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Flashman's Revenge: Central Asia after September 11

by Eugene B. Rumer

Key Points

The September 11 terrorist attacks have altered the geopolitical dynamics in Central Asia. The United States has emerged as the preeminent power in the region, causing other countries with interests in Central Asia to adjust to radically changed circumstances.

The war on terrorism and increasing instability in South and Southwest Asia call for a long-term U.S. military presence in Central Asia. Such a presence could also complement ongoing U.S. diplomatic relationships in the region.

In the long run, U.S. influence in the region will have to contend with the residual advantages that Russia, China, and Iran have by virtue of their geographic proximity, cultural ties, and trading patterns. The American ability to promote the security and stability of Central Asia will depend on the cooperation of and perhaps partnership with one or more of these states.

Central Asia will have to contend with poor governance, widespread corruption, and authoritarian regimes, with all the ensuing consequences for U.S. efforts to promote economic and political modernization. Balancing short-term stability against considerations of long-term political and economic reform will further complicate these efforts. The roles of partner, security manager, and advocate of reform are not easily reconciled in Central Asia. Still, the events of September 11 have left the United States with no alternative but to address these issues.

The terrorist attacks of September 11 swept away much of the uncertainty about Central Asia's importance to the international system and its relationship with the major powers, especially the United States. Indeed, the five states of the region—Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan—have become among the most important frontline states in America's war on terrorism. But the war did not alter many basic long-term trends in the region that will complicate U.S. activities as well as color Central Asian perceptions of the United States. Beyond the immediate demands of the war on terrorism, many fundamental questions remain unanswered: How important is Central Asia to the United States? What is the nature of U.S. interest in the region? What role should the United States play in Central Asia: security manager, hegemon, limited partner?

Defining the right role for the United States in Central Asia is no easy task. The region is geographically remote, unknown to much of the American public, and not easily accessible. It has few evident connections to the United States. U.S. interests in Central Asia—beyond the most basic ones such as peace, stability, and alleviation of human suffering, as well as those associated with terrorism—are not easy to identify in ways that the American people and their leaders would readily embrace. Moreover, the early record of U.S. engagement in Central Asia immediately after the breakup of the Soviet Union and through the 1990s was not a positive one, resulting in mutual disappointments in Washington and the Central Asian capitals. That record offers important lessons that will be considered below.

A History of Ambivalence

The events of September 11 and the onset of the U.S. campaign against terrorism have produced new winners and losers in and around Central Asia. The region itself has been the big winner; the world has focused attention on it to a degree unimaginable in the 1990s. The reason the world cares is different now than in the early 1990s, when Central Asia had nuclear weapons left over from the Soviet Union, or in the mid-1990s, when oil and gas were of great interest, or in the late 1990s, when nongovernmental organizations were campaigning for human rights. The world cares about Central Asia now for two reasons: its proximity to the South Asian tinderbox and the belated realization by Western political establishments that state failure anywhere in post-Soviet Central Asia carries significant risks for the West in its efforts to root out al Qaeda-style terrorist networks.

The new focus on Central Asia is a marked departure from the 1990s when U.S. and Western attitudes toward Central Asia were full of ambivalence about the nature of their interests there. Then, the United States could best be described as a bystander who was interested in the region but unwilling to get involved.

U.S. policy toward the former Soviet Union was the subject of keen personal interest on the part of two U.S. Presidents, several Secretaries of State, and scores of senior State and Defense Department officials. The record of the 1990s is rich in speeches by U.S. officials outlining policy toward and views on the challenges of post-Communist transition throughout the former Soviet Union.¹

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Yet it was not until 1997 that a senior U.S. official made a major programmatic statement on U.S. policy toward Central Asia.

In 1997, the Deputy Secretary of State, Strobe Talbott, the Clinton administration's chief architect of policy toward the former Soviet Union, gave a major address outlining the U.S. approach to Central Asia.² Ironically, the most authoritative Government statement about strategy for the region made quite clear that the United States had no compelling interest in the region, that Central Asia was not a region of critical strategic importance, and that, as a result, Washington effectively would have no strategy for dealing with Central Asia. The title of the speech was "Farewell to Flashman"—telling for its repudiation of the fictional Victorian-era character and the atavistic "Great Game" in which the swash-buckling adventurer had ostensibly played such an active role.

