely out of support for the operation itself. Like Uzbekistan, both countries felt a significant threat

was posed by the Taliban's proximity, so much so that Turkmenistan had sought a "separate peace" with the Taliban prior to September 2001.

Notwithstanding the perceived threat, Turkmenistan has largely refused U.S. offers of assistance, before and after OEF. While specific organizations, such as the airport that receives a fee for each refueling and the hotel where U.S. airmen stay, appreciate the influx of funds, there is no clear sense that the Turkmen government as a whole sees a benefit from the effort. According to U.S. personnel involved in negotiating and implementing the refueling operation, the Turkmen Ministry of Defense has gained nothing as a result of the refueling operation, while the top priority of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is to ensure that the operation remains low-profile. The Turkmen have continued to turn down offers of military contacts, have not used the Foreign Military Financing (FMF) funds allocated them in five years, and have cut back on their participation in IMET.

Nor has Turkmenistan done anything that suggests a general warming towards the United States in other areas. In August 2003, it took steps to evict the U.S. Embassy's public affairs section from its building near the embassy grounds.³³ While President Niyazov told the new U.S. Ambassador, Tracey Ann Jacobsen, that his country would like to see more cooperation with the United States in energy and natural resources, there is no sign that the government plans to relax the rules governing business and investment so as to support such cooperation.³⁴

In short, the last two years of cooperation do not appear to have effected Turkmenistan's attitudes towards the United States. Nor has the United States pushed particularly hard to affect changes, perhaps realizing its very limited leverage with this country. Thus, despite Turkmenistan's atrocious human rights record and recent moves to deny joint citizenship with Russia to long-standing citizens of Russian origin, as well as the imposition of an exit-visa requirement on Turkmen residents seeking to travel abroad, the U.S. State Department assured Turkmenistan that it would not lose its Jackson-Vanik exemption in 2003.³⁵

Tajikistan, too, appears to have a fairly limited view of what cooperation with the United States can bring. The new relationship did result in a state visit by the Tajik President to the United States, and the Tajiks have been far more willing to accept aid and assistance than have the Turkmen. However, like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan has been careful not to allow its relationship with Washington to be perceived as a counterpoint to its close ties to Russia. This has not, however, prevented speculation to that effect in Tajikistan's more pluralistic press. Reports have repeat-

edly appeared in the media suggesting the United States would take over Russia's role in guarding Tajikistan's borders or that the delays in negotiating a Tajik-Russian base agreement were due to a payoff from the United States to Tajikistan to prevent that agreement from being signed.³⁶ Despite repeated denials from both U.S. and Tajik officials, such rumors continue. Thus, as in Kyrgyzstan, the United States faces the danger of having the bilateral relationship become a pawn of domestic politics. Moreover, because the interplay between the United States and Russia is the focus of these rumors, this domestic game has international repercussions.

The Russian perspective here is critical. Because Central Asia has long been under Russian rule, and because it remains one of few areas where Moscow retains real influence, Russia throughout the 1990s tended to perceive U.S. efforts in Central Asia and the Caucasus as hostile encroachment and an attempt to woo Russia's last natural allies away from it. Combined with increasing tension between Moscow and Washington on other issues, such as intervention in Yugoslavia and missile defense, U.S. involvement in Central Asia seemed to many in Moscow to be part of a concerted effort by the United States to lessen Russia's influence.

For the United States, the posturing of Russia and Central Asian regimes vis à vis each other has been difficult to follow, as leaders such as Uzbekistan's Karimov alternated between calling Russia a partner and berating Moscow for exaggerating the Islamic fundamentalist threat to justify Russian bases in the region. But in times of stress, even Karimov has sought Russian assistance. In part, this is because these leaders recognized that they needed some outside support to deal with the threats near and within their borders, and Russia, with its strong interests in the region, remains the most viable partner available. Russia has both offered and provided assistance, including joint training efforts, cooperative planning and border police. Russia's 201st Motor Rifle Division remains on the ground in Tajikistan as do thousands of Russian-commanded border guards deployed along the frontier with Afghanistan. Russia also views the radical Islamic threat in the same way the Central Asian governments have tended to see it—as a significant danger that justifies police crackdowns and less than liberal policies. Russia is also much less critical of human rights abuses and corrupt practices than the United States has tended to be.

