

## The United States and Central Asia: In the Steppes to Stay?

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**Abstract** *11 September 2001 elevated the importance of the South Caucasus and Central Asia in US global strategy. The Central Asian republics proved crucial bases for military and intelligence operations. The South Caucasus, in turn, provided the only realistic air corridor for the deployment of Europe-based US forces to Afghan territory. As its Central Asian footprint grows, Washington must consider the interests of key Eurasian powers and demonstrate a sustained economic and political commitment to the region.*

Soon after the smoke cleared over the Pentagon and World Trade Center, it became clear that the United States would pursue military action in Afghanistan. That action substantially altered the importance in US military planning of the southern regions of the former Soviet Union. The South Caucasus and Central Asia appeared indispensable for the successful prosecution of war in the heart of Asia. The former Central Asian republics, in particular Uzbekistan, became crucial for the basing of troops, for intelligence and for humanitarian cooperation. The South Caucasus states, chiefly Georgia and Azerbaijan, were equally vital for logistical reasons: their airspace was the only realistic route through which military aircraft could be deployed from NATO territory to Afghanistan.

By early 2002, the US had established two substantial military bases at Khanabad in southern Uzbekistan and at Manas near Kyrgyzstan's capital, Bishkek. The US also initiated a train-and-equip programme for the Georgian military, effectively intervening to defuse a growing crisis between Tbilisi and Moscow over the Pankisi gorge along Georgia's northern border with Chechnya. All Central Asian states, including neutral Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Georgia and Azerbaijan, granted the US landing rights, refuelling facilities or over-flight rights (Robinson 2003b, 1). As Vladimir Socor noted, these measures were a historic breakthrough: one signifying the setting foot of Western forces in the heartland of Asia, formerly the exclusive preserve of land empires (Socor 2003).

By late 2003 US engagement, initially justified by the need to combat terrorism, had gradually changed shape. Uzbekistan in particular accepted US use of its territory for military purposes only in exchange for guarantees of long-term Western engagement (Lapidus 2001, 6). This posture stemmed from a fear that the United States would disassociate itself from the region, as it had done following its engagement with Afghanistan in the 1980s. Although the United States has consistently denied seeking a permanent military presence in Central Asia (State Department 2002) it is increasingly clear that it will not

retreat. To the contrary, its regional military presence is now part and parcel of a gradual effort to reshape the US global footprint.

As US engagement in Central Asia becomes more permanent, it will increasingly become a factor in both regional politics and the domestic politics of the several Central Asian countries. That role raises a host of questions. Chief among them is how regional powers such as Russia and China will react to the US presence. A second concerns the implications both for the political development among the region's states and for the future of radical Islam.

This article will argue that Central Asia's importance in US security policy has gone from moderate before 11 September 2001 to immediate and vital afterwards. As the military campaign in Afghanistan decreases in intensity, US military and security relations with the region are likely to turn from tactical to strategic. Given the new tasks that the US military faces in a strategic environment focused on counter-terrorism, Central Asia is now a necessary element in any US global footprint. In this sense, the US is in the steppes of Central Asia to stay.

### **11 September: Before and After**

The US presence in Central Asia has been widely framed as a 'discovery' of the region (Maynes 2003). Yet despite the dramatic increase in US engagement during the Afghan war, the United States was no stranger to the region (Starr 2002b). In 1992, it was among the first countries to establish diplomatic relations with and open embassies in the Central Asian republics. Official, commercial and non-profit US entities have made an important mark on the region, most notably the International Research and Exchange Board, the Eurasia Foundation and major oil companies including ExxonMobil, ChevronTexaco, and Pennzoil. Prior to 11 September, the major vectors of US regional interests were energy issues and a diplomatic commitment to sustain the independence of (and promote democratisation within) the region's states (Brookings Institution 2002).

