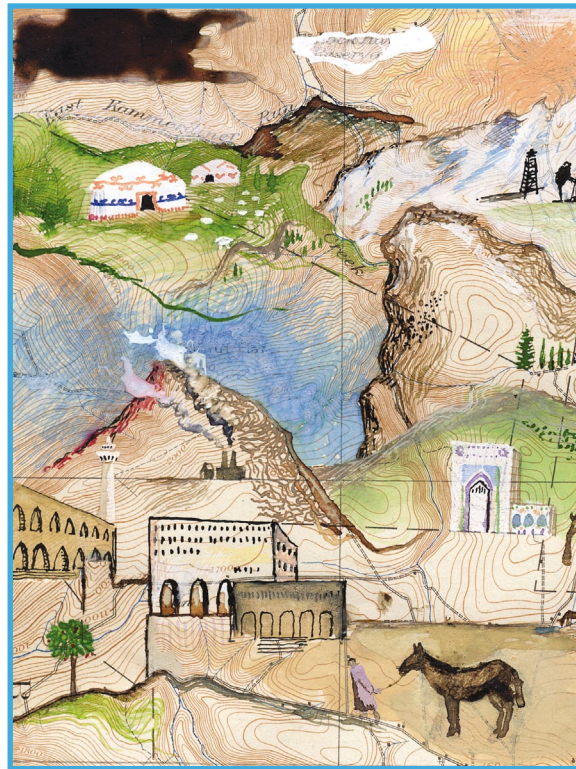


THE U.S. REDRAWNS THE MAP



IN SETTING UP MILITARY BASES IN CENTRAL ASIA, THE U.S. REDREW THE GEOPOLITICAL MAP OF THE REGION. HERE ARE THE MAJOR CHALLENGES THE U.S. NOW FACES.

By DR. SVANTE E. CORNELL

In October 2002, the Bush administration took a decision that will likely be recalled as a landmark in Central Asian history. By deciding to set up military bases in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the U.S. redrew the geopolitical map of the region. The ever-evolving and shifting distribution of power and influence among the states surrounding Central Asia — and the regional states themselves — was fundamentally altered by the serious commitment of the United States to a military and security engagement in the region, even though the length of this commitment was not announced. America's advent on the scene restored a cer-

tain freedom of movement to Central Asian states that were becoming increasingly constrained in an environment dominated by Russia and China.

Eighteen months later, America is firmly entrenched in Central Asia. It has considerable military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and a ubiquitous military presence in Afghanistan; it upgraded political and security links with all states in the region save isolated Turkmenistan, and has a relationship amounting to a strategic partnership with Uzbekistan, the most important regional state. The states hosting U.S. troops are generally happy to see an increased American presence in Central Asia. Some larger neighbors think otherwise, but have neither the intention nor the capacity to dislodge the United States from the region. There is no great danger to U.S. troops or citizens in the region comparable to that in the Arab world or even Southeast Asia, and anti-Americanism is arguably less prevalent.

This means that in practice, the U.S. is in Central Asia for at least as long as it wants to be. It does not mean that the U.S. will maintain large military bases in Central Asia for decades, or automatically get drawn into regional troubles. But it is clear that the U.S. will remain engaged in the security affairs of Central Asia for the foreseeable future to a larger extent than it was at any time before Sept. 11, 2001, and its policies will concomitantly contribute to determining the future of Central Asia to a considerable extent. This raises the question: What major challenges can the U.S. expect to face while dealing with Central Asia as a region, and the individual Central Asian states, in the coming years?

Six major challenges will be dealt with here: the posture that America can expect from regional actors including Russia, China and Iran; the threat of radical

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Islam in Central Asia; the burgeoning illegal drugs trade; the challenge of guiding Central Asian states closer to and not farther away from open societies and democratic reform; the special case of Turkmenistan; and the challenge of relaunching regional trade and development.

Regional Actors

America's presence in Central Asia may have been welcomed by the local states, but most regional powers were less thrilled. Russian President Vladimir Putin may have voiced no objection publicly, but he spent energies after Sept. 11, 2001, trying to convince Central Asian presidents not to allow the U.S. in. Putin was, however, shrewd enough to understand the futility of the enterprise and abandon it without losing face. China is also, though less acutely, feeling alarmed by American encirclement. The American military presence in Kyrgyzstan — which does not share a border with troubled Afghanistan, the stated reason for the base, but does share a long one with China — is reminiscent to some Chinese observers of the Korean and Vietnam Wars, during which U.S. troops massed on the borders of the People's Republic.

