

Regional Politics in Central Asia: the Changing Roles of Iran, Turkey, Pakistan and China

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Introduction

September 11, 2001 affected no region in the world as much as it affected Central Asia.¹ Afghanistan, of course, was the state most affected, as its erstwhile isolated and estranged Taliban government was overthrown and the country opened up to the world. Afghanistan received great amounts of political and economic aid as well as American military presence, and a token international security force in Kabul. Twenty-three years of almost constant war had now come to an end, giving way to the gruesome reconstruction of this war-ravaged country. The five post-Soviet states of Central Asia, on the other hand, saw a greatly changed regional political scene emerge out of Operation Enduring Freedom. For one, the main threat to their security – terrorism originating from Afghanistan, especially the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan – had been done away with. Moreover, aid provided by western donors to Central Asia greatly increased, and American and allied military presence spelt closer relations with the United States for Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and especially Uzbekistan, which was singled out as a strategic ally of the United States. The biggest change, on a broader level, was that Central Asia no longer remained an isolated region. Indeed, before September 11, 2001, western interest in the region had gradually waned. But America's advent on the scene restored a certain freedom of movement to Central Asian states that were increasingly becoming constrained in an environment dominated by Russian and Chinese influence. The ever evolving and shifting distribution of power and influence among the states surrounding Central Asia was fundamentally altered by the serious commitment of the

¹ Central Asia is here defined as including the five post-Soviet states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as well as Afghanistan.

United States to a military and security engagement in the region, even though the length of this commitment was not announced.²

American involvement hence redrew the geopolitical map of Central Asia and beyond, before redrawing the political map of the Middle East a year and a half later through the invasion of Iraq. This involvement greatly increased America's leverage in the region, with profound impact on the respective roles not only of Russia, but also of the other major powers involved in the region: Iran, Turkey, Pakistan and China. Now, two years after September 11, some repositioning of these major actors can be discerned. How have their interests been affected by American presence in the region? How have they responded to this development?

Iran: The Politics of Encirclement

The independence of Central Asian states was welcomed with trepidation in Tehran. Traditionally oriented primarily toward the Persian Gulf in its foreign policy, the Islamic Republic had only three years earlier emerged from the devastating eight-year war with Iraq. The dramatic developments in the Caucasus, especially the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, threatened to spill over into Iranian territory and did so at least on one occasion. Moreover, the rise of nationalism in Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan worried Iran, home to a significant Turkmen minority and an Azerbaijani one at least twice larger than the population of the Republic of Azerbaijan. Relations with Azerbaijan have been tense for most of the past decade, whereas Iran's relations with Armenia have been the closest with any former Soviet Republic.³

After the collapse of the USSR, American and other western actors voiced strong concern that Iran would seek to pursue a subversive and adventurist policy to export its brand of Islamic government to Central Asia and the Caucasus. In retrospect, these fears seem to have been highly exaggerated - partly due to the pragmatic character of Iranian foreign policy-making towards this region and partly due to the fact that Central Asian states are Sunni and not Shi'a. However, Iran has supported Shi'a activist groups on a

² Svante E. Cornell, "Entrenched in the Steppes: The U.S. Redraws the Map", in *Foreign Service Journal*, April 2003; "America in Eurasia: One Year After", in *Current History*, October 2002; Charles William Maynes, "America Discovers Central Asia", in *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2003.

³ Seyed Kazem Sajjadpour, "Iran, the Caucasus, and Central Asia", in Ali Banuazizi and Myron Weiner, *The New Geopolitics of Central Asia and Its Borderlands*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994, pp. 197-215.

low and covert level in Azerbaijan, the only Shi'a majority state. In general, Iran followed a policy of 'incremental engagement' with the region.⁴

The direct impact of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) was positive for Iran: it removed a vehemently anti-Iranian and anti-Shia government from neighbouring Afghanistan. In fact, Iran and the Taliban had had a tense standoff on their common border in 1998, after the Taliban conquered Mazar-i-Sharif, leading to the killing of several Iranian diplomats. The rise of the Taliban had been a cause of concern for Iran and Iranian representatives expressed their vulnerability by arguing that they were 'sandwiched between the Taliban and Saddam Hussein'. Thus, OEF removed a government that was also, on an ideological as well as practical level, a threat to Iran. This was true also with the American overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq 18 months later. In both conflicts, Iran showed an ambivalent position, expressing the fact that Tehran had little problem with the overthrow of either the Taliban or Saddam Hussein. However, Iran worried about the results of American presence on its doorstep. Having been included in the 'Axis of Evil' by President George W. Bush, Iran increasingly felt a direct threat of American military action against it that has only increased after US operations in Iraq and the ensuing soaring debate about Iran's nuclear programme. Secondly, Tehran worried about the impact of the unrest and instability that would result if American intervention did not stabilise these countries – fears that continue to this day.

On the whole, the largest impact of the two American operations on the Islamic Republic of Iran has been a negative one, in the form of an acute feeling of encirclement. Prior to OEF, the American military was by no means far from Iranian shores or borders. The US Navy was omnipresent in the Persian Gulf; America also had military installations in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. Meanwhile, Turkey was a NATO country with a US air base on the Mediterranean. But the US military was not a factor to the East or North of Iran. OEF changed this. Afghanistan became a *de facto* American protectorate; Pakistan hosted several, though minor, American troops, including in the province of Baluchistan neighboring Iran; Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan became areas of permanent US bases; in the Caucasus, Azerbaijan saw increased American military assistance while US training forces were deployed in Georgia. With Operation Iraqi

⁴ Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "Iran and Central Asia: Responding to Regional Change", in Mehdi Mozaffari, ed., *Security Politics in the Commonwealth of Independent States*, Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1997.