Military exchanges accompanied these political and commercial initiatives. Stressing the importance of secular, independent states between Russia and the Middle East that were friendly to the West, the US Department of Defense formulated basic security interests in the region as early as 1994 (Sherwood-Randall 1998, 3). Working unilaterally and through NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP), the United States initiated military relations with the Central Asian republics, which developed throughout the 1990s in both nature and scope (Bronson 1998, 235–37). These military-to-military relations continued despite the marked cooling of US relations with Uzbekistan and other countries during the second Clinton administration over issues of human rights and democratisation (Blank 2001). As such, they enhanced the speed with which the United States constructed operational military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan following 11 September (Butler 2001). As early as 5 October 2001, the United States secured permission to establish a military base at Khanabad in southern Uzbekistan (Defense Department 2001). Khanabad ultimately housed between 2,000 and 5,000 US troops (Bukharbayeva 2002). In December 2001, the United States established the Manas air base outside the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek.

Several factors contributed to the decision to base US forces in Central Asia. Geography was foremost. Indeed, many of the US and Coalition bases were once

used by the Soviet Union, for precisely the same purpose—a war in Afghanistan. Also important were the long-standing ties between several Central Asian states and the Northern Alliance, as well as the relatively low level of anti-American sentiments in Central Asia compared with Pakistan. In any case, the US military had few viable alternatives, especially given the public outcry in Pakistan over the very limited use by the US of air bases in Baluchistan (Kelley 2001).

Khanabad and Manas were both chosen partly for their location close to the theatre of operations in Afghanistan, and partly for long runways that could accommodate US transport aircraft (Hendren 2002, 58). A third facility also opened in the Kulyab region of Tajikistan, primarily due to its geographic location. Conditions varied, however. Whereas the Uzbek government prohibited the use of Khanabad for direct combat operations, no such restrictions were in force at Manas. That discrepancy may have influenced the decision to deploy the regional administrative contingent at the latter base, where the US Air Force built a 37-acre extension to the existing airport to house its headquarters and other facilities (O'Malley 2003).

A significant increase in US assistance accompanied military engagement. In 2002, a one-time payment of US\$100 million augmented the US\$60 million annual aid package to Uzbekistan (Tolipov and McDermott 2003). Yet two years after the first US deployment, a number of questions arose in both the United States and the region regarding the future of the US commitment. The initial justification—establishing bases to prosecute the war in Afghanistan—grows increasingly thin. While low intensity conflict continues in Afghanistan, regional powers such as Russia and Iran (which only grudgingly accepted the US deployment) now voice the concern that these bases will become permanent. Meanwhile, the US Department of Defense is thoroughly rethinking the US military position around the globe. Given the emerging emphasis on extending US deployment abroad, it is difficult to see how this footprint can be implemented without sustaining its military presence both in the South Caucasus and in Central Asia.

### **The Restructuring of US Power: A General Overview**

In a 29 May 2003 interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, US Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith stated that 'everything is going to move everywhere ... there is no place in the world where [US military presence] is going to be the same as it was' (Schrader 2003, 1). The following June, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz further developed that thinking in testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, noting that significant attention now focused on realigning the US global military footprint (Wolfowitz 2003). The US military leadership recognised that US basing structures reflected Cold War planning and should be adapted to new realities.

The 70,000 troops stationed in Germany, for example, were designed to counter a Soviet land invasion (Donovan 2003). In the global war on terrorism, however, these bases have lost much of their original purpose. Nearly 80% of US forces in Europe remain in Germany, while three-quarters of US troops in Asia are deployed at bases in Japan and South Korea. As one observer notes, this pattern represents a 'network of US forward deployment locations created to counter a threat now long gone' (Grier 2003, 50). The present military situation

required reform in both the location and nature of US deployments abroad. Hence the new strategy is to 'create a web of far-flung, austere forward operation bases, maintained normally only by small support units, with the fighting forces deploying from the United States if necessary' (Robinson 2003a, 1). Rather than sustaining Cold War 'tripwires' a larger number of more rudimentary bases will be created to adapt quickly to suddenly appearing military needs. Implementing that programme will require downsizing most bases and ending the extended tours of duty that characterised US deployments in Europe and the Far East.

