

# THE SPECTER OF A NEW “GREAT GAME” IN CENTRAL ASIA

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LAST YEAR’S U.S.-LED INTERVENTION IN AFGHANISTAN TRANSFORMED CENTRAL ASIA FROM A STRATEGIC BACKWATER INTO A CRUCIBLE OF INTERNATIONAL DIPLOMACY, BUT IT HAS ALSO PUSHED THE AGE-OLD “GREAT GAME” INTO A NEW AND MORE DANGEROUS PHASE.

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BY ALEC RASIZADE

**T**he term “Great Game” was originally coined by Rudyard Kipling to label the 19th century Anglo-Russian rivalry for hegemony in Central Asia. After the demise of the USSR a century later, this buzzword was revived by analysts and observers of the region to describe maneuvers by the major powers (Russia, China, the U.S. and Iran) to fill the strategic void there, in ways ranging from military alliances to competition for the oil and gas wealth of the Caspian Basin.

Recognizing full well the potential benefits of a bidding war for their support and resources, the leaders of the five former Soviet republics in the region — Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan — have (with varying degrees of alacrity) sought closer ties to the U.S. They have naturally portrayed their cooperation, including openness to American troop deployments, as a favor to us that should be rewarded. Nothing could be farther from the truth, however: in fact, each state has its own motives for seeking American patronage.

For example, over the past decade, the region has faced growing pressures from Islamic radicalism, terrorism and drug trafficking, all of which emanated largely

from Afghanistan. To address these threats, Central Asian governments have arrested countless suspects, frequently without being overly concerned with their human rights or due process. (On the other hand, we must be careful. After all, when we demand that Presidents Musharraf, Arafat or Mubarrak crack down hard on Islamic Jihad groups, Palestinian terrorists and Muslim brotherhoods, respectively, are we not asking them to do exactly what we criticize Central Asian governments for doing?)

In pursuit of its ambition to become the dominant regional power, **Uzbekistan** early on recognized the value of American support, manifested in the form of economic assistance and security guarantees. President Islam Karimov therefore readily agreed last year to the deployment of American troops at Hanabad Air Base — in return for \$162 million in U.S. aid in 2002, an increase of \$100 million over earlier figures, half of which is earmarked for modernization of the Uzbek armed forces. For its part, Washington is providing the additional funds despite the Uzbek government’s deteriorating record on human rights and democracy.

Meanwhile, this past June, Uzbekistan left the anti-Russian GUUAM Group that it joined three years ago, undermining efforts by the other members of that coalition — Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova — to establish a peacekeeping battalion and a free economic zone. (The group has now reverted to its original acronym of GUAM.)

Since obtaining its independence in 1991, **Kazakhstan** has pursued a “multi-vector” foreign policy that seeks strong relations with Russia and with China. As part of that effort, President Nursultan Nazarbaev has also fostered amicable ties with the U.S., especially in the sphere of energy development. But the anti-terrorism campaign has increased the pressure on him to abandon this policy,

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and settle on one strategic partner. Local observers believe that the government is inclined to align itself with the United States, given Washington's capacity to develop and pay for Kazakhstan's natural resources.

However, Kazakhstan's long border with Russia and its six-million-strong ethnic Russian population ensure that it cannot break with Moscow. The Russian minority includes the restive Siberian Cossack militia, restored after the fall of communism on both sides of the border. They have already attempted to create a Russian autonomous zone in northern Kazakhstan, raising the specter of a Republic of Texas scenario as a potential solution, in which the region would first proclaim territorial autonomy or outright independence from Kazakhstan to "protect" its national identity, and then reunite with Mother Russia. Thus, from the start of the anti-terrorism campaign, Nazarbaev has proceeded cautiously, offering words of support for American actions, but hesitating on the implementation of concrete cooperation measures.

