

Averting a New Great Game in Central Asia

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's hasty July 2005 visit to Kyrgyzstan to ensure future U.S. access to Ganci Air Force Base highlighted the new security challenges Washington faces in Central Asia. The trip came shortly after the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit at which the heads of state of Russia, China, and most Central Asian countries called on the United States and its allies to set a timetable for their military withdrawal from the region. The summit declaration prompted General Richard Myers, then-chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, to accuse Moscow and Beijing of "trying to bully" their smaller neighbors.¹ Although the United States eventually secured continued permission to use the military facilities and airspace of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan to support operations in Afghanistan, for many these events symbolized the resurgence of the traditional "great game" among the major external players in the region.²

Central Asian security affairs have become much more complex than during the original nineteenth-century great game between czarist Russia and the United Kingdom. At that time, these two governments could largely dominate local affairs, but today a variety of influential actors are involved in the region. The early 1990s witnessed a vigorous competition between Turkey and Iran for influence in Central Asia. More recently, India and Pakistan have pursued a mixture of cooperative and competitive policies in the region that have influenced and been affected by their broader relationship. The now independent Central Asian countries also invariably affect the region's international relations as they seek to maneuver among the major powers without compromising their newfound autonomy. Although Russia,

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China, and the United States substantially affect regional security issues, they cannot dictate outcomes the way imperial governments frequently did a century ago.

Concerns about a renewed great game are thus exaggerated. The contest for influence in the region does not directly challenge the vital national interests of China, Russia, or the United States, the most important extraregional countries in Central Asian security affairs. Unless restrained, however, competitive pressures risk impeding opportunities for beneficial cooperation among these countries. The three external great powers have incentives to compete for local allies, energy resources, and military advantage, but they also share substantial interests, especially in reducing terrorism and drug trafficking. If properly aligned, the major multilateral security organizations active in Central Asia could provide opportunities for cooperative diplomacy in a region where bilateral ties traditionally have predominated.

Russia's Resurgence

The Russian government is currently more concerned than any other external actor about developments in Central Asia. A major objective is securing Russia's vulnerable southern borders against malign regional imports such as Islamic extremism and drug trafficking. Moscow's economic goals include ensuring that its firms participate in developing the region's natural resources and that Central Asian oil and gas exporters continue to use Russian pipelines.

In a televised speech to the nation in April 2005, Russian president Vladimir Putin described the Soviet Union's collapse as one of the greatest geopolitical catastrophes of the twentieth century. His administration has made restoring Moscow's influence in Central Asia a priority. Although Russia's diminished economic and military resources make it unlikely that it will soon recover the hegemonic status Moscow enjoyed in Central Asia during the Soviet era, Russia employs a variety of instruments to promote its regional objectives and remains the most important external actor for many issues.

One clear Russian advantage is geography. In January 2005, Kyrgyz president Askar Akayev archly observed that "God and geography gave us Russia, our main strategic partner."³ Thanks to the legacy of the integrated Soviet economy, Central Asia's landlocked states continue to rely heavily on transportation, communications, supply-chain, and other networks that either traverse Russia or fall under Russian control. At present, Russian firms and business groups control much of the transportation infrastructure for Central Asia's oil, gas, and electricity. Lukoil, Gazprom, and United Energy

Systems of Russia have invested heavily in various energy production and transportation projects in Central Asia. The abrupt cutoff in January 2006 of Russian natural gas deliveries to Ukraine to force a price rise demonstrates how the Russian government can use its control over these enterprises to curtail oil and especially gas deliveries from both Russia and Central Asia to recalcitrant purchasers. Russia also can exploit its pipeline monopoly to prevent supplier countries from exporting energy products, as Gazprom did in 1997 with Turkmenistan's natural gas. Even when it becomes fully operational, the newly opened Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, which bypasses Russian territory, is unlikely to threaten the political and economic influence Russia derives from its pivotal role in Central Asia's energy networks.⁴

Major powers cannot dictate outcomes the way imperial governments did a century ago.