The geographical focus of the US military presence is also changing. Indeed, the Global War on Terrorism dictates a focus on threats emanating from the wider zone of instability stretching from the Balkans to Southeast Asia. The result has been the gradual migration of US installations to the south and east: the Graf Ignatievo and Burgas airfields in Bulgaria, together with the Constanza base in Romania, served US needs in both the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. Politically, this trend underscores a move from 'Old Europe' to states in 'New Europe' more amenable to US policy goals in the Middle East. Moreover, these new bases are often located farther from inhabited areas, possess larger training areas and are burdened by less stringent environmental regulations than those in Western Europe. They are also closer to the actual zones of instability.

The United States is moving comparatively larger facilities to Central and Eastern Europe, including Poland and Hungary (Grier 2003; Robinson 2003a, 2003b). Moreover, it is establishing a patchwork of smaller bases—so-called 'lily pads'—throughout the 'arc of instability' running along southern Eurasia. This is where Central Asia and the South Caucasus enter the picture, together with parts of Southeast Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Since 11 September 2001, the United States has built, upgraded or expanded military facilities in Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, Bulgaria, Romania, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, Djibouti, the Philippines and Diego Garcia (Rennie 2003).

### **Central Asia's Role in US Strategy**

United States interests in Central Asia stem from several major elements. Terrorism is the first and most immediate: Central Asia, particularly its southern rim, is a strategically important staging area for operations in Afghanistan. Second are the Caspian basin energy reserves. Since the late 1990s the United States has explicitly stated that ensuring the safe export of Caspian oil and gas to world markets remains a policy priority (Talbot 1997). Yet Central Asia is important for at least one additional reason. First, it is a predominantly Muslim region populated by weak states with troubled political systems and struggling economies. The conditions foster the emergence of radical Islamic groups that pose an increasing threat to secular regimes. Though their public support is currently weak, the rising tide of anti-Americanism underscores the US interest in checking the growth of radical Islam and targeting terrorist organisations such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). What is more, stemming the growth of radical Islam and anti-Americanism mandates US efforts to encourage more inclusive political systems and better-functioning market economies within the region's states.

Hence, Central Asia ranks high on the list of target areas deemed to threaten

US security and global stability: it combines weak states, proven energy resources, radical Islamist movements and an important geopolitical location. Proximity to Afghanistan is likely to ensure its continued significance, since the US and NATO presence there now appears likely to remain. Furthermore, the prospect of internal unrest existing within several of the region's states warrants a US readiness to address the broader challenges to security and stability. Notable also is the fact that the South Caucasus and Central Asia lie adjacent to the Middle East and potential US interests there. Although the United States has long maintained bases in Turkey, the Indian Ocean and Northeast Asia, until 11 September it lacked a stable foothold in this important region, where the interests of major powers including Russia, China, Turkey, Iran, India and Pakistan converge.

The 2001–2 Afghan war illustrated the importance of maintaining a forward presence in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Although the United States positions its fleet off the Makran coast of Pakistan and uses Pakistani airspace, aircraft carriers could not effectively serve as a staging point for troop deployments in Afghanistan. Nor was Pakistan an appropriate base of operations—not least due to the population's pro-Taliban sentiments, especially in Pashtun-populated areas. Only the Central Asian states could play this role.

Yet transporting troops and heavy materiel from NATO territory or from mainland United States posed additional political challenges. Even after securing basing rights in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, the US Air Force still faced a 'Caspian bottleneck'. Transiting US military forces over or through Iran was not an option. Russia was more willing to cooperate, opening its airspace for humanitarian and logistical flights, but refusing to grant the use of Russian airspace to US combat aircraft (Albion 2001). This left only the South Caucasian states—most notably Georgia and Azerbaijan—which were among the first in the world to support the US in its Global War on Terrorism (Yalowitz and Cornell 2004).

Operation Iraqi Freedom in the spring of 2003 further illustrated the importance of bases along the 'arc of instability' in the greater Middle East. The decision by the Turkish parliament not to permit US forces to open a second front in northern Iraq was a stark reminder that the United States could not take basing rights in established allies for granted. Increasingly anti-American trends in South Korean public opinion compounded this realisation. Consequently, voices emerged suggesting Georgia might serve as a backup to Turkish bases (Plugatarev 2003). Likewise, press reports in both the West and Russia speculated that Azerbaijan might serve as a staging area for US operations against Iran. Smaller, more rudimentary bases that are easily upgraded are likely to develop throughout the region. Indeed, the Peter J. Ganci air base at Manas, Kyrgyzstan may serve as a textbook example for a future patchwork of 'lily pads' throughout the arc of instability (Rennie 2003).