The United States is also engaged in a rapid military build-up in **Kyrgyzstan**, building a 37-acre air force base at the Manas Airport near the capital, Bishkek. This base will also serve as administrative headquarters and contain warehouses to store munitions. Manas is suitable for both military and relief flights since it can accommodate fighter jets as well as large cargo and refueling planes. Construction of this base should establish Kyrgyzstan as a hub for reconstruction operations in Afghanistan and for Central Asian stabilization efforts.

Toward that end, favorable terms have been secured for American soldiers serving in Kyrgyzstan. They will be free to enter and leave the country, to wear uniforms and to carry weapons. They will also be immune from prosecution by the local authorities. Washington also has signed basing agreements with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, which provided airport facilities for the war in Afghanistan, and is discussing a similar arrangement with Kazakhstan.

In addition, the United States is planning to relocate fighter jets from Pakistan to Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Given that the American buildup is coming at a time when anti-terrorism operations in Afghanistan are moving into the reconstruction phase, it appears likely that the U.S. military is settling in for an extended stay in Central Asia.

The possibility of extending the natural gas pipelines from Turkmenistan to southern Asia may also tempt Washington to maintain some sort of security presence east of the Caspian Sea.

**Turkmenistan** is one of the most tightly controlled places on the planet. President Saparmurat Niazov, who was the country's last Communist Party leader under Soviet rule, has constructed a personality cult of "Turkmenbashi" (literally, chief of the Turkmen) rivaled only in Baghdad and Pyongyang. A colossal golden figure of Turkmenbashi stands on a rotating pedestal in Ashgabat's Neutrality Square, making him appear to summon the sun at dawn and bid it farewell at dusk.

Niazov has written a 500-page tome titled *Ruhnama* (Book of the Soul), a spiritual constitution that the Turkmen parliament has declared a holy text of advice and observations. Now it is a compulsory subject in all Turkmen schools. Since its independence, Turkmenistan has proclaimed a policy of "permanent neutrality" and remains the least engaged with the U.S. anti-terrorism efforts in the region.

Finally, **Tajikistan** represents a unique experiment of Islamist participation in a Central Asian government since the 1997 signing of a power-sharing agreement that ended five years of Tajik civil war. Under that agreement, the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan was promised a 30-percent share of representation in government structures. The IRP remains the lone example in Central Asia of an Islamic movement attempting to advance its agenda within the established political framework. Its gain in popularity is connected with Tajikistan's continuing economic difficulties: the party's power base rests among the impoverished 80 percent of Tajiks who live below the poverty line.

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### **The Shanghai Group's Response**

The U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan last year not only transformed Central Asia from a strategic backwater into a crucible of international diplomacy. In the process, it has pushed the "Great Game" into a new and more dangerous phase.

As a result, **Russia** sees its historic role as Central Asia's principal security manager threatened. Moscow

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was happy to see the destruction of the Taliban, and President Vladimir Putin has scored some important diplomatic gains in return for Russian cooperation — most notably a more understanding attitude in the West about Russian military operations in Chechnya. But in the absence of any timetable for the departure of American troops from Central Asia, Moscow is likely to perceive the U.S. response to terrorism as little more than an excuse to extend American military presence into the region, which Russian strategists have regarded since the end of the 19th century as the country's soft underbelly.

The Russian policy-making elite is divided over how to respond to the geopolitical shift that has occurred in Central Asia. The sudden arrival of U.S. forces in Central Asia has prompted some analysts in Moscow to accuse the government of “losing” Central Asia. Hawkish statements are coming from such leading figures as the State Duma speaker Gennadiy Seleznyov, who said during his recent tour of the region: “Russia will not endorse the emergence of permanent U.S. military bases in Central Asia.” In addition, Russian security officials claim there are a score of top-secret Russian military facilities in Central Asia that the U.S. and NATO are keen to gather information on. In Kazakhstan, there is the Sary-Shagan Anti-Missile Launching Site and Radar Station, part of Russia's early-warning system. In Kyrgyzstan, the Russian navy operates a long-distance communications center, as well as a testing site on Lake Issyk-Kul for its nuclear submarines' rockets. Russia also has a space surveillance station in Nurek, Tajikistan.