Freedom, the encirclement of Iran was completed: American forces now effectively surrounded the Islamic Republic.

This new situation is the one under which Tehran operates, and in which Iranian policy in Central Asia is being formulated. Consequently, Tehran has followed a policy that is best described as a combination of defensive caution and limited containment of the United States on its borders.

Caution and realism has always been a major determinant of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic toward its neighbours. It never launched the much-feared campaign of Islamisation in Central Asia in 1991, nor is there evidence that Tehran ever planned to do so. Instead, Iran has been continuing its relations with Central Asian states in the economic, political and cultural spheres, with little major change since September 11. In a sense, Iran has never been a major external actor in post-Soviet Central Asia on the political sphere, and if anything this trend has consolidated since Operation Enduring Freedom.

This is in turn related partly to Iran's close relationship with Russia, which has meant the enlisting of Russian diplomatic support for Iran and crucially important nuclear technology and other weaponry.⁵ This Moscow link has gained increasing importance in Tehran as the regime is apparently frantically seeking to achieve nuclear weapons capability, feeling that only such capability would give it a measure of security in an increasingly hostile environment. The cost of this policy has however been in the realm of Iranian policy in the former Soviet sphere. Indeed, it seems to be an unwritten rule that Iran's role in the Caucasus and Central Asia is circumscribed by its deference to Russian domination. In other words, Iran's policy seldom interferes with or contradicts Russian policy in these regions. Its policy of supporting Armenia and counteracting the development of a strong and wealthy Azerbaijan is in tandem with Moscow's interests, though for clearly different reasons. Moscow seeks to dominate the South Caucasus and secure a monopoly over energy resources there, while Iran is mainly afraid of the possible effect of a wealthy and American-allied Azerbaijan on its sizeable and increasingly restive Azeri population. Increasingly close relations between Baku and Washington, however, have aggravated tensions between the two. In fact, rumours in summer 2003 that Azerbaijan would be used as a launching pad for an American

⁵ Robert E. Freedman, "Russian-Iranian Relations in the 1990s", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 4 no. 2, June 2000.

invasion of Iran and that Baku had already consented to this – led to thinly veiled Iranian threats of military action and violations of Azerbaijani air space by Iranian jets.

With regard to Afghanistan, Iran has played a much more prominent role. Iran, like Russia, has supported the Northern Alliance power grab in Kabul, which has created a government with little legitimacy as a broad-based national government capable of reigning in the provincial warlords that still wield much power in the country. Concomitantly, Tehran has extended full support to Ismail Khan, the warlord controlling the northwestern part of Afghanistan centered around the historic city of Herat. By extending military supplies and cooperating in keeping a trade flow generating over US\$ 1 million in duties levied by Ismail Khan (none of which is sent to the central government), Iran effectively undermines the emergence of a strong central government in Afghanistan.⁶ The reasons for this policy are clear: given American preponderance in Afghanistan, a strong Afghan government would mean, from the perspective of Tehran, a strong American presence in the region. Tehran would prefer to prop up the warlords whom it can influence rather than face the prospect of competing with the US in influencing a central government in Kabul. Therefore, Tehran is following a policy of mild containment of the US on its eastern border. Tehran's policy towards Azerbaijan is also along similar lines and it has sent clear warnings to Baku regarding a larger American military presence there. Finally, in Iraq, the Iranian policy remains to be determined. Iran allowed some Iran-based groups that are opposed to Saddam Hussein to engage with the United States. But this was aimed at influencing the post-Saddam processes in Iraq rather than pleasing the US.

Iran is at present in a defensive position. With regard to former Soviet Central Asia, its policies have changed little and its influence remains relatively circumscribed; in Afghanistan, Iran keeps being an influential actor, especially at a regional level, clearly in contradiction with the stated interests of the United States.

Turkey: Domestic Preoccupations

Turkey's policy towards Central Asia has gone through several phases since the fall of the Soviet Union. Immediately following the collapse of the USSR, at a time when Turkey felt rejected by Europe, it was suggested that Turkey should take advantage of the creation of five new Turkic states in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and seek to at least forge closer ties with these countries. However, it did not take Turkey long to

⁶ See i.e. "Afghan Fears as Iran Arms Warlord", *Daily Telegraph*, 24 January 2002.

realise that this policy had slim chances of success. Russia had not abandoned its ambitions in these regions and thwarted Turkish ambitions, especially in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Moreover, Turkey's economy was heavily oriented towards Europe, and it was not in a position to take on the task of supporting the process of economic reform in the former Soviet states. Turkey's internal troubles, especially the PKK rebellion, also cast doubts on its ability to exert influence so far away. In addition, pronouncements of a Turkic 21st century scared Russia and Iran, while the Central Asian states were put off by some Turkish representatives' big brotherly behaviour. By the late 1990s, Turkey had developed a more pragmatic policy, focusing security relations on the South Caucasus, specifically Azerbaijan and Georgia, while entertaining economic, political and cultural interactions with Central Asian states. Hence, Turkey gradually downscaled its ambitions in the region. It allowed its private sector to take the lead, with state support, in forging closer ties with Central Asia. Much like Iran, Turkey had not, during the 1990s, managed to achieve a position as a major player in the political scene of Central Asia.⁷