Given the extent of the strategic partnership between Tashkent and Washington, Uzbekistan is likely to remain a pillar of US military engagement in the region (Tolipov and McDermott 2003). Ensuring the safe supply of bases in Afghanistan or further east may also necessitate a sustained US military presence in either Turkmenistan or Kazakhstan. Yet present conditions militate against greater US engagement, not least because of Kazakhstan's close relations with Russia and the erratic and totalitarian nature of the Niyazov regime in

Turkmenistan. Indeed, Turkmenistan's unwillingness to play an active role in the war in Afghanistan, was a major irritant to the Defense Department in the autumn of 2001 (Ismailzade 2003).

Accordingly, an enhanced US military presence in the South Caucasus seems most likely in the near future. As previously discussed, the region is crucial not only in its own right, but also as a transit point to existing Central Asian facilities. To be sure, Caucasian airspace and refuelling facilities are a prerequisite for any sustained US presence in Central Asia. Yet the South Caucasus is also a very troubled region. Ethnic conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as within Georgia, constitute one security threat; a second is the continuous Russian efforts to undermine Georgia's independence; a third is Iranian encroachments on Azerbaijan in the Caspian Sea. Against this backdrop, enhanced US engagement seems both likely and, from Washington's perspective, desirable. During his December 2003 meeting with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld expressed an interest of establishing an air base on the Apsheron peninsula outside Baku—an objective long sought by the US Air Force (Graham 2003).

### **Central Asia: Central to Whom?**

The Afghan war plunged the United States into a security environment marred by numerous complexities, many of which stem mainly from power struggles between regional powers seeking to maximise their influence in the region, as well as from the reluctance of those powers to see a heightened US role there. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the resulting Central Asian power vacuum created openings for several proximate players—notably China, Iran, Turkey, India, and Pakistan—to pursue political, economic and cultural interests, albeit with varying degrees of success (Cornell 2004a). Of these, China has undoubtedly proven the most successful in developing its economic and political presence (Swanström 2004). By comparison, Turkey, Iran and Pakistan succeeded primarily in the economic and cultural spheres, their political influence still being circumscribed (Turkey's influence in the South Caucasus is a notable exception). Finally, despite Russia's attempts to restore its former influence, no clear geopolitical order, whether through a balance of power, a concert of powers, or mechanisms of collective security, has emerged in the Soviet Union's wake.

Regional politics remain fluid and unpredictable. A central reason lies in the fact that Central Asia is, despite its name and geopolitical location, not central to the interests of any of its neighbouring powers. For Turkey, the European Union remains the primary object and vector of its foreign policy. For Iran, the Persian Gulf is still paramount in its orientation and security concerns. India and Pakistan focus primarily on their bilateral relationship. China's security challenges lie to the East, with the Taiwan issue looming large over its foreign policy, and relations to the Korean peninsula and Japan following closely. Finally Russia, despite its historical influence and interests in Central Asia, is preoccupied with the Caucasus and its relations with the West. Hence, while Central Asia is important to all these powers, the location of their primary concerns in other areas implies that their interest in the region is characterised more by irregular efforts or short-term initiatives rather than by consistent

strategies. As a result, a stable regional environment has yet to emerge (Starr *et al.* 2001).

For most of the 1990s, no power had either the capacity or the desire to assert a dominant role in Central Asian politics. Russia's influence gradually waned despite efforts, renewed under President Vladimir Putin, to assert Moscow's role as the primary arbiter of regional affairs (Olcott 2003, 4). Turkey and Iran sought to assert influence in the region in the early 1990s, but ultimately realised that they lacked the resources necessary to do so (Cornell and Sultan 2001). While China has silently increased its influence in the region since the mid-1990s, it has in no sense a dominant influence on any country (Cornell 2004a; Swanström 2004). India and Pakistan, for their part, arguably have lost influence in the region. Initially intended to ensure a pliant Afghan government and secure access to Central Asia, Pakistan's support for the Taliban visibly failed (Gul 2002). In turn, India's attempts to expand its political influence in Central Asia remain dubious given its geographic separation from the region (Blank 2003a; MacDonald 2003).