**China** also initially acquiesced in the U.S. action in Afghanistan, not least because of evidence that al-

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Qaida was training Muslim separatists operating in the Xinjiang Autonomous Province of western China. Beijing has generally deferred to Moscow regarding security issues in Central Asia, preferring instead to focus on expanding trade links across the region. But China now states publicly and unapologetically that it views the U.S. presence as a hindrance to its strategic objectives in the region. In its view, the American base rights in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are part of a broader strategy to contain the expansion of Chinese influence. Specifically, Beijing has alleged that the U.S. is seeking access to an air base near Semipalatinsk in northern Kazakhstan, the old site of Soviet nuclear tests, which was designed by the USSR precisely to support possible strategic operations against China.

Beijing also sent a delegation to the Central Asian republics in January to strengthen its regional relations. In Tashkent the delegation announced a Chinese economic assistance package for Uzbekistan totaling \$600 million (nearly

four times the \$162 million pledged by the U.S. a few months before).

Russia and China have also moved on a multilateral basis to counter America's expansion into Central Asia, acting to overhaul the **Shanghai Cooperation Organization**. Created in 1996, the SCO encompasses Russia, China and all the Central Asian states mentioned above except the neutral Turkmenistan. Until last year, it was primarily a forum for border demilitarization and trade promotion, but at the organization's St. Petersburg meeting on June 7, 2002, the presidents of Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan signed a charter transforming the SCO security bloc into a full-fledged international organization with a permanent secretariat based in Beijing. They further agreed to set up a regional antiterrorist structure to be based in the Kyrgyz capital, Bishkek, and signed a political declaration underlining the SCO's new joint goals: to fight terrorism, prevent conflicts, and ensure security in Central Asia. But there is little doubt that the true aim is to reduce the rationale for a Western security presence in the region.

### **The Role of Iran**

**Iran** has also become more active in this increasingly volatile environment, partly in response to President Bush's declaration that he reserves the right to extend the war on terrorism to other countries. Iran, Iraq and North Korea were the three members of an “axis of evil” he named in his State of the Union address last January as future potential targets. While he reserved his harshest words for Saddam Hussein, Bush's language about Tehran was nearly as harsh: “Iran aggressively pursues ‘weapons of mass destruction’ and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian

people's hope for freedom."

Specifically, the president cited the Iranian nuclear program built around the Russian nuclear power reactors at Bushehr, as well as Iran's ballistic missile program. Reinforcing such fears, former Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani has called for his country to use nuclear weapons against Israel.

Meanwhile, U.S. intelligence agencies have spotted scores of Iranian intelligence and military personnel deep inside Afghanistan working to obstruct and destabilize the fragile pro-American government now in place in Kabul so that it either falls or rejects the presence of Western military forces. Such an outcome would also weaken Iranian reformers in their power struggle with Shiite fundamentalists.

U.S. Special Envoy for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad has repeatedly charged that hard-line elements around Iran's spiritual leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, are helping to arm and finance groups within Afghanistan in a bid to establish centers of Iranian influence in Herat (80 kilometers from the Iranian border) and in surrounding provinces. Khalilzad has also alleged that the Revolutionary Guard Corps helped members of al-Qaida escape from Afghanistan to Iran and were helping the fleeing fighters to travel on to other destinations abroad.

After the failure of the five Caspian littoral states to reach an agreement on delimitation of the Caspian Sea at their April 2002 presidential summit in Ashgabat, Iranian president Mohammed Khatami toured Central Asian capitals to discuss two issues: energy routes and the American presence. He called for regional leaders to step up exports of oil and gas through Iran as the shortest route to world markets. At the same time, he sharply criticized progress

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by the U.S. in developing a military presence in the region for its war on terrorism. Referring to Washington,

Khatami said in Almaty: "One must not get entrenched on this or that territory, setting up bases under the disguise of an antiterrorist campaign. This is sheer humiliation for our nations that have the right to resolve their problems on their own and decide themselves what is good and bad for them."