In the Caucasus, on the other hand, the Turkish economic and political role has become increasingly clear. Here the main vehicle of Turkish foreign policy has been the military establishment, which considers both Azerbaijan and Georgia to be of strategic importance. Turkey spent most of the 1990s building up the Azerbaijani military, in fact developing its military forces from scratch after their debacle in the war with Armenia. Following this, Turkey established a military academy in Georgia as well, and relations with that country by the late 1990s reached the level of strategic partnership. This reflected a generally more activist trend in Turkish foreign policy, especially in areas close to home. The military alliance with Israel, Turkey's active participation in peace-keeping in the Balkans and taking responsibility for the security of Azerbaijan, are examples of a more activist Turkey. Yet it has stayed away from Central Asia.

September 11 allowed Turkey the opportunity to capitalise on its role as a secular, American-allied Muslim country. Immediately after September 11, Turkey took part in the International Security Force in Afghanistan (ISAF) which it also headed for more than six months. Turkish commandos also took part in OEF, supporting American forces especially in the Uzbek-populated north of Afghanistan. Turkey also upgraded its

⁷ Mustafa Aydin, "Turkey and Central Asia: Challenges of Change", in *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 15 no. 2, June 1996, pp. 157-178.

security relations with Uzbekistan, and launched anti-terrorism training programmes in that country.⁸

However, Turkey was plunged into a domestic crisis, first with the economic crisis in February and later as a result of Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit's failing health in spring 2002. Its fragile coalition of three parties with diverging platforms (a social democratic, a liberal and a nationalist party) collapsed, prompting early elections in November 2002. These elections fundamentally reshaped the Turkish political scene, leading to the expulsion from Parliament of most parties that had formed the core of Turkey's political scene for a decade. In their place, the AK Party (AKP), a moderate Islamic-oriented party grabbed 36% of the votes and a two-thirds majority in Parliament. This development seemed to augur well, as it gave Turkey a consistent government with a clear political orientation as well as a manifestly business-friendly one. The leader of the AKP, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, visited Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan in January 2003, with a specific economy-oriented agenda – increasing trade with the Caucasus and Central Asia.⁹ Unfortunately, Ankara did not sustain a political interest in Central Asia. The AKP government was by no means experienced, with much of its leadership and parliamentary group consisting of newly elected provincial politicians new to the national scene, as well as the core leadership of the city administration of Istanbul that Erdogan had chaired previously. Shortly after coming to power, the AKP was confronted with the need to kickstart Turkey's economy, while passing relevant judicial and political reforms to be accepted as a candidate country to the European Union. At this point, the US war in Iraq began to loom large over the horizon, leading up to the March 3 2003 vote in the Turkish Parliament that did not produce a sufficient majority for allowing US use of Turkish territory for the war in Iraq. As this implied that a large chunk of the AKP parliamentary group had voted against the wishes of its own government, it plunged Turkey into a period of political as well as economic instability, as the US aid that had been tied to the passing of the resolution did not come through.¹⁰

In other words, Turkey started off on a positive note in its relations with Central Asia after September 11, especially in the security sphere but also, to some extent, in the

⁸ See Kemal Kaya, "Turkey's New Challenges in the Caucasus and Central Asia", *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 7 November 2001.

⁹ Antoine Blua, "Turkey: Erdogan Begins Tour Of Turkic-Speaking Countries Of The Former Soviet Union", RFE/RL, 7 January 2003.

¹⁰ Cornell Caspian Consulting, "The Turkish Parliament Rejects War Plans: Causes and Implications", Policy Brief, 4 March 2003.

economic field. However, the war in Iraq prohibited a greater attention to this region and forced Turkey to focus on domestic concerns to a greater extent.

Pakistan: Coping with the Aftershock

Much like Turkey, Pakistan initiated its relationship with Central Asia in the early 1990s with great hopes. While Turkey put its ethno-linguistic affinities with the region as well as its relationship with the west as a base for its relationship, Pakistan took advantage of the fact that it is the only neighbouring power sharing the Sunni Islamic faith with Central Asia. More importantly, Pakistan portrayed itself, logically, as the natural trade route for Central Asian states to reach world markets and break out of their trade and economic dependence on Russia. The second government of Benazir Bhutto in the early 1990s made the greatest effort to translate this policy into practice, as it mapped the mountain passes on its northern border to identify the most suitable trade routes. Out of this, partially, was born the idea of creating a major trade route from Central Asia through Herat and Kandahar to Quetta and down to the port of Gwadar in Baluchistan.

Pakistan's main problem in establishing a relationship with Central Asia was geographic: while only several miles away from Tajikistan across the Wakhan corridor, it is separated from the region by Afghanistan. The breakup of the USSR coincided with the breakdown of law and order in Afghanistan, and the civil war between rival Mujahideen factions that led to a collapse of central government authority in Kabul.¹¹ As a result, Afghanistan descended into lawlessness, making it a particularly unsuitable conduit for trade: trade convoys were routinely robbed and drivers injured or killed; and rival Mujahideen factions extorted money at numerous checkpoints across the country.