Russia's continued economic primacy in Central Asia manifests itself in other ways as well. Despite China's growing commercial presence in the region, Russia remains Central Asia's leading trade partner. Russia's comparatively higher standard of living pulls millions of mostly illegal migrants from Central Asia into the Russian labor market, especially in the booming construction industry. Their remittances make an essential contribution to the gross national products of their countries of origin, remove potentially dissatisfied social elements from these states, and give Central Asian governments another reason to stay on Moscow's good side. Russian nationals and ethnic Russians also perform vital commercial, managerial, and technical services in many Central Asian communities, especially in Kazakhstan, providing Moscow with additional leverage. Finally, the recent surge in world oil and gas prices has facilitated a major resurgence of Russian public and private investment in Central Asia.⁵

The Russian government also continues to increase its defense activities in Central Asia. In October 2003, Russia established its first new regional military base since the Cold War at Kant, Kyrgyzstan, which lies only 30 kilometers from the U.S. base at Ganci. More recently, Russian and Kyrgyz officials have discussed establishing another major Russian military facility in southern Kyrgyzstan.⁶ In October 2004, Tajikistan granted Russia's 201st Motorized Infantry Division a permanent base near Dushanbe. A year later, Tajik and Russian officials announced that Russia would also obtain a new air base near Dushanbe, with housing available for 6,000 military personnel.⁷ Moscow has been expanding its security cooperation with Uzbekistan as well. In June 2004, the two governments signed a Treaty on Strategic Co-

operation stating that the “sides, based on the separate agreements, will offer to each other the right to use the military facilities that are located on their territories.”⁸ The accord also provides for additional Russian military assistance to Uzbekistan and the creation of a joint antiterrorism institute. In September 2005, Russian and Uzbek forces conducted their first joint military exercises since the Soviet Union’s collapse. Two months later, Russia and Uzbekistan signed a Treaty on Allied Relations that pledged mutual military assistance in the event either becomes a victim of “aggression.”

How long the Russian government will endorse the substantial U.S. military presence in Central Asia remains unclear. Moscow initially accepted the deployments because U.S. forces could fight local Islamic extremists more effectively than Russia and its local allies could. More recently, the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the Colored Revolutions that deposed pro-Moscow governments in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan have led influential Russians to view the continued U.S. presence as a major source of instability. In February 2005, the Russian Foreign Ministry pressured the Kyrgyz government to reject a U.S. request to station AWACS aircraft at Ganci.⁹ Since then, Russia’s state-dominated media has repeatedly urged Central Asian governments to crack down on U.S.-supported civil liberties groups.¹⁰ Alexander Vershbow, the departing U.S. ambassador to Russia, said that, to draw Central Asian states closer to Moscow, some Russian officials had launched a “concerted and coordinated effort to foster the impression that the United States is trying to undermine the regimes in the region.”¹¹ Pushing too hard for U.S. disengagement, however, could antagonize Washington, aggravate regional instability, and alarm Central Asians seeking to balance the great powers. Moscow confronts more pressing security challenges in the Caucasus, especially Chechnya, and would prefer not to divert resources to fill the security vacuum that would follow a U.S. withdrawal. Russians worried about China’s growing influence in Central Asia also favor a counterbalancing U.S. presence in the region.¹²

China’s Growing Role

To many observers’ surprise, Central Asia’s newly independent states have not become objects of rivalry between Moscow and Beijing but rather a major unifying element in Sino-Russian relations. The two governments cooperate more closely in Central Asia than in any other world region. Through the multilateral SCO and their extensive bilateral dialogue, Russian officials acknowledge China’s legitimate interests in Central Asia, while Beijing has institutional mechanisms to promote its regional objectives in close cooperation with Moscow. China also does not want to jeopardize security ties,

including purchases of advanced Russian military technologies, by challenging Russian policies in a region of still limited importance for Beijing. Because Chinese leaders share many important goals with Russia in Central Asia, they have been able to benefit from Russian initiatives in these areas and redirect resources to other priorities.

Similar to Moscow, Beijing is concerned about the spread of threatening ideologies such as Western democracy and Islamic fundamentalism. Periodic waves of violence linked to ethnic separatism in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, an area constituting one-sixth of China, have aroused fears about the effects of Central Asia's post-Soviet independence on the 10 million non-Han Chinese in Xinjiang. Members of the large Uighur communities in Central Asian countries have participated in anti-Chinese terrorist groups. China has taken several steps to induce Central Asian governments to curb separatist activities by Uighur, or "East Turkestan," activists. Beijing has signed bilateral agreements with them on border security, military cooperation, and counterterrorism with provisions for joint law enforcement operations, police training, and intelligence sharing. Unsurprisingly, given their own harsh repression of antigovernment protesters in 1989, Chinese officials wholeheartedly backed the Uzbek government's military crackdown in Andijon against "the three forces of separatism, terrorism, and extremism."¹³