At the start of OEF, it appeared to observers in Central Asia and elsewhere, that the United States could become the key security partner to the Central Asian states, with Russia's acceptance. Russian President Vladimir Putin's statement that U.S. deployments in Central Asia were "not a tragedy" was historic, and followed even more historic decisions by

Central Asian leaders to allow U.S. basing—decisions taken, in most cases, without consultations with Moscow. These events marked a sea-change in Moscow's relations with the Central Asian regimes, and with the United States.

From Russia's perspective, not protesting the U.S. presence had real advantages. For one thing, stopping it was all but impossible. For another, it soon became clear that the United States was solving a problem that Russia had struggled with for a decade—successfully driving the Taliban from power in Afghanistan. Certainly, such action was in Russia's interests as well as the Central Asian states'. However, Russia's feelings about the U.S. presence remain mixed, and various actors in Russian politics have very different views about what should be acceptable to Moscow. Russia is therefore watching the U.S. presence in Central Asia with a good bit of concern and making much of statements that this presence is temporary.

Increased tension between the United States and Russia over both countries' activities and interests in Central Asia have the potential to create, to paraphrase Vladimir Putin, a real "tragedy." First, the fact remains that Russia has a stronger and more immediate interest in Central Asia than does the United States. While U.S. interests in preventing instability and helping develop successful states are clear, they are no more critical than U.S. interests in doing the same elsewhere in the world. For Russia, Central Asia is the first line of defense—for the United States, it may not even be the third or fourth. Furthermore, for a wide range of reasons, which include the same transnational threats, as well as arms control and other global policy interests, the U.S.-Russian relationship is more important to the United States than are its relationships with the Central Asian regimes, together or separately.

When it comes to Central Asia, Russia and the United States are not the only interested parties. Turkey, India, China, Iran and various European states also are involved to different extents, and have a broad range of interests in the region. Many, if not all, of these states are critical to U.S. national security interests in their own right, over and above their interests in Central Asia. For these states, the primary goals are economic and focus on the energy resources of the region. For all of them, the development of economic ties with the Central Asian countries depends on stability and functioning governments. Several of these states also have other security concerns. India is concerned about extremism and the potential for Central Asian unrest to impact its ongoing conflict with Pakistan. China fears spillover to its ethnic Turkic minority, the Uighurs, in northwestern

China. Thus, all of these states share American, Russian and Central Asian interests in stability.

All are also, to varying extents, willing to let others ensure that stability if possible, even as they want to remain both involved and aware of developments. Turkey generally has been willing to take the U.S. lead, although officials complain that the United States is not sharing information about its activities and goals sufficiently to enable Ankara to coordinate its own policy with Washington's. China, while steering clear of antagonizing Russia, is seeking to build its own strategic relations with the Central Asian states, both on a bilateral basis, particularly with Kyrgyzstan, and through the multilateral Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which, despite its lack of activity to date, does have some real ambitions in regards to both counterterrorism cooperation and development of trade. India, for its part, has been developing security ties with Tajikistan since its years of support for the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, and now has a limited military presence on Tajik soil.

For the United States, this means numerous potential partners for its efforts to promote stability and development in the region. However, as with Russia, cooperation would require a level of coordination and transparency that the United States has yet to achieve with Turkey, much less any of the other countries with an interest in Central Asia. Moreover, the interests of the surrounding countries in Central Asia, albeit quite real, pale in comparison with Russia's and are of secondary concern.

Toward an Effective Policy

In principle, cooperation between the United States, Russia and other interested parties to attain the broad range of shared goals in Central Asia should be the answer to this dilemma. Indeed, it is unlikely that much progress will be made in this part of the world without Russian participation. Its proximity, its political and economic ties to the region, and its more immediate concerns about these problems are all parts of the equation. Russia is on the receiving end of transnational threats such as narcotics trafficking, weapons smuggling, transnational crime, and potentially terrorism that come from or through Central Asia, and in some cases is the source of other such threats. Resolving these problems with Russian cooperation will be far easier and more effective than attempting to resolve them without it. Involving others who share the same goals would help spread the burden, as well as ensure a greater stake on their part in the success of the endeavor.