In fact, one of the main reasons for the Pakistani government's decision to sponsor the Taliban movement when it emerged in late 1994 was to clear the barriers to building a trade route. The first major raid conducted by the Taliban was aimed at setting free a test convoy that had been tasked to create a land trade route between Pakistan and Central Asia via Kandahar and Herat. The convoy, organised by the then Pakistani Minister of Interior Nasirullah Babar, was held hostage by a local commander, but was soon freed by a Taliban attack.¹² Within days, the Taliban captured Kandahar, beginning a series of conquests that eventually gave them control over close to 90% of Afghanistan's territory.

¹¹ Anthony Hyman, "Afghanistan and Central Asia", in Mehdi Mozaffari, ed., *Security Politics in the Commonwealth of Independent States*, Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1997.

¹² Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000, p. 28. See also Imtiaz Gul, *The Unholy Nexus: Pak-Afghan Relations under the Taliban*, Lahore: Vanguard Books, 2002.

At this time, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and military establishment, both in conflict with the Bhutto government, were still supporting long-time Pakistani favourite Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. The bulk of the Pakistani state switched allegiance to the Taliban only after Hekmatyar had been roundly defeated and the Taliban were about to capture Kabul.

Pakistan's support for the Taliban has often been described in terms of a policy motivated by Islamic zeal. In fact, it served many pragmatic purposes. First, it helped in establishing a pro-Pakistani government in Afghanistan, whereas earlier governments had been hostile to Pakistan and friendly to India. This provided Pakistan with a certain strategic depth in its relation with India. Second, the Taliban emerged as a new force and the only one that seemed capable of stabilising Afghanistan after the civil war of the early 1990s. Last, but not least, these two conditions, a stable and pro-Pakistan Afghanistan, were to provide the framework for a Pakistani role in Central Asia as the main artery for trade, and therefore, political influence resulting from increased economic interactions.

Unfortunately for Islamabad, this did not happen. For one, the Taliban movement did not take orders from Pakistan. In fact, Pakistan's ability to influence the Taliban has been widely overrated. As a result, Pakistan was unable to prevent the Taliban from pursuing its self-destructive policies towards women, minorities, and the population in general that brought it international ostracism, sanctions, and isolation. The Taliban was providing shelter to rebel Islamic groups from Central Asia such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the neighbouring Central Asian states feared that they too would be affected by the "spread of the Taliban" movement. This led Uzbekistan to close its borders with Afghanistan and Tajikistan to serve as the major conduit for military and political assistance to the Northern Alliance fighting the Taliban. Only Turkmenistan, itself increasingly isolated, kept working relations with the Taliban government. Though by 1998, the Taliban was controlling enough of Afghanistan to serve as trade conduit, it could not fulfill this role for political reasons. The regional backlash against the Taliban also reverberated against Pakistan. With the support of Russian policy and media, Pakistan increasingly became depicted in Central Asia as a country with an Islamic agenda, covertly supporting Taliban-style extremism to subvert the region. This generated large-scale resentment against Pakistan, and led to increasing suspicion against Pakistanis in general, making the task of Pakistani diplomats and businessmen very difficult.

Thus, Pakistan's Afghan policy proved immensely counter-productive. Far from making Pakistan a conduit of trade, it alienated Central Asian states from Pakistan and generated suspicion that may take a long time to undo. In retrospect, Pakistani support for the Taliban was a bad idea. It reflected a failure in Islamabad to assess the changes in international politics. In the 1980s, during the tenure of Zia ul-Haq, Pakistan and the United States had in tandem used radical political Islam to fight the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. For Pakistan, it made perfect sense: its closest links were with the Pashtun population in southern Afghanistan, but supporting nationalist Pashtun groups meant supporting groups that had inherent territorial claims on Pakistan's Pashtun areas. Islamic groups, however, would not necessarily have such claims and seemed to be better suited from Islamabad's vantage point. When the Soviet Union had been defeated in Afghanistan, the Pakistani elite supported the use of religious groups to meet political objectives. In the mid-1990s, Islamabad again felt that a religious grouping could fulfill a political purpose. But times had changed. Whereas Islamic fighters in Afghanistan had been the heroes of the west in the 1980s, Islamic fighters in the post-Cold War era had, by a twist, come to be depicted as a threat to peace and stability and potential terrorists. The same policy that had worked with the west in the 1980s hence became an international debacle in the 1990s. By September 11, the Taliban had clearly become a failure and an embarrassment for Islamabad. Pakistan's change of policy towards the Taliban on September 12 was hence in line not only with international necessities but also with the domestic realisation that the policy was counter-productive.

Operation Enduring Freedom led to both positive and negative consequences for Pakistan. On the positive side, the collapse of the Taliban regime and the presence of American forces in Afghanistan impeded most problems related with the Taliban government, such as the sheltering of radical sectarian Sunni groups banned in Pakistan. A significant irritant in Pakistan's relations with the Taliban was the refusal by Taliban authorities to hand over members of the Lashkar-i-Jhangvi (including its leader Riaz Basra)¹³ Sipah-i-Sahaba, and Tehrik-i-Nafaz-i-Shariat-i-Mohammadi, wanted for sectarian terrorism in Pakistan.¹⁴ The collapse of the Taliban helped Musharraf to reinvigorate his own 'war against terror' and crackdown on the sectarian groups. The death toll in sectarian violence decreased by half from 2001 to 2002, while over 50 leading members of Lashkar-i-Jhangvi were either killed or apprehended, and the Tehrik-i-Nafaz-i-Shariat-

¹³ Rory McCarthy, "Death by Design", *The Guardian*, 17 May 2002.