The United States, Talbott made clear, was not interested in planting its flag in Central Asia as a player in another Great Game. Hidden beneath the allegorical use of the fictional character was an important message to all those suspecting the United States of engaging in yet another land grab in the heart of Eurasia. The message was clear: the United States did not have a compelling interest in the region. It aimed not to become dominant in Central Asia, but to keep others from dominating it or competing for influence there. Unlike Europe or Asia, where a clearly defined U.S. footprint, maintained through a web of alliance relationships, is essential for U.S. interests, Central Asia was of secondary importance. No immediate U.S. presence was therefore required. U.S. interests would be just as well served if the region continued, in effect, as a no-man's land outside any other power's sphere of influence.

The worst imaginable turn of events from the standpoint of U.S. interests would be a geopolitical wrestling match between Russia, China, Iran, India, Pakistan, and Turkey for control of Central Asia. It would upset too many *other* interests that the United States might have *elsewhere*. The best approach for all parties involved, the Talbott speech suggested, would be to allow Central Asia to

become a great-power-free zone, to let it develop its natural resources and achieve stability through economic development. Hence, the unspoken but obvious conclusion: the United States would be willing to help with economic development and democratization, but most of all it would like to keep the region from becoming an American problem.

That attitude prevailed for the rest of the 1990s. By the end of the second Clinton administration, U.S. relations with Central Asia reached a difficult stage. The region's image in Western media had become tarnished by widespread reports of corruption, growing authoritarianism, and lack of progress on economic reform. Increasingly, the expert community came to view the "stans" not as the next generation of Asian tigers but as the next wave of failed states. The region's energy wealth—once thought to be the engine of its economic recovery—had come to be viewed as the source of

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rampant, debilitating corruption that one day would ensure it a permanent place among those resource-rich nations, such as Nigeria or Congo, that had failed to take advantage of their natural wealth. As a result, by the end of the 1990s, the U.S. strategic debate (to the extent that there was one) about Central Asia was left pondering whether it was "strategic quicksand" or a "mission too far."³

The change of administrations in Washington in 2001 initially seemed to trigger few changes in this attitude of general indifference. Prior to September 11, the Bush administration evidently had little time to revisit U.S. policy toward Central Asia. It did not figure prominently in reports of the Bush administration review of foreign policy priorities, which focused heavily on major powers—China, Russia, and India. Perhaps the sole exception was the region's energy potential, which the authors of the May 2001 report of the National

Energy Policy Development Group⁴ identified as a promising source of hydrocarbons that could help diversify the world's energy supply and lessen global dependence on the Persian Gulf.

The New Landscape

Since September 11, the United States has emerged as the principal power in Central Asian affairs. With the troop presence in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, the defeat of the Taliban government in Afghanistan, and all signs pointing to a long-term U.S. military presence in the region, the United States has become Central Asia's security manager. After 10 years of working to maintain its distance from Central Asia, to keep the region from becoming a U.S. responsibility and headache, the United States has landed squarely in the middle of it.

The U.S. arrival has been a definite gain for the Central Asian regimes. The Russian withdrawal from Central Asia in the early 1990s paradoxically made life difficult for area leaders, who were left without a regional security manager. Mutual suspicions and intraregional rivalries have effectively thwarted all hopes for region-wide cooperation and consolidation. Too weak to provide for their own security, the Central Asian states have had to contend with domestic insurgencies, cross-border incursions, and fears of militant Islam, as well as serious transnational threats, including drug- and gun-running. U.S. reluctance to fill the void for nearly 10 years had pushed the states of Central Asia toward uneasy relationships with Russia and China, both of which lacked the requisite muscle and will to become effective regional hegemony but were more than willing to throw their weight around and assert themselves at the expense of indigenous rulers. The U.S. arrival in Central Asia has changed that, displacing both Russia and China as the region's preeminent powers and giving its leaders room to maneuver vis-à-vis Moscow and Beijing.

China's Setback. In the near term, the most prominent victim of the new post-September 11 security order in Central Asia has been the Shanghai Forum and, by extension, China. Established in the mid-1990s by Russia, China, and the Central Asian states, the forum was intended to serve many purposes. For Russia and China, it was a chance to manage Central Asian security affairs and cross-border issues free of U.S. influence. The Shanghai Forum offered the Central Asian states the opportunity

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to sit at the same table with the two biggest players in the region, to harness their resources to help make Central Asia more secure against Afghanistan-based and domestic insurgents and militant Islamic movements, and to do all this while getting both Moscow and Beijing to guarantee their existing borders.