Regional arrangements have proven equally unsuccessful. In 2001, Russian and Chinese interlocutors sought to employ the 'Shanghai five' mechanism—originally conceived in 1995 to resolve the border conflicts between the Soviet successor states and China—to establish a Central Asia collective security framework (Blank 2002, 12). Yet, while local states joined the revamped Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), they were reluctant to be subsumed by it. The weakness of this Chinese–Russian mechanism is best illustrated by the speed and openness with which those states welcomed US forces on their territory. Unlike the SCO, which offered little in terms of economic aid or military protection, new partnerships with Washington provided Central Asian regimes with enhanced security and a concomitant broadening of their foreign relations.

### **Regional Turmoil: Addressing the Repercussions**

Russian and Chinese apprehension notwithstanding, the absence of a dominant regional power allowed the United States to step into Central Asia virtually unhindered. That US forces were welcomed with open arms in Tashkent was not surprising, given Uzbekistan's long-standing attempts to establish an independent foreign policy posture (Bohr 1998; Cornell 2000). More unexpected was the decision by both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, both considered close Russian allies, to welcome the US military despite Moscow's advice to the contrary. This illustrates the extent to which these states saw the US entry as an opportunity to broaden their foreign policy and thereby maximise their freedom of movement.

If Russia appeared uneasy with the US military presence in Central Asia, it was somewhat intimidated by the swift victory in Afghanistan and even shocked by the speed with which Coalition forces decapitated Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. These developments, together with US declarations concerning a revamped global military posture, US inroads into Georgia and Azerbaijan, and NATO's enlargement to the Baltic states, led some Russian observers to speak of a renewed Western policy of containment. Iran, by comparison, felt an acute sense of encirclement. United States military forces now appear on all sides, in

Georgia, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq, in addition to earlier deployments in Turkey, Oman and the Persian Gulf. Similar though less acute fears are also evident in China, where the US military presence in Kyrgyzstan—which shares a long border with China—is reminiscent to some observers of earlier deployments in the Korean and Vietnam Wars (Swanström 2004; Fairbanks 2002).

### **Russian Concerns**

As it becomes increasingly obvious that the US is in Central Eurasia to stay, relations with regional powers are likely to become strained. Not long after American forces were deployed in the region, Russia increased the number of its forces in Tajikistan. In mid 2002, Moscow responded to the US deployment at Manas by securing an agreement with the Kyrgyz military to lease the Kant air base (Nichol 2003, 5). In Tajikistan, the 201st motorised rifle division, initially deployed to guard the Afghan–Tajik border, is now being converted into a more durable and permanent military presence. Putin underscored anti-terrorism as the main reason behind the opening of the Kant air base at an inaugural ceremony in October 2003 (Putin 2003). Yet analysts see these and other Russian efforts as intended to check US advances in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, thus preventing them from slipping from ‘Moscow’s shadow’ (Blank 2003b). As Stephen Blank notes, these moves represent ‘an increasingly coordinated attempt to realise the diminution of these states’ effective sovereignty by creating a Russian-dominated sphere of influence that entails their military-economic-political subordination to Russia and allows Russia opportunities to monopolise access to and influence over their energy holdings and defense policies’ (Blank 2003c).

With time, Russian attitudes grow less patient. The November 2003 elections brought more hardline forces into the Duma, many of which support a tougher Russian stance on Central Asian affairs. What is more, some analysts believe that a more assertive foreign policy is likely following the April 2004 Russian presidential election, notably at a time when the United States is increasingly focused on its own elections. While visiting Washington in late 2003, Russian Defense Minister Sergey Ivanov reminded his hosts that Russia acquiesced to US military bases in Central Asia solely for the purpose and duration of the anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan (Kulakov 2004; Radyuhin 2003). Moreover, he noted that Russia would be ‘concerned’ by the move of ‘NATO infrastructure’ closer to Russia’s border, stating that such a move would ‘evoke a reaction’ (Saradzhyan 2003; Strobel 2004).