¹⁴ See eg. Ali Abbas, "Taliban Refuses to Hand over Wahabi Terrorists to Pakistan", *Shianews.com*, 25 April 2001.

i-Mohammadi decimated.¹⁵ It also, on a larger scale, allowed Pakistan to put the Taliban episode behind it and begin a new phase in its relationship with Central Asia. The renewed international attention to Afghanistan and to the reconstruction of the infrastructure of that country also seemed to increase the feasibility of finally realising Pakistan's role as a conduit for Central Asian trade to and from the Arabian Sea. Along with this, Pakistan's international standing benefited greatly from allying with the US, with very tangible benefits. Within four months of September 11, Pakistan secured pledges of \$1,5 billion in direct assistance or grants, signed debt rescheduling agreements with fifteen countries, and secured a number of new loans from International Financial Institutions.¹⁶ There has been a complete turnaround in the macro-economic situation in the country, and Pakistan's previously bleeding economy is now stabilizing. In fact Pakistan is "enjoying a measure of economic stability it hasn't seen for decades".¹⁷ Its growth rate has increased from 3,6% to 4,5% for the fiscal year ending June 2003; textile exports increased by 19% in the same period; and foreign exchange reserves have jumped from \$3,2 billion in July 2001 to 10,2 billion in March 2003.¹⁸

On the other hand, Pakistan faced serious consequences from the events in Afghanistan. First, it no longer had a pro-Pakistan government in Kabul. On the contrary, the vehemently anti-Pakistani Shura-i-Nazar, the dominant Panjsheri Tajik faction of the Northern Alliance, came to heavily dominate the Afghan government after the fall of the Taliban. Over a very short period of time, Islamabad had gone from being the main external influence on Afghanistan's rulers (though influence over the erratic Taliban was limited) to a position where most regional players including Russia, Iran and even India probably exerted a larger influence on Kabul than it did. New Delhi's relations with Kabul developed rapidly in all fields, including the opening of two Indian consulates near Pakistan's borders (in Jalalabad and Kandahar) which were perceived in Pakistan as threatening to its security.

The war in Afghanistan also carried implications for Pakistan. The US war on the Taliban and American occupation of Afghanistan was highly unpopular in the Pashtun-populated border region of the North-West Frontier Province and northern Baluchistan. This was partly due to the fact that it led to the demise of the Pashtun-dominated

¹⁵ See Kanchan Lakshman, "Deep Roots to Pakistan's Sectarian Terror", *Asia Times*, 9 July 2003.

¹⁶ Moinuddin Ahmed, "Assistance, Loans and Rescheduling Pacts after 9/11", *Dawn*, 11 September 2002.

¹⁷ Naween A. Mangi, "Pakistan: It Pays to be Uncle Sam's Pal", *BusinessWeek*, 7 April 2003.

¹⁸ Ibid., also Ashfaque Hasan Khan, *Economic Performance during 1999-2002*, Government of Pakistan, Finance Division, 30 October 2002. <http://209.71.203.116/summary/main.htm>.

government. The other reason factor was that a significant section of the population of the border areas of Pakistan was heavily dependent on cross-border trade and smuggling, which saw a severe downturn with the increased military presence on both sides of the border. These factors contributed to the victory of the Islamic-minded Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal in the elections in the NWFP.

In sum, these factors made it difficult for Pakistan to formulate, let alone implement a strategy towards Central Asia. Its focus has been on its domestic situation, its relations with the United States, and India, given the renewed tensions with India in the aftermath of the December 13, 2001 suicide attack on the Indian Parliament. As of mid-2003, Pakistan has not made significant efforts to lower its tariffs and boost trade with Afghanistan and Central Asia. On the other hand, with Chinese help, Pakistan has made significant progress in the building of the deep-water port at Gwadar in Baluchistan, which is now to be linked with Pakistan's rail and road network as well as with Afghanistan and Central Asia.¹⁹ Likewise, important steps have been made at the inter-governmental level to develop the project of building a gas pipeline from the Daulatabad gas fields of Turkmenistan to Multan via Afghanistan.²⁰ The pipeline project nevertheless has doubtful economic feasibility, at least as long as India is unwilling to have Pakistan as a transit country for its energy resources.

Pakistan remains the logical trade corridor for Central Asia, and has a great potential to become an important actor in the region. This will nevertheless require a stable Afghanistan, and a strategy on the part of Islamabad to build relations with its northern border.

China: Aiming for the Long Haul

Of the countries bordering Central Asia, it is safe to say that the People's Republic of China is the only power that has considerably increased its influence in both political and economic terms since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Discussions of Central Asian regional politics in the early and mid-1990s often completely ignored China's policy and interests, focusing instead on a purported rivalry between Turkey and Iran. This rivalry never happened, as the would-be contenders had neither the means nor the intention, eventually, to pursue it. China never made large pronouncements of its interests and

¹⁹ *Pakistan Economist*, No. 27, 2003, July 7-13, 2003; "Development of Gwadar port discussed", *Dawn*, 2 April 2003; "Gwadar port to change fate of region: PM", *Dawn*, 21 May 2003.

²⁰ Aftab Kazi and Tariq Saeedi, "India and the Politics of the Trans-Afghan Gas Pipeline", *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 28 August 2002.

policy in Central Asia, instead pursuing its policies in the quiet and, undoubtedly, with a considerably longer-term strategy than most players involved.