### **Three Challenges for the U.S.**

At the risk of oversimplification, I would suggest that three fundamental challenges confront any model of American involvement in Central Asia. These pertain to local politics, public welfare and regional security:

#### **1. Uphold human rights.**

Without exception, all Central Asian leaders have cited national security and stability to justify the concentration of power in the hands of the executive, the avoidance of elections, the retarded development of



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participatory government, and the curtailment of civil liberties. They clearly hope that American patronage will deflect international criticism of their human rights records and failure to democratize.

The situation is painfully reminiscent of the Cold War, when the U.S. supported anticommunist countries no matter how poor their human rights records. Yet proponents of the current stance say the end justifies the means and that Washington's new containment policy might work against terrorism just as they believe it did against communism.

Thus, Uzbek President Karimov has justified his political repression (including the jailing of over 7,000 political prisoners) by pointing to the threat posed by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Now that IMU leader Juma Namangani is presumed dead, Karimov says his regime is threatened by another Islamic movement known as the Hizb-ut-Tahrir (Party of Islamic Liberation), which advocates the creation of a caliphate (multinational theocratic state) in Central Asia. Although that party's members claim they want to attain their political objectives by peaceful means, they are being harassed by authorities in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and even in Azerbaijan.

In spite of his abysmal record, Karimov was invited to visit the United States earlier this year. On March 12, 2002, he had a private White House meeting with President Bush, where he signed a five-point "Declaration on Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Framework." Among other things, that document obliges the U.S. to provide aid that encourages "civil society development" in Uzbekistan. But unless Washington continues to pressure Karimov to live

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up to his end of the bargain, there is little hope that democratic reforms will come to Uzbekistan.

**2. Promote meaningful economic development.** The fundamental source of internal instability throughout the region is neither religious extremism nor ethnic conflict but lack of economic opportunity. The United Nations estimates that over 80 percent of the populations of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan live below the poverty level. The average monthly wage in Tajikistan is \$10 or less. In parts of Kyrgyzstan, one hears of people eating rats and dogs. In Uzbekistan people say flatly that young men who do not have political connections simply cannot find a job. Such conditions offer militant Islamic groups ripe ground for recruitment.

In the Fergana Valley, for instance, 70 percent of the population live on the minimum salary, which equals \$15 a month. This is barely enough to purchase 100 loaves of flat bread a month, yet the typical Uzbek family consists of six or more persons, each of whom usually consumes a loaf of bread per day. Clearly, until Central Asians and Afghans are able to feed

their families and find jobs, there will be no end to opium production and drug trafficking, and no peace in the region.

This will not be accomplished through the vast infrastructure projects proposed at the international conference on rebuilding Afghanistan held in Tokyo in January 2002 or a Central Asian 'Marshall Plan,' however. Instead, the focus should be on fostering village-level agriculture, small businesses and farms, and removing impediments to entrepreneurship at all levels. It is particularly important to open the ancient trade routes that linked Central Asia and Afghanistan to their natural ports and trading partners in Iran and Pakistan. Neither security arrangements nor political reforms will survive without economic development.

**3. Stay engaged in the region for the long haul.** In the new geopolitical environment, Washington remains dangerously ambiguous about its ultimate intentions and exit strategy. Some American foreign policy planners hold that after achieving the destruction of al-Qaida and the Taliban in Afghanistan, the U.S. should leave postwar stabilization and reconstruction to others. But such a course runs the danger of condemning all Central Asia to further waves of instability from Afghanistan.

In this context, Washington must be careful not to raise expectations it cannot fulfill. Instead, it should develop and implement a longer-term strategy or doctrine for regional security in Central Asia. Such a strategy is essential for the viability and sustainability of the states of Central Asia. No less, it is essential for the United States' own long-term interest in helping build a stable world. ■