Yet these reminders appear to have little influence. During his December 2003 mission to Tbilisi, Secretary Rumsfeld endorsed the new Georgian government and called on Russia to withdraw its military bases there in accordance with its commitments under the 1999 Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Istanbul summit—thus reversing an earlier policy of silence over Moscow’s failure to abide by this commitment (BBC 2003). In January 2004, US Secretary of State Colin Powell reiterated that the United States would establish military bases in the former Soviet territory, but stressed that this should not be construed as an attempt to surround Russia (Slevin 2004). These statements did little to allay the fears of Russian leaders that American military presence in Central Asia is not only permanent but also gradually expanding (Blank 2003d).



## Chinese Apprehension

China's reaction has been no less hostile. In October 2001, President Jiang Zemin called a meeting of the Politburo to discuss the consequences of a 'potentially massive conflagration at its doorstep' (Lam 2001). In January 2002, Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan lamented the expansion of the US presence in Central Asia, expressing the view that 'one should not endlessly expand the aims of the anti-terrorist operation' (Basken 2002). Following the establishment of American and Russian bases in Kyrgyzstan, China subsequently launched joint exercises with the Kyrgyz military inside Kyrgyzstan (*China Daily* 2002).

Officially, China merely questions US military plans for the region. Below the surface, however, a considerably greater degree of irritation is teeming. A May 2002 article in the weekly *Liaowang* (a publication closely tied to the ruling elite) called US activities in Central Asia a part of a 'US Grand Strategy for global domination'. It identified US goals in the region to be fourfold: to form a 'line of containment' preventing Russia from becoming a great power; to encircle Iran; to 'control South Asia and march all the way down to the Indian Ocean'; and to 'contain the rise of China' (Fuqiu 2002). While this thinking may seem alarmist, if not unrealistic, it nonetheless illustrates the nature and extent of Chinese concerns over the US presence in Central Asia (Friedberg 2002, 40–42).

## Intra-regional Implications

America's presence in Central Asia affords an unprecedented opportunity to influence political development through the region. Following 11 September, the initial US engagement in Central Asia inspired hope that its presence would encourage democratisation and liberalisation. Yet it also carried certain risks: should the United States fail or neglect to help governments alleviate substantial economic problems, the region's inhabitants may increasingly see it as complicit in supporting illegitimate and unpopular governments. As in the Middle East, Washington could even be seen to be keeping these regimes in power.

Moreover, issues of human rights and democratisation no longer appear central in US foreign policy. One observer argued that US engagement merely 'empowered governments to continue aggressive campaigns against their opponents and [gave] an added impetus to repression' (Hill 2003). Measures taken by regional countries—such as the March 2002 registration of a human rights organisation in Uzbekistan or the Kyrgyz government's declaration of a 'Year of Human Rights'—secured some measure of international legitimacy (Tabyshalieva 2002). Yet regional leaders largely have withstood Western demands for liberalisation, often employing anti-terrorism as justification for maintaining a strong hold over political power (Olcott 2003). Uzbekistan is a notable exception. Though accused of substantial human rights violations and a pervasive lack of economic reform, the Karimov regime now seems resolved to make its currency convertible and to integrate into the world economy (Kakharov 2003; Buchman 2004). Uzbekistan's fate will likely prove crucial to regional development, not least because of its geographical position and political influence (Hill 2003, 50).

At present, it is too early to judge the long-term implications of the US presence. Nonetheless, modest progress in Uzbekistan and elsewhere may be

attributed, at least in part, to a more balanced US attitude. During Madeline Albright's tenure as Secretary of State, Central Asian powers perceived themselves as hectored and alienated by the West, and shrugged off Western criticism that, in their view, failed to appreciate or comprehend the very serious security threats posed by Islamic radicalism. Since 11 September, however, the United States and some European powers have changed their approach, though not their aims. By pursuing dialogue with Central Asian regimes the West has enhanced its influence and encourages greater permeability to political and economic reform. This is an important lesson; while the process may be excruciatingly slow, the right approach and attitude can produce positive outcomes.