Chinese interests in the region are manifold. The most acute relates to Xinjiang, which is, in fact, the Chinese part of Central Asia.²¹ Populated mainly by Uighurs (a people closely related to the Uzbeks), Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, the nominally autonomous province of Xinjiang has been a restive area that only reluctantly is being incorporated into the political and economical structures of the People's Republic. Uighurs are in general resentful of Chinese domination, especially given the large scale migration of Han Chinese into Xinjiang. Only half a century ago, Uighurs formed 90% of the population of the region, whereas an active colonisation programme led by the Beijing authorities has sought a "Sinification" of Xinjiang. Today Han Chinese and Uighurs are approximately equal in number in Xinjiang.

The independence of the five states of Central Asia hence served as a reminder to both China and Uighur political groups that the status of Xinjiang as a constituent part of China was by no means a foregone conclusion. A main vector of Chinese policy has hence been to ensure that former Soviet Central Asian states and Afghanistan do not become safe havens for Uighur separatists to operate and agitate for the independence of Xinjiang.²²

While the collapse of the USSR has therefore added an element of unease for Beijing – in the light of the threat to the security of China's borders – it also provided notable opportunities. The two most significant developments were the removal of control over the region exercised by a hostile power, the USSR; and increasing Chinese access to the natural resources of Central Asia.²³ China has been worried about the region opening up to international presence and the increasing activities of the United States and NATO in Central Asia, including the Partnership for Peace exercises in Kazakhstan in 1997. These worries, as well as an increasing realisation of a common interest with Moscow to minimise western influence in Central Asia, led China to take the lead in turning the Shanghai Five group. The group, which had been created in the early 1990s to solve border issues between former Soviet states and China, developed into a full-fledged regional organisation, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). This organisation

²¹ Michael Dillon, "Central Asia: The View from Beijing, Urumqi and Kashghar", in Mehdi Mozaffari, ed., *Security Politics in the Commonwealth of Independent States*, Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1997, pp. 133-150.

²² Phunchok Stobdan, "China's Central Asia Dilemma", *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 22 no. 3, June 1998, pp. 399-408.

²³ The concept of China's three ancient categories of interests in Central Asia was articulated by David Finkelstein at a conference on "China's Emergence in Central Asia", Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., February 5, 2003. See event summary available at <http://www.csis.org/china/index.htm>.

was intended to institutionalise security cooperation with Central Asia before the United States was able to do so, hence pre-empting what Beijing feared could at some point turn out to be American encirclement of China. By the summer of 2001, China and Russia had effectively managed to include even the most independent-minded Central Asian country – Uzbekistan – in this cooperative mechanism. In fact, the dramatic threat created by the IMU insurgencies in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in the summers of 1999 and 2000 had challenged the militaries of these countries, forcing the governments to seek outside assistance to deal with the problem. As the United States was less than forthcoming in providing military assistance, Russia and China were able to benefit from disillusionment in the region with the US to create an embryonic collective security mechanism within the SCO.

China's most substantial success in Central Asia, however, lies in the sphere of economy and trade. To date, more than \$500 million have been invested, and China has become a major trading partner and investor especially in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Cross-border trade has also boomed, and low-cost Chinese goods have flooded into the region. Beijing has announced plans to increase trade by a factor of 50 in the next ten years. Although this may be utopian, it is clear that the Chinese government sees trade as its chief vehicle of gaining influence in Central Asia. In terms of energy, China has taken an especially strong interest in Kazakhstan, recently pledging to invest the equivalent of US\$4 billion in the energy sector of that country.²⁴

China's policy toward Afghanistan was also characterised by a larger dose of caution than Russia and most Central Asian states. It never actively took part in the regional efforts to militarily oppose the Taliban, perhaps feeling, somewhat correctly, that if the Taliban could not be defeated by the joint efforts of Russia, China, India and Central Asian states, then China's contribution would make little difference other than angering the Taliban. Instead, China followed a two-pronged policy. First, it sought informal contact with the Taliban and initiated trade and infrastructure projects in Afghanistan. Second, it applied pressure on its close ally, Pakistan, to use its influence with the Taliban to prevent the latter from hosting anti-Chinese Uighur groups. This two-pronged policy in retrospect seems to have been relatively successful. Only a handful of ethnic Uighurs seem to have been trained on an individual basis in the terrorist camps of the IMU and

²⁴ Niklas Swanström, "Chinese Business Interests in Central Asia: A Quest for Dominance", *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 18 June 2003.

Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, whereas no Uighur militant group *per se* was given sanctuary in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

September 11 did alleviate some of Beijing's fears that Afghanistan would serve as a safe haven for Uighur militants but it worsened China's economic and political standing in the region. Economically, the increase of western and American aid and investments put China at a disadvantage. More importantly, America's military presence in the region was accepted only grudgingly by Beijing in the framework of the war against Al Qaeda and the Taliban. While China understood the deployment of US military in Uzbekistan on Afghanistan's border, the choice of Kyrgyzstan, a country not bordering Afghanistan but bordering China, for the location of the largest American base in Central Asia did not go down well. In fact, China seems to view American involvement in Central Asia in the context of American presence in South Korea and its support for Taiwan – i.e. in terms of a fear of encirclement by the US. Thus, China has lost its influence considerably.²⁵ The SCO failed to lure the Central Asian states, especially Uzbekistan, into an exclusive alliance with the Russian and Chinese. As soon as the opportunity arose, Tashkent, followed by Bishkek and even Dushanbe, developed strategic relations with the United States and granted America basing rights, in spite of clear Chinese and Russian disapproval.