In apparent reaction, for the first time since 1949, the People's Liberation Army held exercises on another state's territory in 2002. Of the 13 countries that China borders, the exercises were held in Kyrgyzstan. Meanwhile, Russia, also in 2002, opened a military base in Kant, Kyrgyzstan, just miles from the American base, in a clear signal that it, too, remains a player in Central Asia.

In fact, China and Russia had worked hard to exert a dominant influence over Central Asia, using the Shanghai Cooperation Organization for this purpose. Though local states had a modicum of interest in the establishment of a cooperative umbrella organization for the resolution of disputes in Central Asia, by 2001 the SCO was effectively being used to force the Central Asians to follow Beijing's and Moscow's foreign policy priorities, including so-called "multilateralism" — shorthand for a world not dominated by America. As local states found no concrete support

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from the West for their acute security concerns, including Islamic radical incursions, they cautiously sought the support of Moscow and Beijing. The way in which, later, they ostentatiously ignored the SCO — whose main aim was counterterrorism — and opted for bilateral relations with the U.S. points to their apprehensions about Sino-Russian policies.

Iran, for obvious reasons, is feeling extremely threatened as it sees American military forces that could potentially be used against it surrounding it from all sides, in Georgia, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and likely soon in Iraq, in addition to the earlier bases in Turkey, Oman, and the Persian Gulf.

As the war against the Taliban and al-Qaida winds down, and the U.S. bases are no longer as clearly motivated by the war on terrorism, the U.S. is certain to face increasing pressure — whether explicit, implicit or perhaps even covert — from Russia, China and Iran to withdraw or to downscale its presence. Whether in tandem or individually, China and Russia are likely to take initiatives to regain some of the ground they lost in the region since the fall of 2001. Current initiatives such as Russia's Kant Air Base suggest this process may already have begun. America should expect implicit tests of its determination to remain in Central Asia; any lack of attention to the region will likely be exploited by other powers to try to increase their own presence, perhaps at the expense of American interests there.

Radical Islam

Movements espousing a radical and millenarian version of Islam have made inroads in Central Asia since the early 1990s, but their influence remains very limited. Central Asian Islam is very different from Arab Islam, especially the Gulf variety, and Central Asians have a centuries-long track record of living peacefully with other religions and allowing for a plurality of views within Islam. Yet a set of factors has enabled radical movements to prosper there. Islam suffered heavily from the Soviet experience; young and middle-aged people have a much weaker knowledge of

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the tenets of the religion than their parents due to forced Soviet atheism. This contributed considerably to the secularization of society, but also created a moral and spiritual vacuum among the youth. Knowing their own religious traditions less well, youngsters in Central Asia are particularly susceptible to the belief that views imported from the Arab world are the *true* Islam, especially as indigenous religious institutions are weak.

Poverty and increasing social and income gaps, together with official corruption, also play into the hands of radical groups, whose message is not only a religious one but also one of social justice and equality, stressing the maintenance of law and order and just rulers. In addition, the large financial sums available from the Gulf region to radical organizations help them propagate their views effectively. Finally, the absence of legal alternatives to political activity independent of the governments may be pushing increasing numbers of politically active citizens toward radical movements.

Rising radical Islamism brings with it increasing anti-American sentiments. These views are marginal today, but need to be watched, analyzed and preempted by regional governments with U.S. support and assistance. Central Asia is an area where America still has a positive connotation for most people; the U.S. needs to ensure this remains the case through its policies toward the various regimes in the region. Strengthening and supporting moderate Islamic institutions in the Central Asian societies is one example of how the U.S. could not only curtail possible extremism and terrorism, but also gain popularity in a region where radical groups are feared and loathed by a majority of the population.

Suppressing the Drug Trade

The trade in narcotics, especially opium and its main derivative, heroin, is perhaps the area in which the U.S. has failed most blatantly since September 2001. For all its flaws, the Taliban regime in Afghanistan eradicated almost all opium production

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in the part of the country it controlled, but the new U.S.-backed Karzai administration has done very little to prevent the boom in opium cultivation and heroin production that has taken place since the Taliban regime fell. In fact, parts of the government are likely deeply involved in the trade. And the drug trade is no peripheral issue. Central Asia, with the weakest and most corruptible states surrounding Afghanistan, has rapidly become the main trafficking route for Afghan heroin, eclipsing even Iran. In a region with little economic activity, save for oil, gas, and cotton, the drug trade plays an important role. The region is impoverished, and the profits of the drug trade are so enormous that it infiltrates governments and society as a whole.