But since September 11 the United States has established itself as the main power broker in China's strategic backyard. Moreover, the United States has displaced China as Russia's principal interlocutor in Central Asian regional affairs and has pursued a new strategic relationship with India—China's long-term competitor. Finally, the United States has resumed a patron-client relationship with Pakistan—long a Chinese partner. None of this is to be taken lightly by the national security establishment in Beijing, especially given the tensions in relations with Washington in recent years.

In the near term, China's reversal of fortune in the heart of Eurasia has been breathtaking. A regional power broker prior to September 11, China now finds itself marginalized, displaced, and virtually alone,⁵ pondering the unenviable (for Beijing) option of playing second fiddle to the United States and a host of its newfound best friends. No matter how much China gains from the U.S. military campaign—and there can be little doubt that it has been a beneficiary of the campaign against the Taliban and the ensuing blow to operations of its own Uighur militants—U.S. preponderance in Central Asia must be a serious setback to the government that aspires to the role of the Asian superpower.

Russia's Gain. Russia's post-September 11 position in the Central Asian region is more bittersweet. Undoubtedly, few among Moscow's foreign policy and military elite cherish the sight of U.S. troops in their strategic backyard. U.S. military presence has been an awkward reality for Russia's national security establishment; after all, the Russian government granted the United States access to facilities that the Russian military still controlled in areas that were Soviet only a decade ago. At least, some must have thought resentfully, the United States had the decency to consult with Russia before moving into the region.

Still, the uncompromising public stance by President Vladimir Putin in support of U.S. actions has brought a number of important advantages to Moscow. The United States has tacitly acknowledged a certain Russian *droit de regard* in Central Asia. Russia's own military

campaign in Chechnya ceased being a barrier to Moscow's relations with the West and instead became something of a bridge on the strength of the argument that both Russia and the United States are fighting the same militant Islamic enemy. Russian claims of Osama bin Laden's complicity in Chechnya's separatist (Moscow prefers to call it *terrorist*) movement have also been perceived in a different light since September 11. The issue of violations of human rights in Chechnya has been effectively relegated to the back burner in favor of the more immediate concerns about terrorism and other issues in relations with Washington.

U.S. military presence in Central Asia will benefit Russian security interests, no matter how difficult it will be for the Russian elite to come to terms with this turn of events

Furthermore, Russia got a major post-September 11 boost in its standing in relation to China, whose growing economic, military, and strategic might had become a source of increasingly vocal concern among Russian politicians and foreign policy specialists.⁶ New regard for Russia in Washington, as well as prospects for continuing improvements in U.S.-Russian relations, must send an important signal to Beijing, further contributing to its sudden sense of isolation.

In Central Asia proper, the new spirit of accord and cooperation in U.S.-Russian relations has had important implications as well. Central Asian potentates have learned well how to play Washington and Moscow against each other. The fact that there is now less light between respective Russian and U.S. positions on a number of important issues leaves Central Asian governments less room to maneuver and exploit their differences, whether in regard to pipeline routes, Caspian boundaries, or security ties to rogue regimes.

In practical terms, Russia can do little other than offer the United States unimpeded access to Central Asia. It has no military muscle that would have allowed it to play a significant role in the Afghanistan military campaign in the air or on the ground. In the

short and medium terms, the best that Moscow can do in support of counterterrorism is to provide unfettered access to and from the Central Asian region, share intelligence, and do all it can (including accepting international aid) to put its own house in order—to secure its nuclear weapons, material, and expertise, as well as its chemical weapons and biological warfare capabilities.

The nature of Russia's contribution to the war in Afghanistan indicates its likely role in the region beyond the near term. Geography will ensure its continuing importance to the region for years to come, if only as an outlet for oil and gas. Alternatives to existing shipping routes will take years to build, and even then they will complement, rather than substitute for, the routes currently crossing Russia.

In addition to its geographic proximity, Russia is bound to stay involved in Central Asia for a long time because of its residual ethnic population there. Despite considerable emigration from Central Asia, the region is still home to some 8 million ethnic Russians (the largest populations residing in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan—5.1 million and 1.4 million, respectively).⁷ Although the fate of ethnic Russians abroad is unlikely to be as important a theme in domestic politics as some politicians have claimed, no government in Moscow will be in a position to ignore this issue, especially in the event of regional destabilization.