Clearly, the American military presence so close to its own backyard is a cause for great discomfort for China. The fact that the People's Liberation Army conducted its first military exercises outside China in the PRC's history in Kyrgyzstan clearly indicates this. Yet, China's proximity to the region, its gradually developing economic strength and trade advantages, and not least its long-term approach to its relations with Central Asia are all factors that suggest China is a key actor in the region and will shape future regional security relations in Central Asia.

Relations among the Powers and with Greater Powers

The present dynamics of the security environment in Central Asia involves the United States, Russia and China as the chief external actors. Though Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and India all play complementary roles, that cannot be compared with the influence of the key powers. The dynamics of the interactions among these players is in constant flux. Few relationships can be categorised as clear-cut alliances or as exclusively antagonistic.

²⁵ Stephen Blank, "China's Defeats in Central Asia", *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 14 August 2002.

Alliances are primarily the Turkish-American, the Russian-Iranian, and the Sino-Pakistani relationships. However, neither of these is active to a considerable degree in Central Asia. Turkey and the United States have had military consultations on Central Asia and the Caucasus, and these meetings do provide for a mechanism to coordinate policy. They do share a common vision for Central Asia to develop into western-oriented, democratic societies and polities with market economies. However, America and Turkey often follow separate policies to safeguard their respective interests independently from one another in Central Asia. These separate interests often do coincide, and mutually reinforce each other. However, it is unclear whether the congregation of the roles of Turkey and the United States is larger than the sum of its parts. In practice, the two states coordinate policies towards security in the Caucasus, involving security cooperation with Georgia and Azerbaijan as well as the building of the East-West pipeline corridor. In Central Asia, both powers tended in the late 1990s to distance themselves from close involvement with security issues in the region. September 11 catapulted America into a central role in the security of the region, while Turkey's engagement with Central Asia has not changed significantly. In the Caucasus, Turkey and America need each other's support, while America seems to see less of a crucial role for Turkey in Central Asia.

As for the Russian-Iranian alliance, it is also based on common geopolitical interests: containing the spread of American military, political, economic, and not least cultural influence in the region. However, in practice, the alliance is mainly focused on certain sectors, such as armaments cooperation and trade, and containment of Turkey and to some extent western interests in the Caucasus. The level to which there is bilateral coordination of policies with respect to Central Asia is probably low. Russia is content with the present situation allowing a limited and predictable role for Iran in the region, and Iran too sees enough benefits from its relationship with Russia. The two also have points of disagreement, such as on the sectoral division of the Caspian Sea, where Russia abandoned Tehran's position of a condominium several years ago. Iran's increasing encirclement also prevents Tehran from playing too active a role in the region.

Finally, the Sino-Pakistani alliance seems to involve Central Asia mainly in the framework of trade. China is financing the bulk of the building of the Gwadar port, a \$260 million project. Plans to connect some of the trade between eastern parts of Central Asia (eastern Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) to Pakistan through Xinjiang are progressing, though the difficulties in expanding the Karakoram highway may prove to be a major

obstacle. In political and security terms, the two countries, however, follow independent policies towards Central Asia.

In sum, America, Russia, and China play such a large role in the security of Central Asia that their need to coordinate policies with, respectively, Turkey, Iran and Pakistan is limited. To qualify these three relationships as patron-vassal relationships would also be inadequate. The three lesser powers do occasionally play a complementary role to their respective larger ally. However, they are regional powers in their own right and pursue policies that occasionally clash with their would-be 'patrons'.

As for antagonistic relationships, the US-Iranian and Indo-Pakistani relationships stand out, and affect the interests of the respective powers in Central Asia. Iran is clearly the most affected, with American presence further circumscribing Tehran's freedom of movement in the region. America's greater influence over regional governments often translates explicitly and directly into a diminishing influence for Tehran. In a less obvious way, American interests are also affected by Iranian antagonism. In Central Asia, the lack of Iranian cooperation in dealing with the increasingly erratic nature of Turkmenistan's leadership is a case in point. So is the role of Iran in sponsoring Ismail Khan in Herat. India and Pakistan also affect each other's interests in Central Asia. In fact, the deadlock in relations between New Delhi and Islamabad prevents both parties from realising their respective interests in the region. Pakistan's ambitions to become a trade corridor to and from Central Asia would be much more attractive if such trade could reach India as well. But the Trans-Afghan Pipeline is unlikely to be realised as long as the logical destination for Turkmen gas, India, is not willing to accept a pipeline through Pakistan. Conversely, India's ambitions to play a larger role in the region will continue to be thwarted unless it can have geographic access to the region, which means access through Pakistan. India is unlikely to be able to satisfy its growing energy requirements through Central Asian resources without transiting Pakistan's territory, the only economically feasible transit route. Attempts to circumvent Pakistan through the prohibitively expensive underwater gas pipeline project from Iran, or the abortive idea to build a Russia-China-India pipeline over Tibet, all carry major economic, technical and security problems.²⁶ Relations with Central Asia are an area where India and Pakistan have a need for one another, and their continuing conflict is going to impede the possibilities of both in the region.