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trafficking routes, affects public health conditions, opening the way for severe diseases including HIV/AIDS; creates social conflict; fuels corruption; finances extremism and terrorism; and even plays a role in civil wars. The armed incursions by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in 1999 and 2000, which affected Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan significantly, was almost certainly in great part related

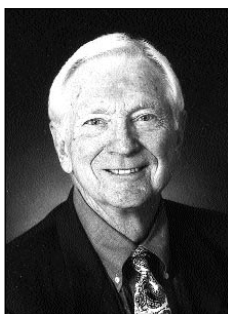
Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are by now candidates for the label of “narco-states” — countries where the drug trade has infiltrated the bureaucracy and political elite to such an extent that it actually controls part of the state. Over a third of Tajikistan’s GNP is considered to be drug-related. Drug consumption, which follows the

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to the IMU's role in the drug trade, and its need to open up new trafficking routes.

In Afghanistan, the return to a drug economy directly conflicts with the rebuilding of the state and its central authority. Drug production and trafficking depend on instability and weak central governments. The stronger the state is, and the more efficient the police and system of justice are, the worse the environment for criminal networks. These networks therefore have an interest in keeping whole areas outside government control, or in other ways making sure the government does not disturb their criminal operations. The consequences are deteriorating law and order, exacerbating an already difficult situation for the local population, by discouraging investment, which decrease economic production and increases poverty. This situation forces the population to participate in the production and/or smuggling of narcotics. It is hence imperative for the U.S. to tackle the drug trade, both its roots in Afghanistan and its role and salience in the politics and economy of Central Asian transit states.

Democratic Reform

Ever since the mid-1990s, the Central Asian region has been notorious for backtracking on democratic development. While Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have been exposed more than others for their shortcomings and human rights abuses, a functional opposition and free media are suffering in the entire region. Even Kyrgyzstan, which once tried to portray itself as an island of democracy in Central Asia, has reverted to governmental behavior very similar to that of its autocratic neighbors. Differences between the Central Asian governments are not in the nature of their rule, but in degree and in their capacity to enforce that rule.

So far, America's closer ties with the regional states have done little to improve this situation. Issues of human rights and democratization have clearly dropped in priority in American foreign policy, though they are constantly mentioned in dealings with the region at all levels. In fact, the Central Asian gov-

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ernments have tried to exploit the war on terrorism to eliminate, neutralize and discredit their political opponents. The "consolidating autocracies," as Freedom House calls some of the Central Asian states, risk further exacerbating social tensions and political instability by pushing opposition to the fringes of the political

scene, playing into the hands of radical Islamic and other violent forces.

In the past, western and American governments rightly accused Central Asian governments of undemocratic policies and human rights abuses, and threatened sanctions when matters grew worse. This policy produced little result, as it was very much a monologue rather than a dialogue. The Central Asian governments felt hectored and alienated by the West, and shrugged off Western criticism, which they felt failed to comprehend the very serious security threats in the region. In particular, the West's failure to understand their suppression of Islamic radicalism estranged them.

Since the events of Sept. 11, 2001, however, America (along with some European states) has changed its approach. The U.S. now holds a dialogue with countries like Uzbekistan, and as Uzbeks feel that the U.S. is listening to them, they are slowly becoming more receptive to influence and advice regarding reforms. This is an important lesson, as it shows that these countries are not impermeable to change; the process may be excruciatingly slow, but the right approach and attitude in dealing with these governments can pay off.

Turkmenistan

Since independence, Turkmenistan has remained aloof from developments in the rest of Central Asia. Its policy of "permanent neutrality" has enabled the country to stay out of any regional alliance or organization; it has also meant that Turkmenistan has freely conducted relations with all neighboring states, including Iran, and the two opposing administrations in Afghanistan, the Taliban and the Northern Alliance, both of which were simultaneously accorded

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diplomatic status. Turkmenistan is also a country that has a potential to become wealthy, as it has the world's fourth largest reserves of natural gas for a population of less than five million. However, Turkmenistan is at present the most problematic country in Central Asia, and the one most likely to see violent unrest or an implosion in the near future.