However, in spite of significant discussions about the need for such cooperation, it has not been forthcoming as of yet. Several reasons are behind this, most having to do with the critical bilateral relationship between the United States and Russia. The first roadblock is the continued perception on the part of some—in Russia, the United States, and Central Asia—that influence and involvement in Central Asia is, in fact, a zero-sum game. This viewpoint holds that the United States and Russia are competing for influence, and the Central Asian states are prizes to be won by one side or the other. This attitude could easily be dismissed as persisting only among those who have difficulty letting go of Cold War patterns were it not for its popularity in both governments. While in their public statements Presidents Bush and Putin appear committed to cooperation, both have advisors who feel there is no real alternative to antagonism, and who view gain by one country as a loss for the other.

In Central Asia, the perception of a zero-sum game has been more common in Uzbekistan than elsewhere, although it is also evident in statements and media reports from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. A microcosm of this belief can be found in the U.S. and Russian military presence at Manas and Kant Airbases, respectively, in Kyrgyzstan. These are seen by some as reflective of U.S. and Russian efforts to exert influence, even as Kyrgyzstan tries to balance between the two great powers. In fact, the U.S. deployment was driven first and foremost by the requirements of OEF. Russia's decision to place a base so near the U.S. base can be seen both as a statement of Russia's continued interest and as a marker that regardless of what the U.S. does, Russia still has a role to play that will continue long after the United States and other coalition members have gone. For Kyrgyzstan's part, it has sought to maintain good relations with both countries, and it stands to gain, economically and in terms of security, from doing so.

If this is, in fact, Kyrgyzstan's attitude, as it also appears to be Kazakhstan's and Tajikistan's, it is a remarkably rational one. These countries stand to gain much from cooperation with the United States, Russia, China, and even, potentially, each other. A good deal also may be lost by playing into the notion of competition in the region. As noted, energy interests in Central Asia are not sufficient to drive U.S. policy, and true U.S. security interests suggest that from the U.S. perspective, the Central Asian states are not a prize to be won but a problem to be managed. It is in Central Asia's interests, as well as in America's, Russia's and others, that the countries of Central Asia eventually graduate to managing their problems on their own. In the meantime, however, they will need assistance from a wide range of sources.³⁷

In order for the Central Asian states to acquire this assistance and to move forward effectively, Russia and the United States also must do their part to eliminate the zero-sum game perception. From the U.S. perspective, many reasons exist to do this. It is not in the U.S. interest to be seen as a bulwark against Russia by any of these states. This will needlessly antagonize Russia and give the impression of unconditional support for increasingly unsavory regimes. Moreover, even if it wanted to, the United States does not have the resources or interests to be the primary partner to any Central Asian state. The less the perception of competition, moreover, the greater likelihood that other states will seek to become involved, without fear of being caught in the middle of a U.S.-Russian rivalry.

The experience of Afghanistan demonstrates that even limited Russian-U.S. cooperation towards common goals can be extremely fruitful. However, both countries have, to a large extent, failed to recognize that benefits can be gleaned from such cooperation. There seems to be little interest at the working levels in building better ties and little understanding of the repercussions of failing to do so. Indeed, some U.S. officials view the U.S. military presence in Central Asia as countering Russian neo-imperialism, while some Russian officials see it as critical to Russian interests to reassert not just influence, but control over Central Asia.

The keys to moving forward are cooperation, multilateralism, tangible goals and small steps. If the problems are transnational in nature, the solutions must be as well; solutions that do not involve all of the states concerned can only be partial solutions at best. Certainly, there are limits to what is possible. Turkmenistan, for example, will remain very difficult to engage as long as Niyazov is President, and possibly longer. However, insofar as Russia, the United States and all of its neighbors share an interest in reform in that country, their cooperative efforts likely would stand a better chance of success than sporadic and uncertain individual efforts.

Tangible goals are also critical. It is important to identify areas of cooperation where real benefits to all concerned can be easily achieved. Even during the Cold War, the United States and Russia were able to develop dialogues and reach cooperative decisions when it was in the interests of both nations to do so.³⁸ More recently, the cooperation between the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Russian Emergency Ministry present another example of how effective coordination can be if it is perceived as necessary by both sides. A good first step in this case might be discussions of common use of the airspace over Kyrgyzstan, now that both an OEF coalition base and a Russian base are in place near Bishkek. This also qualifies as a small step in that its implementation would

require little effort. Still, these building blocks of cooperation build trust while accomplishing mutual goals, and this is critical to moving on to the larger areas where cooperation is needed.