The remaining bilateral relations are all characterised by a mixture of cooperation and rivalry. Turkey and Iran, and Iran and Pakistan, are examples: the three states have been

²⁶ Aftab Kazi, "Is the Proposed Russia-China-India Pipeline Feasible?", *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 3 July 2002.

driving forces behind the attempt to build multilateral cooperation among themselves and with Central Asia through the ECO (Economic Cooperation Organisation), though at times they have differed strongly on security issues. Turkey and Iran have been since 1979 following completely divergent policies regarding their domestic state structure, with Turkey espousing a secular state and Iran an Islamic republic. Their policies have clashed in the Caucasus, with Turkey supporting Azerbaijan and Georgia, and Iran supporting Armenia; the two have never clashed openly, though Turkey responded strongly to Iranian threats of use of military force against Azerbaijan in the Summer of 2001 over a dispute in the Caspian Sea. The two states maintain, as they have for two centuries, a relationship of rivalry, but not enmity.

Iran and Pakistan have a history of close and uneventful relations, yet divergent policies on Afghanistan in the 1990s created mutual suspicion and a downturn in relations. Since the early 1990s, and after the advent of the Taliban and Pakistan's open support for the Taliban movement, Iran and Pakistan have been in a state approximating a cold war with one another. From 1995 to 2001, they were actively arming opposing sides in the Afghan civil war. Yet the overthrow of the Taliban and the change in Pakistan's policy allowed them to have a rapprochement of sorts, though Iran's developing ties with India are a major concern in Islamabad.²⁷ Pakistan's relations with Russia and the United States also deserve mention. With Russia, Pakistan has a history of hostility, partly due to the conflict in Afghanistan and Pakistan's leading role in supporting the Afghan resistance in the 1980s. However, hostility has continued through the 1990s, again with Afghanistan being the major point of contention. The aftermath of September 11 nevertheless allowed some improvement in relations, which both Islamabad and Moscow seem to desire.²⁸ Pakistan's relations with the United States are a broad and complicated topic. Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan has been considerably affected by America's military presence there. From having been extremely active in Afghan affairs for 20 years following the Soviet invasion, Pakistan has since September 11 kept a very low profile in Afghanistan. Accusations of support for the Taliban and/or Hekmatyar in the post-September 11 period have been voiced, though they have never been fully substantiated or linked to the government of Pakistan. The ethnic linkages across the border, however, imply a large concern among Pakistani Pashtuns with the conditions of Pashtuns across the border in Afghanistan. As the Pashtuns remain sidelined in the politics of

²⁷ Rizwan Zeb, "The Emerging Indo-Iranian Strategic Alliance and Pakistan", *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 12 February 2003.

²⁸ Zahid Anwar, "Identifying the Irritant in Pakistan-Russian Relations", *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 6 December 2002.

Afghanistan and as resentment with this grows in the Pashtun belt, this naturally also affects the Pakistani border areas.²⁹ Given that Pashtun resentment is being channeled into support for Hekmatyar and Taliban remnants, support for these forces also grows in Pakistan. Tensions between Islamabad and the Northern Alliance government, including the ransacking of the Pakistani Embassy in Kabul in July 2003 shows the volatility of this problem. On the whole, the Musharraf government has clearly delineated a policy of non-interference in Afghanistan, very much due to the debacle of the pro-Taliban policy and America's dominant position in Afghanistan, which leaves little role for Pakistan unless it challenges America's policies there, something Islamabad is clearly unwilling to do. Non-state actors in Pakistan, including radical religious parties, clearly have an agenda that differ from that of the government, posing significant trouble for the government, which has been unable to effectively constrain these elements. Still, Musharraf's government has taken the unprecedented step to deploy the Pakistani military in the semi-independent Federally Administered Tribal Areas, in order to ensure that the situation there does not spiral out of control.

Conclusions

The unstable nature of regional politics in Central Asia is caused partly by the dynamics of the region itself, and the multitude of internal challenges facing the region. These include disputed borders, a slow and stagnant economic transition, widespread poverty, the soaring problem of narcotics production and trafficking, the growth of political and religious extremism and terrorism, corruption and mismanagement. But a major factor in the security of the region is the diverging and fluid policies of regional and external powers towards the region. The number of regional powers with an interest in Central Asia is large, and their policies towards one another are often ambiguous and contradictory. This does not provide a framework for stable regional development, especially as there is a remarkable absence of mechanisms or institutions for regional cooperation in the region. While intra-regional mechanisms exist, and some institutions led by one or two regional powers have been created (such as the SCO), there is no mechanism or institution bringing together, even as a forum for discussion, all interested parties. These clearly include the six Central Asian states, but also at least seven foreign powers: the United States, Russia, China, Turkey, India, Iran, and Pakistan. While such a mechanism is difficult to envisage due to the occasional hostility among several of these

²⁹ Awamdost Pakhtunkhel, "Gulbuddin Hekmatyar: A Magnet of Discontent in Afghanistan", *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 12 March 2003.

powers, its absence allows for unwarranted fears and threat perceptions to go unchecked as little discussion takes place between many of the interested parties.

The roles played by powers such as China, Iran, Turkey and Pakistan in Central Asia will continue to depend, as they do today, partly on their domestic dynamics and problems; and partly on their relationships with one another and the great powers. Given the number of parties involved, the intricate puzzle that is the regional politics of Central Asia is likely to remain for the foreseeable future a web of complex, intricate, and sometimes contradictory relations.