But Russia's military weakness, lack of power projection capabilities, and limited resources (already under multiple domestic demands) will mean that it is not a realistic candidate to become the region's security manager or hegemon for years to come, regardless of the future of U.S.-Russian relations. Even so, given the congruence of U.S. and Russian interests in combating radical Islamic terrorism, Moscow's military weakness means that U.S. military presence in Central Asia will benefit Russian security interests, no matter how difficult it will be for the Russian elite to come to terms with this turn of events.

Iran's Loss. By contrast, Iran—Russia's long-time partner in Central Asia and ally in the anti-Taliban cause—has found itself among the losers in the region's post-September 11 realignment. Long the pivotal member of the anti-Taliban coalition and loyal backer of the Northern Alliance, Iran has been squeezed out of its key foothold in Central Asia—Tajikistan—with which it shares strong common cultural, linguistic, and ethnic ties.

The speed and eagerness with which the Tajik government accepted U.S. military presence on its soil must have seemed the ultimate betrayal to Tehran. The opening of Turkmen airspace to American overflights (even if officially only for humanitarian purposes) and the deployment of allied troops to Central Asia must have underscored to Iran's political establishment that in a confrontation with the United States, it would now need to worry about U.S. presence not only in the Persian Gulf but also in the north—Central Asia and the Caucasus—to say nothing of the east and south—Afghanistan and Pakistan.

There can be little doubt that Iran, like China, has been an immediate beneficiary of the military defeat of the Taliban, with which Tehran had had a very tense relationship. But the aftermath of the military campaign and the de facto establishment of a U.S. protectorate in Afghanistan must have been a blow to Iranian interests, adding to a growing sense of encirclement by the United States.

In the immediate post-September 11 period and the active phase of the military campaign in Afghanistan, U.S.-Iranian relations showed glimmers of hope. Both the United States and Iran had long been opposed to the Taliban regime. Iran's expression of sympathy for the United States after the tragedy of September 11, pledge of cooperation in delivering essential humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, and offer of assistance to U.S. airmen in cases of emergency had further fueled those hopes. In the absence of a common enemy, however, the United States and Iran found themselves on opposite sides of the Afghan divide. Iranian attempts to play factional politics in Afghanistan threatened the stability of the fragile U.S.-backed Hamid Karzai government.

In addition, Iranian rejection of the invitation by Washington to join the war on terrorism manifested itself in continuing Iranian support for terrorist attacks against Israel, most notably, as suggested in the so-called Karine-A incident of January 2002, in which Israel Defense Forces intercepted a major clandestine shipment of Iranian-supplied weapons and munitions to the Palestinian Authority.⁸ The episode sent a powerful signal that expectations of an imminent U.S.-Iranian thaw in the aftermath of September 11 had been premature indeed. This in turn was a blow to Iranian influence in Central Asia, where a new sheriff—the United States—was in charge.

An Unavoidable Responsibility

The emergence of the United States in a new critical role in Central Asian security affairs and the rapid displacement by the United States of all other major players from the Central Asian landscape prompt the following questions: Is this an opportunity to be feared? Is Central Asia a “mission too far” for the United States? And, again, what is the nature of U.S. interest there?

There can be little doubt that, in the short and medium term, the United States is committed to maintaining its military, political, and economic presence in Central Asia. The United States may adjust the level of its military presence in the region consistent with the operational requirements of the mission of

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securing Afghanistan, as well as other requirements associated with combating terrorism, but support for Afghanistan and prosecution of counterterrorism missions are the interests that will determine U.S. presence in the region.⁹

Moreover, the pledge made by President George Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell—“the United States will not abandon the people of Afghanistan”¹⁰—leaves no doubt that the U.S. presence in Afghanistan is a long-term proposition, one that General Tommy Franks has recently compared to the American presence in Korea. Given Afghanistan's landlocked position and U.S. dependence on such volatile neighbors as Pakistan or Iran for access, Central Asia is bound to play a critical role in counterterrorism strategy. Pakistan's volatility and the current state and uncertain future of U.S.-Iranian relations underscore the importance of Central Asia as an alternative staging area for operations by the Armed Forces in Afghanistan.

In the aftermath of September 11, though, it would be shortsighted to define U.S. interests in Central Asia merely in terms of operational counterterrorism requirements and ongoing

military operations in Afghanistan. The tragedy of the terrorist attacks has given a new and very different meaning to the notion first articulated by U.S. policymakers in the 1990s and enunciated by Strobe Talbott in 1997—the notion that U.S. interests in Central Asia will be adequately served by the absence of geopolitical competition in the region, by keeping the region free of the Great Game. In the benign post-Cold War atmosphere of the 1990s, it was natural to interpret this simply as a formula of U.S. disinterest and desire to avoid a new entanglement. As long as Central Asia was free of big power competition, the United States had little interest in it.