Understanding the local political landscape is also crucial. Although Central Asian states allow little public opposition, this does not imply that they are devoid of political debate. To the contrary, vivid debates (and power struggles) take place in and among the various political elites. These dynamics require US policy-makers to understand the identity, political affinity and narrow interests of the officials with whom they interact. The Uzbek elite, for example, comprises at least three separate groups: Westernising liberals dominant in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and parts of the Ministry of Defence; former Communists with a power base in the security services; and a nationalist-religious faction, which by no means is close to Islamic radicalism, but nevertheless sees an important role for Islam in the future of the Uzbek state. Cross-cutting regional linkages and other affinities further complicate relations within and among these groups. Hence the need to understand the complexity of Central Asian political systems, as well as the extent to which religious groups—be they traditional or radical—have infiltrated government structures.

### **Regional Trade and Transnational Crime**

Stemming Central Asia's problems requires reviving its stagnant economies throughout the whole region, including those of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Only Kazakhstan, with impressive GDP growth in the early 2000s, achieved a notable degree of macroeconomic flexibility. Yet while Kazakhstan (and to a certain extent Turkmenistan) may possess substantial energy resources, these capital-intensive industries will not provide a consistently sound base for the regional economy. Nor will they generate a sufficiently high number of jobs. Also notable is the region's dependence on Russian infrastructure for foreign trade. This Soviet legacy is clearly illogical from a geographic point of view, given the relative proximity of the Arabian Sea and the port of Karachi—Central Asia's historic link to the world. In his memoirs, Babur, the 16th-century founder of the Mughal Empire, recorded the export of pistachios from the Fergana valley to Hindustan (Babur Ghaznavi 2002 [1529]). Those trading routes were abandoned in the 19th century, however, when the British–Russian standoff in Afghanistan isolated Central Asian states from their southern neighbours—an isolation that intensified under Soviet rule and lasts to this day.

During the 1990s, the confluence of civil war and Taliban repression in Afghanistan prevented that country from serving as a viable transport corridor. With the fall of the Taliban, however, comes the prospect of opening trade routes and re-establishing traditional links to the south—steps that will likely

prove indispensable for regional economic development. Reconstruction of Afghan infrastructure remains crucial. If major repairs are undertaken, and a modicum of security and stability persists in Afghanistan, then a significant part of the historic Silk Road may be re-established. Advancing regional cooperation in transportation will likely prove an essential prerequisite of any US efforts to promote economic development and reduce poverty, and thereby address one of the core roots of Islamic radicalism (Starr 2002a).

If Central Asia remains isolated in terms of licit international trade, illegal trafficking operations flourish in the region. Central Asia is a major source and conduit for narcotics—primarily opium and heroin produced in northern Afghanistan. Although the production and use of opiates is not new to the region, trafficking on a massive scale is a phenomenon that has grown exponentially from relatively low levels in the mid 1990s (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC] 2003; Olcott and Udalova 2000; Lubin *et al.* 2002). Afghanistan produces enough opium annually to supply nearly all of Russia's estimated three million opiate users. Production in the northern Badakhshan province alone rose from 2,500 hectares in 2000 to 12,800 in 2003, implying an estimated opium production of 544 tonnes (UNODC 2003, 42–47).

Increasing narcotics production affects US interests both directly and indirectly. Terrorist organisations including al-Qaeda and the IMU are believed to finance their activities, at least in part, through drug trafficking. What is more, the drug trade is threatening Central Asian states in the military, political-economic and societal spheres. Drug-funded organisations such as the IMU wage military insurgencies that threaten the regimes in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan (Cornell 2004b). On a political and economic level, the drug trade infiltrates governments through corruption and official collusion with criminal networks. The result is a form of state capture that impedes the effectiveness of institutions. Illicit trade also impedes the development of market economies, while high levels of drug addiction and ensuing epidemics burden strained public budgets and undermine productivity (Silk Road Studies Program 2004).

Put simply, the drug trade weakens and criminalises the region while underwriting the activities of terrorist organisations. Yet while this poses an obvious threat to US interests and international security, little has been done to stem the problem. Far from removing the threat, the recent war in Afghanistan only enhanced regional opium production. For Central Asia to remain stable, the United States and its regional partners must proactively address the criminalisation of political and economic life at a qualitatively different level than previously witnessed.