Similar to their Russian counterparts, Chinese officials have looked uneasily at the elevated U.S. military deployments in Central Asia since September 2001. Ganci's location only 200 miles from the Chinese-Kyrgyz border, combined with Washington's long-standing military cooperation with Japan and Taiwan and its growing security ties with India, invariably has stimulated fears of encirclement and containment. Nevertheless, Chinese leaders thus far have avoided directly challenging the U.S. military presence in Central Asia. Beijing's ambivalence reflects its recognition of the advantages of having the United States suppress the region's terrorist movements and promote the stability required to develop Central Asian oil and gas resources. Chinese leaders also likely remain uncertain over Beijing's ability to manage the consequences of a comprehensive U.S. military disengagement. Although China's power projection capabilities are growing, its capacity to intervene militarily in Central Asia still lags far behind that of the United States or Russia.

China's growing energy needs represent another force driving its increased interest and involvement in Central Asia. The combination of a booming

External great powers have incentives to compete, but they also share substantial interests.

economy and declining domestic energy production has resulted in China's accounting for 40 percent of the growth in world oil demand since 2000 and becoming the world's second-largest oil consumer, surpassing Japan in 2003.¹⁴ For the past decade, Chinese policymakers have sought to enhance their access to Central Asian energy resources to supplement their vulnerable Persian Gulf sources, which currently supply more than half of China's oil imports. These shipments traverse sea lanes susceptible to interception by foreign navies. In addition, the Chinese realize that terrorism, military conflicts, and other sources of instability in the Middle East could abruptly disrupt their energy imports. As a result, Chinese officials are pushing for the development of less-vulnerable, land-based oil and gas pipelines that would direct Central Asian energy resources eastward toward China. Although Central Asia currently provides only about 10 percent of China's total oil imports, Chinese planners apparently hope that, by purchasing local energy equities and developing the region's eastward transportation infrastructure, they can increase this percentage substantially in the future.¹⁵

U.S. Choices

The United States has several core objectives in Central Asia, including limiting terrorism and Islamic extremism, developing the region's economies, and securing access to energy resources. Washington also wants to preserve the autonomy of the newly independent states by preventing any one country or group of countries, such as a Russian-Chinese condominium, from dominating Central Asia. Many Americans also seek to promote human rights, civil liberties, and genuinely democratic elections throughout the region.¹⁶

Some of these U.S. interests coincide with those of other regional actors. All the major players want to enhance border security; encourage economic and energy development; and curb terrorism and trafficking in narcotics, people, and weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Yet, the great powers disagree about the need to promote liberal democratic principles and the desirable duration of the U.S. military presence in Central Asia. From Washington's perspective, the key to managing these mixed interests is to exploit complementarities, minimize conflicts, and hedge against adverse developments.

THE FREEDOM DOCTRINE IN CENTRAL ASIA: PROS AND CONS

The U.S. commitment to promoting democracy entails both advantages and disadvantages for its competitive strategies in Central Asia. On the positive side, because most Central Asians seem to hold relatively favorable views of

Americans, if not U.S. policies, this commitment to advancing political liberties could represent a long-term advantage.¹⁷ If democrats come to power in the region, they likely would appreciate past U.S. support and perhaps move closer toward Western democracies and away from Russia and China, given the backing of those countries of the previous authoritarian regimes. Furthermore, because Central Asia is a less important region for the United States than the Middle East, any unfavorable consequences of a failed freedom crusade would be limited in terms of overall U.S. foreign policy goals.

On the negative side, recent experiences in Uzbekistan suggest why aggressive democracy promotion in Central Asia would likely both fail and harm U.S. interests. First, the region's democratic opposition movements typically have been weak and divided. Second, the incumbent regimes have shown a willingness to employ whatever means necessary, including electoral manipulation; media controls; and, in Uzbekistan last May, forceful repression, to remain in power. Third, the authoritarian leaders have made clear that they would further curtail cooperation with the United States and other countries that pursued policies that threatened their overthrow. Finally, Russian and Chinese officials invariably would see a vigorous, U.S.-led democracy-promotion campaign as threatening their alliances and other interests in Central Asia. They also would fear the spillover of the resulting regional chaos into their own territories and perceive intensified risks to their rule from foreign-inspired democratic forces. Their probable response, intensified collaboration to limit U.S. influence in the region, would in turn stimulate alarm among those in Washington who fear a Sino-Russian alliance against the United States. The result would be a deterioration of overall great-power relations due to a dispute over a peripheral region and a threat to the very "balance of power that favors freedom" that Bush administration officials see as the most important change in world politics in centuries.¹⁸

Rather than expecting democratic governments to emerge soon in Central Asia, U.S. policies should adopt the more modest goals of encouraging foreign investment in the region, which could alleviate poverty and help establish the socioeconomic bases for sustained political reform, and pushing for an end to major abuses of human rights and other civil liberties. U.S. officials also should prepare for the day when democrats might assume power by continuing academic, professional, and other exchanges that help train the next generation of Central Asian elites. As with Eastern Europe during the Cold War, however, they must proceed from the recognition that it could take decades for comprehensive leadership transitions to occur.