It is clear in retrospect that other powers took a different view. Russia, China, Iran, and Pakistan did not stay out of Central Asia or Afghanistan. The latter, in fact, became the hotbed of factional and big power rivalries with (it seemed at the time) only the United States not getting involved directly but admonishing everyone else from the sidelines to stay out. Factional warfare, driven by Afghanistan's internal divisions and fueled by big power meddling in its internal affairs, consumed the country in the 1990s, eventually raising the specter of region-wide instability. Yet not one single power involved in regional competition and Afghanistan's internecine warfare proved up to the task of displacing all others and assuming the role of Central Asia's security manager.

In retrospect, the 1990s notion of making Central Asia free of the Great Game and keeping it stable by limiting U.S. presence was unrealistic. Since September 11, the opposite appears to be unavoidably true: that the way to keep Central Asia stable and free of great power competition is by filling the security vacuum that allowed the competition to develop in the first place.

An Enduring Challenge

Whether the United States is prepared to take on the challenge of maintaining security and stability in Central Asia is virtually moot, since in the eyes of most powers interested in the region, it already has done so. U.S. actions and statements in this regard have left little room for doubt. Aside from the military deployment to the region, one of the most telling signs of U.S. commitment to Central Asia appeared in the bilateral U.S.-Uzbek declaration in March

2002, in which the United States affirmed that “it would regard with grave concern any external threat to the security and territorial integrity of the Republic of Uzbekistan.”¹¹

Such an undertaking will involve a substantial commitment of political and financial resources from the United States, well in excess of the billions of dollars spent to date in Central Asia.¹² There is no guarantee that the United States will eventually prove up to the task, which it appears to have taken on in the aftermath of September 11. The biggest challenge appears to be the long-term, almost open-ended nature of the commitment required—along the lines of the commitment the United States has made to countries such as Turkey or Pakistan. Far more than money for acquisition of military capabilities and bailouts of insolvent local regimes, the United States would have to take on the challenge of the region’s modernization and integration in the international community and economy.

Central Asia is vast, poor, corrupt, and polluted.¹³ It suffers from backwardness and long-term neglect as well as from equally long-term isolation from the outside world.¹⁴ The majority of the region’s inhabitants have seen their fortunes decline in the first decade since independence.¹⁵ Overcoming these obstacles will be difficult and expensive, will require a long-term commitment, and is not guaranteed success.

Yet despite long-running decline and numerous obstacles to improvement in the region, several aspects of the Central Asian situation suggest that conditions in the region are not as precarious as they appear to be in neighboring Afghanistan. Although the region’s population is predominantly Muslim, Central Asia has no tradition of militant Islam. Its governments have been able to maintain a considerable degree of internal stability, albeit by nondemocratic, often oppressive means. Regional security has been greatly enhanced by the presence of U.S. troops and—more importantly—the defeat of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and eradication of militant Islamic movements that had made forays across the border from their Taliban-sponsored Afghan sanctuaries.

The relative stability of Central Asia, combined with its multitude of needs, makes identifying some of the more deserving targets for U.S. assistance a rather straightforward task. From helping local and national governments improve water resource management

and basic infrastructure projects to building and training national military institutions, the list is long and—ironically—familiar. It is virtually the same list that foreign governments and international organizations from the World Bank to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization offered the newly independent Central Asian nations or contemplated offering a decade ago. Ten years into independence, the types of things Central Asia needs are largely the same as they were when the Soviet Union was collapsing, except the needs have become ever more dire.

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In spite of this lamentable continuity in Central Asia, the situation in the region is far from being a mere replica of the early post-independence phase. The five Central Asian states have firmly established their independence, which was far from being taken for granted a decade ago. The worst of post-independence strife has passed, most notably Tajikistan’s civil war. Local elites have consolidated their hold on political power and economic resources. The five Central Asian countries have established and tested relationships with other nations. And last, but certainly not least, whereas the nature of U.S. interest in the states had seemed uncertain only a decade ago, the events of September 11 erased any doubts that the United States is committed to staying in the region for the long run.