### **Radical Islam**

Addressing the implications of US presence in Central Asia on radical Islam poses a second major challenge. This issue is closely related to both regional governance and economic reform, since the attitudes and policies of Central Asian regimes will likely prove a major factor in stemming or fuelling radicalism. Three elements are central to this endeavour: political development, regional economic development, and limiting the role of foreign actors in bankrolling and sponsoring extremist movements (Cornell and Spector 2002). At the outset, however, it should be mentioned that Central Asia stands out in the

Islamic world as one of the areas where anti-American sentiment is not yet widespread. At present the United States enjoys a neutral or even positive image. Unlike in the Middle East or Latin America, Washington has no need to counter long-standing prejudices or political legacies left by past interventions.

The United States faces two strains of radical Islam. Most evident is the violent and criminalised version espoused by the IMU, which, at least temporarily, appears decimated by military losses during the Afghan war (Naumkin 2003). Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan style movements with clear connections to the regional drug trade present a law enforcement problem. Trying to integrate them into a political system would be futile, and even dangerous. Yet equally important is the challenge posed by avowedly non-violent groups that are nevertheless strongly opposed to a US presence and agitating against it. Chief among them is Hizb-ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation), which in recent years has established an increasingly strong presence in parts of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (International Crisis Group [ICG] 2003). Such groups require more measured political engagement. While Central Asian regimes tend to portray all Islamic groups as terrorists and drug traffickers, this is not necessarily the case. Correctly ascertaining the composition and objectives of these movements is a crucial step in determining whether they pose a challenge and how they should be handled.

Against this backdrop, the degree of US success in encouraging regional political and economic development will have broad implications for the rise of radical Islam. Closed political systems marred by economic isolation and deprivations are fertile ground for radicalism; gradually liberalising polities with developing economies are less so. Another important factor is the behaviour of American forces; it is of utmost importance that they do not acquire a reputation similar to that they have in South Korea or Okinawa. Far better to cultivate a relationship with host countries similar to that in Turkey, where US forces are generally well regarded by the general public. Finally, US policies toward other parts of the world, and in particular the Muslim world, will affect the influence of radical Islam in Central Asia. Public reaction to the Iraq war illustrates that while Muslim identity is diverse and seldom dominant, it is nonetheless a global political reality.

## **Conclusions**

In view of current efforts to restructure its global footprint, it seems reasonably clear that the United States will be an important player in Central Asia for some time to come. The next few years are likely to see an expanded US military presence built around smaller bases in Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Also likely are deployments in Azerbaijan and Georgia, which together form a critical geographical and logistical bottleneck for US forces in Central Asia. These developments are not without consequences. By late 2003, US officials implicitly acknowledged a long-term intention to maintain existing bases (State Department 2002; Strobel 2004). As it becomes clear that the US military presence is no longer tied exclusively to Afghanistan, reactions from regional powers are likely to intensify. While these states can do little to counter the US presence, they are likely to test continuously Washington's commitment to the region.

Regional powers often frame US engagement in Central Asia as destabilising and as a sign of unilateralism (Brake 2003; Diamond 2003). The only obvious source of instability, however, would be a failure by Washington to define and articulate its intentions. Should the US delineate a clear and consistent policy demonstrating that its facilities are part of a global strategy rather than a means of targeting regional powers, those powers are more likely to acquiesce. Such an approach would enhance Central Asian confidence in sustained Western engagement. Yet should US policy remain ambivalent and therefore unpredictable, regional powers likely will be tempted to test US resolve. Fearing the prospect of a sudden US departure, local regimes would likely prove less reliable and less willing to pursue necessary reforms.

Thanks to its newfound presence in the heart of Eurasia, the United States now possesses an unprecedented opportunity to affect positively the region's economic, social and political development. Yet the US role must be considered in a broader context. To what extent could Washington positively influence these complex processes? Absent a new 'Marshall Plan' for Central Asian reconstruction and development, the United States may ultimately lack both the means and will to encourage political reform, promote the development of civil society and decriminalise the economy.

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