The Russian government is currently more concerned than any other external actor.

COMPLEMENTING BILATERALISM WITH MULTILATERALISM

U.S. officials can attenuate competitive pressures by complementing their traditionally bilateral policies in Eurasia with initiatives directed at the region's core multilateral security institutions. By enhancing transparency and countering misperceptions, these institutions could help avert an unnecessary great-game security spiral among Russia, China, and the United States, including one triggered by a regional crisis caused by other actors, such as another Colored Revolution.¹⁹

Central Asia has become a major unifying element in Sino-Russian relations.

Washington needs a more flexible approach in deciding whether to employ bilateral or multilateral approaches to manage regional security issues. On one hand, the U.S. government thus far has pursued a generally successful bilateral strategy to counter other countries' multilateral efforts to limit its military presence in Central Asia. After

the participants at the July 2005 SCO summit called on the United States and its allies to establish a timetable for withdrawing from their Central Asian military bases, for example, U.S. officials successfully exploited their bilateral ties with the governments of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and other Central Asian governments to retain military access.

On the other hand, Washington's bilateral dialogues with Russia and China regarding Central Asian issues have had limited utility. Although U.S. and Russian military forces have been operating in Central Asia for several years, their direct contacts have been surprisingly limited. Even in Kyrgyzstan, they rarely communicate despite their proximity, a situation inadvertently highlighted in April 2005 when Russian defense minister Sergei Ivanov said "Russian and U.S. military bases in Kyrgyzstan are not bothering each other."²⁰ The two countries should consider institutionalizing regular consultations among base commanders and conducting joint exercises on force protection, humanitarian relief, and counterterrorism to explore how they might interact in a crisis. At a minimum, such precautions would help avoid friendly fire and other incidents.

Nevertheless, given the poor track record of bilateral initiatives directed at Russia and China exclusively and the transnational nature of most Central Asian security threats, it would be risky for Washington to rely too heavily on bilateral solutions alone to address the region's security problems. Central Asian governments have shown continued interest in deepening ties with multinational institutions despite their differences over terrorism, boundaries, and other issues. Russia and China also have made clear their

preference for employing multilateral institutions to address international security issues involving the United States.

CONNECTING CENTRAL ASIA'S INSTITUTIONAL NEXUS

The SCO is perhaps the most important multilateral security institution in Central Asia. It includes almost two-thirds of Eurasia—China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—as full members. India, Iran, Mongolia, and Pakistan have observer status. Cooperation against terrorism (broadly defined) has become an SCO priority, centered on the Regional Antiterrorism Structure in Tashkent. Because the SCO's membership includes some of the world's largest oil producers and consumers, energy is an important issue for collaboration. The organization has also launched small-scale cooperative initiatives in the realms of commerce, counternarcotics, and environmental protection.

The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), consisting of all former Soviet republics except the Baltic states, initially emerged as the most important security institution in the former Soviet Union. Although its role and importance subsequently declined, the Putin administration launched a sustained campaign to revitalize cooperation among a core group of pro-Russian governments. In May 2001, CIS members authorized the formation of a Collective Rapid Deployment Force (CRDF). More importantly, the following May the presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan with Armenia and Belarus decided to create a Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The new body soon took charge of the CRDF and transformed it into a standing force with a small multinational staff and a mobile command center. Russia has reduced its troop deployments outside the CIS and has increased spending on military facilities and forces related to CSTO missions. Moscow allows CSTO members to purchase Russian-made defense equipment and supplies for their CRDF components at the same prices paid by the Russian military. The Russian Ministry of Defense also subsidizes the costs of training officers from CSTO militaries.²¹

NATO began to develop contacts with Central Asian governments in the mid-1990s when many of them joined the alliance's Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) and its related Partnership for Peace (PfP) program. The EAPC and the PfP provide mechanisms through which NATO and former Soviet bloc countries can pursue practical defense and security cooperation on a range of issues. Two recent developments have augmented NATO's interests and activities in Central Asia. First, because the alliance has offered full membership to most eastern European countries, Central Asia has become the main residual focus of the PfP program. Second, Operation Enduring Freedom has resulted in a substantial increase in the

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alliance's regional military presence. When NATO took charge of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan in August 2003, its representatives negotiated military transit agreements and other supportive arrangements with neighboring Central Asian governments. At their June 2004 Istanbul summit, NATO governments designated Central Asia, along with the Caucasus, as an area of "special focus."²² They also decided to establish a special representative for Central Asia and station a permanent liaison officer in the region.