Turkmenistan's problem is its leader, Saparmurat Niyazov. In power since the Soviet era, Niyazov began building an ever-more-erratic personality cult as soon as the nation gained its independence. The cult began with the standard omnipresent posters and slogans, but soon expanded. Niyazov named cities, buildings, parks and streets after himself, then erected statues of himself around the country, including a 30-foot golden stat-

The reconstruction of major highways, bridges and tunnels through Afghanistan is crucial.

ue in central Ashgabat that rotates with the sun. He named himself "Turkmenbashi" (Head of all Turkmen) and prohibited any mention of his name in the press without this title. By 2001, the epithet "the Great" was added, and Niyazov published the *Rukhnama*, a book he allegedly wrote. *Rukhnama*, which claims to "explain the world anew," is really an esoteric mix of mythology, an ambitious but questionable history of the Turkmen nation (said to date back to the prophet Noah, whose accomplishments include having founded 70 states, including Safavid Iran), and general ethics and admonitions ("wear clean and decent clothes").

These measures, including Niyazov's renaming of all months of the year (with January named after himself), are the subject of much ridicule, but actually

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obscure the seriousness of the situation. In spite of its gas wealth, the people of Turkmenistan are increasingly impoverished and isolated, and health care and education are collapsing. Niyazov slashed higher education to two years, and made the *Rukhnama* the focal point of school instruction. For weeks at a time, pupils are taken away from school, for example, to harvest cotton fields. No legal opposition exists in the country, but many of his former aides have joined the exiled opposition. Niyazov's rule is becoming increasingly paranoid: he moves high officials every six months and constantly purges key offices to prevent the emergence of any rivals. Some suspect a failed assassination attempt on Nov. 25, 2002 was staged.

It is impossible to speculate on the prospects for Niyazov's regime, as even Central Asia experts know very little of what is actually going on inside Turkmenistan. But it is safe to say that the situation is not viable. Tribal divisions are very strong, and the country's position between the Caspian Sea and Afghanistan, as well as its large gas reserves, invites foreign meddling. Though the U.S. presently lacks significant leverage to influence the country, the situation developing in Turkmenistan should be a major concern.

Regional Trade and Development

A final but important challenge is the need to revive the stagnant economies of the entire region, including Afghanistan and Pakistan. Kazakhstan (and, in the future, Turkmenistan) may have large energy resources, but these capital-intensive industries are not a sound base for the economy of the region, and will certainly not generate enough jobs. In addition, Central Asia is landlocked, and still overwhelmingly linked to Russia and Baltic seaports for its foreign trade. This Soviet legacy is clearly unnatural, given the relative proximity of the Arabian Sea and the port of Karachi, which is Central Asia's historic link to the world. Babur, the founder of the Mughal empire, wrote in his memoirs about how the pistachio nuts of Fergana were of such high quality that they were exported all the way to Hindustan — in the 16th century. However, the British-Russian standoff in Afghanistan that began in the early 19th century forced Central Asian states into an isolation

from their southern neighbors that intensified under Soviet rule and lasts to this day.

Afghanistan's general lawlessness and the preoccupations of the Taliban regime made the use of that country as a transport corridor impossible. The fall of the Taliban generated great hope in Central Asia for the opening up of routes that could help this wider region restore its traditional trade links to the South, which is indispensable for its economic development. For this purpose, the reconstruction of major highways, bridges and tunnels through Afghanistan and the improvement of their links to Central Asian infrastructure are crucial. If these major repairs are undertaken, and a modicum of security and stability persists in Afghanistan, restoration of a significant part of the great Silk Road has a chance of gradually being accomplished.

To promote the economic development of Central Asia, reduce poverty, and thereby address one of the principal roots of Islamic radicalism, then, the U.S. needs to keep its focus on advancing regional cooperation in the transportation field.

Conclusion

The United States is in no position to dictate the policies of the Central Asian states. Nor should it try to do so. But the maladies of faraway lands in the heart of Asia can and do affect the interests and the very security of the United States, as was so tragically shown by the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. The U.S., however, is in a position to have a significant influence — perhaps the most significant external influence — on the course of Central Asia's political future. Some of the issues it will have to confront are discussed above.

More generally, U.S. policy toward Central Asia has in the past been characterized by a measure of unpredictability. The sheer power of the U.S. made its potential role in the region well understood by all actors, but America's failure to clearly outline and determine its interests and policies toward the region was destabilizing, as different actors and states had different assumptions regarding America's role. In formulating a long-term policy in Central Asia, America's focus on clarity and consistency will be crucial to its success. ■