But Central Asia’s status quo is at least as much of a problem as it is an opening to a potential solution to the region’s problems. Its regimes are entrenched and have determinedly suppressed all political opposition despite countless appeals from the United States and other nations to respect the most basic human rights. Political succession is one of the greatest challenges facing all regimes in Central Asia, where democracy has steadily retrenched since the days of *perestroika* and *glasnost*.

There is no dividing line between power and property anywhere in the region. In fact, as evidenced by numerous corruption scandals and Western investigations involving prominent Central Asian personalities, access to political power is the most reliable pathway to wealth and property.¹⁶ The result of this has been accumulation of wealth by local political elites and widespread impoverishment of the general population. Thus, the very sources of Central Asian stability in the near term are the obstacles to political and economic modernization and stability in the long term.

This situation, not unique to Central Asia, poses a difficult challenge for the United States, the challenge of harnessing the near-term forces of stability in the name of long-term change. It is in effect the same challenge U.S. policymakers have faced in Central Asia since 1991, although the stakes clearly have been altered in the wake of the terrorist attacks.

Toward a New Strategy

Given those stakes and the enduring nature of Central Asian resistance to political and economic modernization, the only sensible option for U.S. policy is to work with the region’s ruling regimes but simultaneously to seek gradual change in their domestic political and economic environments. The watchwords in this context should be *continuity* and *gradualism*.

In the area of economic assistance, the emphasis should be on alleviating widespread poverty and eliminating potential sources of political destabilization, such as high unemployment in rural and urban areas. Given the region’s need for major improvements in basic infrastructure, the water supply system, and other labor-intensive projects, U.S. and other international assistance could go a long way toward providing much-needed jobs and income, defusing political tensions, and improving intraregional cooperation.

Domestic politics represents a far more challenging target for U.S. assistance. The entire experience of the 1990s in Central Asia suggests that the region’s political elites have not embraced the basic concepts of democracy and have only paid lip service—at best—to admonitions from Western leaders and international organization. Thus, the real challenge—given the inevitability of political succession throughout Central Asia—is to make sure that succession does not lead to



destabilization, as befell Tajikistan in the early 1990s. In the absence of stable domestic institutions and in the presence of personality-based regimes, whose chief aim has been to avoid political succession, political succession is the biggest long-term threat to regional stability.

Here too, U.S. policy options are quite limited and could involve tradeoffs between stability and commitment to democratic principles. In some countries with troubled democratic traditions, such as Turkey, Pakistan, and South Korea, the military has on occasion taken an active role in domestic politics, claiming to be the last pillar of stability and savior of the nation. Regardless of the merits of those claims, the five Central Asian states do not yet have even that option, however objectionable it may appear. Their militaries are new, small, and have uncertain traditions, given their short histories of independence and statehood, as well as the long-standing Soviet practice of restricting the number of Muslim minorities in

the officer corps. U.S. security assistance and military-to-military contacts could promote the development of professional military institutions in Central Asia. However, it is conceivable that in a future crisis in a Central Asian country, the military could indeed become the last pillar of stability, triggering its intervention in domestic politics.

Need for a Diplomatic Strategy. The new—deeper and wider—U.S. footprint in Central Asia also calls for a new diplomatic strategy for the region. The burden of Central Asia is certain to be such that participation by and cooperation from other powers with interests in the region will be required.

Given the regional players involved, forging a diplomatic consensus around Central Asia will clearly be no easy task. The short list includes China, Iran, and Russia. Of these, Russia has been by far the most cooperative partner in U.S. post-September 11 efforts in Central Asia. Each nation has a huge stake in regional stability, despite deep-seated resentment and fears of

supposed U.S. hegemony in what each considers its backyard. Thus, these states share an important interest with the United States. However, their interest in Central Asian stability does not outweigh fears of U.S. preponderance. Resolving these tensions and forging a cooperative regime will require a deliberate and determined effort, along with compromise on the part of the United States to communicate the nature of its interests and presence in Central Asia and to convince the Central Asian states of the non-threatening nature of American intentions.

The Tyranny of Geography. Central Asia's most important neighbors—China, Iran, and Russia—albeit squeezed by the arrival of the United States in the short run, are bound to play an important role in the region if only because of geography.