Russia, China, and the United States would benefit from establishing ties between these multilateral security institutions. Central Asia represents the one area of the world where their militaries operate in regular proximity. Yet, NATO has few ties with the CSTO and none with the SCO. China also lacks formal contacts with NATO. A direct

U.S.-SCO relationship could provide an institutional mechanism for broadening the Sino-U.S. strategic dialogue, facilitating reconciliation between the United States and Uzbekistan after President Islam Karimov leaves office, and establishing an indirect dialogue between Washington and Tehran.

Framing the initiative as a SCO-CSTO-NATO engagement might entice Russia and China to allow Washington to develop formal contacts with the SCO. In October 2002, Chinese officials proposed that NATO engage Beijing in a bilateral dialogue on strategic developments and security threats in Central Asia, though neither side pursued this initiative.²³ For several years, Russian representatives have called on NATO to work directly with the CSTO on joint projects, especially reducing terrorism and drug trafficking in Central Asia. Russian interest in establishing official NATO-CSTO ties partly reflects a desire to enhance the CSTO's international legitimacy by equating it with a more powerful regional security organization. In mid-December 2005, CSTO secretary general Nikolai Bordyuzha proposed establishing a Eurasian Advisory Council that could include representatives from the CSTO; the SCO; NATO; the European Union; and the Eurasian Economic Community, which includes Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan.²⁴ Although Russian officials have not addressed the issue of NATO-SCO relations, they might support the alliance's pursuit of parallel contacts with the CSTO and the SCO. NATO officials have preferred to deal with the member governments directly rather than through the CSTO, which they see as dominated by Moscow. Cooperating on antiterrorism, emergency management, and energy and other security issues could promote mutual objectives and provide a segue to collaborating with the SCO.

Expecting the Unexpected

Although the complex relations among the major powers with interests in Central Asia work against a revived great game, they also provide another reason why U.S. decisionmakers should plan for major discontinuities in Central Asia's future development. None of the major historical forces that could affect U.S. interests in the region are necessarily linear. Eurasia may be experiencing a democratic wave or crest. Central Asia's terrorist movements continue to evolve; the fate of WMD proliferation now lies at a tipping point, with the cases of Iran and North Korea still very much in doubt; the energy market remains thoroughly unpredictable; and major uncertainties surround the future regional policies of Russia, China, and other countries, including the United States.

The probability of major discontinuities resulting from these complexities, underscored by the swift collapse of the U.S.-Uzbek alliance in the wake of Andijon, requires U.S. planners to adopt robust hedging strategies. Besides abrupt geopolitical shifts, a sudden regime collapse is also possible, as seen in Kyrgyzstan. Even the transition to a new generation of Central Asian leaders as the region's elderly strongmen fade from the scene is fraught with uncertainty. Central Asian political systems are so tightly controlled by a single leader and his immediate coterie that sweeping policy transformations could easily ensue from turnover at the top. U.S. policymakers will need flexible plans for a comprehensive range of contingencies. Issues requiring analysis include protecting expatriates, managing refugees, discouraging foreign military intervention, conducting covert operations against Islamic extremists trying to seize power or sensitive WMD-related materials, inducing new leaders to expand civil liberties, and pursuing the other objectives that make Central Asia an important although not vital region for U.S. security.

Fortunately, the fact that Central Asia does not represent the most important geographic region for any external great power also works against the revival of a traditional, geopolitical great-game conflict. Russia, China, and the United States have strong reasons to cooperate in the region. Although each country has extensive goals in Central Asia, the resources they have available to pursue them are limited, given other priorities. As long as their general relations remain nonconfrontational, Moscow, Beijing, and Washington are unlikely to pursue policies in a lower priority region such as Central Asia that could disrupt their overall ties. Most often, they will find it more efficient and effective to collaborate to diminish redundancies, exploit synergies, and pool funding and other scarce assets in the pursuit of common objectives. Unfounded fears or overtly competitive policies could undermine these opportunities for cooperation and should be avoided.

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