The other key component of success must be multilateralism. It is true that the Central Asian states themselves have been loath to cooperate too closely with one another. However, there is precedent for their doing so. The solution may be, in part, to involve a variety of other players, including the United States, Russia, India, China, European powers and others as viable. This will create strong incentives for most Central Asian states not to remain on the sidelines at the risk of missing out on the potential to build ties with a range of possible partners.³⁹ This approach can be effective in both economic and security settings and can serve as a stepping stone towards easing some of the tensions between the states of the region, as well as helping to facilitate solutions to the transnational threats that plague them and their neighbors. The SCO was founded in part on such principles, and the United States might consider seeking observer status in that organization, so as to demonstrate its support for the efforts of others.

U.S. interests in Central Asia all but guarantee some level of involvement in the region for the foreseeable future. But its military presence should be reduced, just as other areas of involvement should grow. The challenge for America will be to manage this in a way that leaves neither it nor the region worse off than before the United States got involved. Good relations with Russia are one component of this. Transparency and coordination with other current or prospective partners are another. No less critical, however, will be avoiding stronger than needed commitments to existing Central Asian regimes, even while maintaining cooperation with them. In the end, it will be a balancing act. But the alternative may be a very dangerous fall.

Notes

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² For a discussion of the access issue more broadly, see David Shlapak, et. al, *A Global Access Strategy for the U.S. Air Force* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2003).

³ While proponents of democratization have traditionally argued that it advances strategic goals due to a postulated lower propensity among democracies to fight wars (or, according to some, fight wars with one another), the literature is, in fact, inconclusive on this. Moreover, regardless of whether democracies are more or less war-prone, democratizing states are, according to some data, more likely to face conflict. Many of the key arguments in these debates can be found in Michael E. Brown, Sean

M. Lynn-Jones, and Steven E. Miller, eds., *Debating the Democratic Peace*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996). In addition to the papers in that volume, see also Carol R. Ember, Melvin Ember and Bruce Russett, "Peace Between Participatory Politics," *World Politics* (July 1992); Michael W. Doyle, "Liberalism and World Politics," *American Political Science Review* (December, 1986).

⁴ See Olikier in *Faultlines*.

⁵ "Central Asia: Fault Lines in the New Security Map."

⁶ Vladimir Socor, "Cheek by Jowl in Kyrgyzstan," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 8, 2003.

⁷ Similar activities were also underway with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

⁸ A deal to supply North Korea with Kazakh MiG fighter aircraft was discovered in 1999. Over twenty aircraft were delivered before the deal was discovered and deliveries halted. The Kazakh government's investigation report concluded that, although government officials were involved in the deal, they were acting independently. Defense Minister Mukhtar Altynbayev was removed from his post as a result of the deal (although he resumed it in December 2002). The United States sanctioned the firms involved and waived sanctions against the country of Kazakhstan as a whole. ("The High Price of Kazakhstan's MiG Affair," Stratfor.com, *Update Weekly Analysis*, November 18, 1999, reprinted by *Asia Times*, November 19, 1999; James P. Rubin, U.S. Department of State, Daily Press Briefing No. 142, November 22, 1999, 1:20 pm; Kazakhstan, Government and NGO Descriptions, NIS Nuclear and Missile Database, Nuclear Threat Initiative website, <www.nti.org/db/nisprofs/kazakst/govt/governme.html>, downloaded December 29, 2003.)

⁹ "U.S., Uzbekistan Sign Military Cooperation Agreement," *RFE/RL Newswire*, 6, no. 14, Part I, January 23, 2002.

¹⁰ Dana Milbank, "Uzbekistan Thanked for Role in War," *The Washington Post*, March 13, 2002, A23; "U.S., Uzbekistan Sign Military Cooperation Agreement," *RFE/RL Newswire*, 6, no. 14, Part I, January 23, 2002.

¹¹ Interviews with and information provided by U.S. government officials, summer 2003; "U.S. to Help Finance Uzbek Aircraft Production," *RFE/RL Newswire*, 7, no. 156, Part I, August 18, 2003.

¹² "Kyrgyzstan, U.S. Sign Military Cooperation Agreement," *RFE/RL Newswire*, Vol. 6, no. 213, Part I, November 13, 2002.