Russia remains an important outlet for the region's commerce and a source of important subsidies through favorable trade terms.¹⁷

China, too, will continue to play a growing role in Central Asia. Its setback after September 11 is a short- to medium-term phenomenon. It shares a long border with Kazakhstan. Quite apart even from the much-discussed oil pipeline project from Kazakhstan to China—which after years in limbo is facing daunting odds—China has long been Central Asia’s key trading partner.¹⁸ Aside from political and security considerations, Central Asia is of particular importance to Beijing because of its proximity to Xinjiang and its ability to serve as a key source of raw materials, steel, cement, fertilizers, and heavy machinery for that critical region.¹⁹ Quite clearly, economic development has been key to Beijing’s hopes of maintaining political stability there. That in turn underscores the importance of Central Asia for China.

Conversely, China is immensely important for its two major Central Asian neighbors, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. But China’s gravitational pull will be a matter of trade and economic relationships spread out over decades. In the short term, trade and even geographic proximity are no match for U.S. military muscle and Russia’s residual military presence in the region. In the long run, Russia’s and China’s staying power should not be underestimated.

Seeking a partnership for Eurasian stability with both Russia and China would require a major adjustment in current U.S. thinking about both countries. Neither may be ready at the current stage for such a partnership, as they are still adjusting to the fallout from September 11 and the U.S. response to it. Whether one or both of these countries will ultimately join the United States in this effort to bring long-term stability to Eurasia is likely to be determined by the overall quality and direction of U.S. relationships with each of them. But the prospect of partnership in securing and consolidating the gains of the early phase of the counterterrorism campaign in Central Asia should be an important consideration in the U.S. debate about relations with Russia and China.

Iran poses an equally difficult challenge in the context of U.S. presence in Central Asia. Its geographic proximity, ethnic and cultural ties to the region, geopolitical ambitions, and potential role as an export route and market for oil and gas virtually ensure it an important role in Central Asia’s long-term scenarios. Although its military capabilities are unlikely to pose a challenge to U.S. interests, it is uniquely well positioned to meddle in regional affairs and undermine U.S. influence there.

Thus, seeking a modus vivendi with Iran in Central Asia is another key element of U.S. diplomatic strategy for the region.

At the same time, there is no question that the United States enjoys considerable leverage vis-à-vis Iran in Central Asia. Militarily, economically, and politically, its position is far superior to that of Iran—a circumstance unlikely to be lost on Iranian political leaders.

Central Asia’s most important neighbors—China, Iran, and Russia—are bound to play an important role in the region if only because of geography

Upon rational consideration, a modus vivendi with the United States in Central Asia could become an important objective for the Iranian government. It would be counterproductive therefore to relegate Iran a priori to the category of a U.S. adversary in Central Asia.

The biggest challenge that the United States is likely to confront in Central Asia will be the nature of Central Asian regimes and their resistance to modernization. Stated bluntly, the United States, through its political involvement and military presence, runs the risk of becoming the security guarantor of Central Asia’s regimes—regimes that are retrograde, oppressive, and resistant to political and economic reforms urged upon them by the United States and much of the rest of the international community since their independence from the Soviet Union. Based on experience, the odds that the United States will be able to use its military presence and political influence as leverage to advance economic and political reforms in Central Asia are not encouraging. Hence, the danger that regional

regimes will use their role in fighting terrorism as an excuse to resist change is very real. However, the United States simply has not been given an alternative to maintaining a long-term presence in Central Asia and taking on the role of security manager.

In the future, a lack of progress in U.S. efforts to modernize Central Asia should not be seen necessarily as a failure of U.S. policy. It is important to recognize the limits of U.S. resources and influence. It is also important to consider the alternatives and the fact that U.S. presence has already contributed greatly to regional stability and security and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

Notes

¹ For the online archive of Clinton administration statements, see <<http://clinton.archives.gov/welcome/welcome.html>> and <<http://www.state.gov/index.html>>.

² Address by Strobe Talbott on July 21, 1997. See <<http://www.state.gov/www/regions/nis/970721talbott.html>>.

³ See, for example, Kenneth Weisbrode, “Central Eurasia: Prize or Quicksand? Contending Views of Instability in Karabagh, Ferghana and Afghanistan,” International Institute for Strategic Studies, Adelphi Paper 338; and Richard D. Sokolsky and Tanya Charlick-Paley, “NATO and Caspian Security: A Mission Too Far?” (Washington, DC: RAND, MR-1074-AF, 1999).

⁴ See <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/energy/Chapter8.pdf>>.

⁵ China’s post-September 11 isolation in Central Asia is underscored by the unprecedented new positive relations between Russia and the United States, which were unaffected even by U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty—a move that is more likely to affect the U.S.-Chinese strategic balance than U.S.-Russian strategic balance.

⁶ See, for example, materials from discussion on China and the future of Russian-Chinese relations held by the leading Russian foreign and defense policy organization Council for Foreign and Defense Policy, accessed at <<http://www.svpov.ru/yuka/856.shtml>>.

⁷ Calculated on the basis of the Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook 2001*, accessed at <<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html>>.

⁸ See Robert Satloff, “The Peace Process at Sea: The Karine-A Affair and the War On Terrorism,” *National Interest* (Spring 2002), accessed at <<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/satloff/satloff-peace.htm>>; James Bennet, “Seized Arms Would Have Vastly Extended Arafat Arsenal,” *The New York Times*, January 12, 2002; and “President Bush, Prime Minister Sharon

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Discuss Middle East," February 7, 2002, accessed at <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/02/200207-15.html>>.

⁹ See remarks by Tommy Franks in August 2002 that U.S. troops will remain in Afghanistan "indefinitely," accessed at <<http://www.usatoday.com/usatoday/20020826/4391202s.htm>>.

¹⁰ Colin L. Powell, remarks at International Conference for Reconstruction Assistance to Afghanistan, Tokyo, Japan, January 21, 2002, accessed at <<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2002/7366.htm>>.

¹¹ United States-Uzbekistan Declaration on the Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Framework, March 12, 2002, accessed at <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2002/8736.htm>>.

¹² In fiscal year 2002, assistance funding to the five Central Asian states was estimated at \$442 million. Since 1992, U.S. Government assistance to Kazakhstan has amounted to roughly \$1 billion; Uzbekistan, \$600 million; Turkmenistan, \$250 million; Tajikistan, \$475 million; and Kyrgyzstan, \$725 million. Compiled from Department of State data, it can be accessed at <<http://www.state.gov/eur/rls/fs/11032pf.htm>>, <<http://www.state.gov/eur/rls/fs/11038pf.htm>>, <<http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/fs/11035pf.htm>>, <<http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/fs/11037pf.htm>>, and <<http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/fs/11033pf.htm>>.

¹³ Information on the internal situation in Central Asia is widely available to the general public. For example, the International Crisis Group has published a series of reports describing conditions in Central Asian countries and highlighting their implications for their stability: "Central Asia: Water and Conflict, May 2002," accessed at <<http://www.intl-crisis-group.org/projects/showreport.cfm?reportid=668>>; "Central Asia: Border Disputes and Conflict Potential, April 2002," accessed at <<http://www.intl-crisis-group.org/projects/showreport.cfm?reportid=606>>. See also "Nations in Transit," published annually by Freedom House, accessed at <<http://www.freedomhouse.org/research/nattransit.htm>>.

¹⁴ In December 2001 testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, A. Elizabeth Jones, summarized the past 2 centuries of Central Asian history as a transition from "squabbling and despotic warlords" to Russian colonization to Soviet-imposed isolation. Testimony accessed at <<http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2001/11299pf.htm>>.

¹⁵ All five Central Asian states have seen major increases in infant mortality, a basic indicator of a country's health, since their independence and are comparable to some of the least developed countries in Africa. See the Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook 2001*, accessed at <<http://www.cia.gov/cia/>

>; and *Demograficheskiy Yezhgodnik SSSR 1990* (USSR Demographic Yearbook 1990) (Moscow: Goskomstat, 1990).

¹⁶ Seymour M. Hersh, "The Price Of Oil," *The New Yorker*, July 9, 2001.

¹⁷ For example, in 1999—the latest year available—Russia was Kazakhstan's biggest trading partner, with 20 percent of Kazakhstan's exports and 37 percent of its imports (International Monetary Fund, *Republic of Kazakhstan: Selected Issues and Statistical Appendix*, January 2001). In 1999, Russia accounted for 57 percent of Uzbekistan's imports and 41 percent of its exports (International Monetary Fund, *Republic of Uzbekistan: Recent Economic Developments*, March 2000).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Such trade data is sporadic at best, but in 1996, for example, Kazakhstan is reported to have accounted for 43 percent of Xinjiang imports, Kyrgyzstan, only 14 percent. See *Central Asia and the New Global Economy* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), 220.

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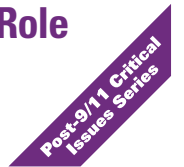
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