¹³ This also reportedly involved a medical team from South Korea. Marina Kozlova, "Analysis: Kyrgyzstan Dances with US, China," *UPI*, October 10, 2002; "Kyrgyzstan, U.S. Sign Military Cooperation Agreement," *RFE/RL Newswire*, 6, no. 213, Part I, November 13, 2002; *FBIS* November 18, 2002; "Joint U.S.-Kyrgyz Military Exercises Held Near Bishkek," *RFE/RL Newswire*, Vol.7, no. 51, Part I, March 18, 2003; Sultan Jumagulov, "Superpowers Compete in Kyrgyzstan," *IWPR's Reporting Central Asia*, no. 200, April 28, 2003.

¹⁴ Vladimir Socor, "Cheek by Jowl in Kyrgyzstan," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 8, 2003.

¹⁵ Interviews with U.S. personnel at Karshi-Khanabad, May 2003.

¹⁶ Interviews with U.S. officials, personnel, Summer and Fall 2003; visit to Karshi-Khanabad, May 2003.

¹⁷ Interviews with U.S. officials, personnel, Summer and Fall 2003.

¹⁸ Interviews with U.S. officials, summer 2003.

¹⁹ "Turkey, U.S. Assist Kazakh Military," *RFE/RL Newswire*, 6, no. 204, Part I, October 29, 2002.

²⁰ Interviews with U.S. officials, Summer 2003.

²¹ There were complaints from Kyrgyz authorities that during the 1999 and 2000 IMU incursions, Tajikistan did not provide timely and effective warning. "Official: Danger of Extremist Incursions into Kyrgyzstan Still Exists," *RFE/RL Newswire*, 7, no.50, Part I, March 17, 2003.

²² This problem was solved with an exchange of diplomatic notes.

²³ Interviews with U.S. officials, Spring, Summer 2003.

²⁴ Interviews with U.S. officials, Spring, Summer 2003.

²⁵ "Kazakh Foreign Ministry Sees Increased U.S. Interest in Kazakh Oil," *RFE/RL Newswire*, 7, no. 60, Part I, March 28, 2003.

²⁶ Interviews in Uzbekistan, May 2003.

²⁷ Antoine Blua, "Tajikistan: Government to Vet Islamic Clerics," *RFE/RL*, August 7, 2002; International Crisis Group, "Central Asia: Islam and the State," July 10, 2003.

²⁸ "Five Degrees of Separation: The Central Asia States' Positions Towards War in Iraq," *RFE/RL Central Asia Report*, 3, no. 12, March 21, 2003.

²⁹ "Unofficial Censorship on War Reporting Instituted in Uzbekistan," *RFE/RL Newslines*, 7, no. 53, Part I, March 20, 2003.

³⁰ It should be noted, of course, that Uzbekistan also had a good deal to gain from the elimination of the Taliban and that it had been working, with Russia, India, Tajikistan, and Iran, in a loose coalition that supported the Northern Alliance for many years.

³¹ Discussions in Uzbekistan, May 2003.

³² "Kyrgyz Opposition Party Official Questions Russian Base," *RFE/RL Newslines*, Vol. 7, no. 72, Part I, April 15, 2003.

³³ "U.S. Embassy in Turkmenistan Protests Eviction of Public Affairs Section," *RFE/RL Newslines*, 7, no. 159, Part I, August 21, 2003.

³⁴ "Turkmen President Wants More U.S. Technology," *RFE/RL Newslines*, 7, no. 163, Part I, August 27, 2003.

³⁵ The Jackson-Vanik amendment denies unconditional normal trade relations to countries with non-market economies and restrictive emigration policies.

³⁶ "U.S. Will Not Help Protect Tajik Border," *RFE/RL Newslines*, 6, no. 217, Part I, November 19, 2002; Yana Amelina, "Moscow Considers Tajikistan Options," *Rosbalt*, July 23, 2003; "Defense Minister Says Tajikistan Still Wants Russian Base," *RFE/RL Newslines*, 7, no. 141, Part I, July 28, 2003.

³⁷ Recent Uzbek warming to Moscow, in contrast to its past antagonism, suggests that Tashkent may also be coming around to such an approach.

³⁸ The Incidents at Sea talks and nuclear arms control are examples.

³⁹ This approach may be of little appeal to Turkmenistan under its current regime, but it may be an effective way to, for example, bring Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan both to the table, a historically challenging task.