

# The New Great Game in Central Asia

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Rajan Menon

Until 11 September 2001, the United States was widely presumed to lack vital interests in Central Asia. The attention paid to Caspian energy after the collapse of the Soviet Union did not appreciably change Central Asia's low ranking in American strategic priorities and public awareness. Although American trade with the region increased and American oil companies hastened to join the multinational oil consortia emerging in and around the Caspian basin, Central Asia was hardly becoming critical to the American economy. The development of limited political and military relationships with former Soviet republics did little to alter this picture. Thus, it was also assumed that no American president would send combat troops to Central Asia or assume long-term commitments that encompassed, or had serious consequences for the South Caucasus, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey and China's Xinjiang province – that is, 'greater Central Asia'.<sup>1</sup> President Bill Clinton had launched cruise missiles at Afghanistan after the bombing of US embassies in East Africa instead of sending soldiers to track down Osama bin Laden. And although the Taliban had played host to al-Qaeda and committed all manner of atrocities against its own citizens well before 11 September, no US official or politician of either major party proposed that American power be used to revamp Afghanistan's politics or to expel al-Qaeda. In fact, the prevailing view in Washington during Clinton's second administration was that, for all its faults, the Taliban had ended the cycles of civil war that had gripped Afghanistan since 1978 and had created civil order. This stability, so the argument went, would enable the planned energy pipelines from Central Asia to Indian Ocean ports via Afghanistan, particularly the Unocal project to transport natural gas from

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Turkmenistan to Pakistan. Some even recommended that the US should therefore find a way to do business with the Taliban.

Most of the conditions that propelled the United States into greater Central Asia – now advanced as reasons why it must remain there – were in plain view long before the hijacked jetliners slammed into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001. Taliban-ruled Afghanistan was known to be a breeding ground for terrorism: al-Qaeda was there; American leaders knew that it was responsible for other attacks against the US; and counter-terrorism officials fretted about the organisation's growing arsenal of destructive capabilities and its possible acquisition of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The Taliban – with support from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia – was brutalising Afghans and spreading disorder in surrounding states, particularly the nascent and generally unstable countries of Central Asia. Pakistan was the arch patron of the Taliban, which, along with al-Qaeda, was sponsoring the infiltration of insurgents into Indian-held Kashmir. That, in turn, was ratcheting up tensions between India and Pakistan and increasing the danger of yet another war between them – this time, potentially involving nuclear weapons. Pakistan was also mired in economic problems and instability, and hosted an array of militant Islamist groups. This led American officials to debate whether the greater danger was a nuclear war between India and Pakistan, or the implosion of a nuclear-armed Pakistan.

Meanwhile other malign forces operated in greater Central Asia. Heroin, using the Central Asian states and Iran as corridors, was streaming out of Afghanistan and Pakistan and reaching the West. The narcotics as a whole, spawned corruption, addiction and violence in these countries, weakening their respective regimes by undermining the rule of law. While new energy sources promised oil-importing states some respite from the hydrocarbon hegemony of Gulf Arab states and a pathway to prosperity for Caspian energy exporters, pipelines and pumping stations also offered tempting targets to saboteurs and states at war. Further, the scramble for Caspian energy threatened to unleash destabilising rivalries among Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, India and China in a region that had been cordoned off by the Russian and Soviet empires for 150 years. The hope that energy revenues would boost economic development in the Caspian Sea zone was widespread in the West – and even more so in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. But the historical record was not encouraging: elsewhere, soaring energy revenues had been associated with corruption, the inflow of weapons and arms races and a widening gulf between rich and poor. Little about Central Asia suggested it could buck the trend.<sup>2</sup>

Long before 11 September, then, American leaders understood the variety and extent of greater Central Asia's problems. Yet they were not

about to undertake major strategic commitments there. Nor could momentum to do so have developed from the low levels of trade and investment and non-essential diplomatic visits and initiatives under NATO's Partnership for Peace. In the event, however, al-Qaeda's 11 September attacks revealed vital US national interests in the region and focused Washington on the deeper problems gripping greater Central Asia. Even after US troops routed the Taliban and forced al-Qaeda to disperse to Pakistan's cities and tribal areas, thousands of members of these groups remained in the Central Asian theatre. Indeed, a long-term US military role in the region may not be merely advisable, but indispensable for the stability of Afghanistan, Central Asia and Pakistan.<sup>3</sup>

### **Engagement or entrapment?**

Despite America's determination to avoid quagmires and a predilection for limited military missions and quick exits, the United States' strategic burdens in greater Central Asia are likely to prove enduring and heavy for four main reasons. First, the American strategic emplacement in Central Asia will probably remain important to the war on terrorism. Bases in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, along with those in Pakistan, were platforms for the war against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Tracking down fugitives and conducting mop-up operations will require a well-developed, well-protected infrastructure. The continuation of terrorist operations since the US-led Afghanistan intervention indicates a possible regrouping by al-Qaeda's remnants. Moreover, although military bases are generally acquired and defence agreements reached as ad hoc means to an end, they tend to become entrenched institutions as various domestic interests – both civilian and military – lobby to maintain and, perhaps, to expand them.

Second, greater Central Asia's environment is ideal for the purposes of al-Qaeda and other Islamic radical movements. The wrenching social and economic transformations that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union have made poverty and joblessness pervasive. Demographic trends guarantee a mismatch between the supply of young people and the number of jobs available. Large numbers will migrate from squalid rural areas to cities. And they will be disoriented, lost and susceptible to worldviews that offer simple answers, clear enemies and outcomes presented as infallible on account of divine sanction. Further, Central Asia is a region of instability and ubiquitous corruption – traits that also cater to al-Qaeda and local Islamist groups linked to or inspired by it. These conditions make it easy to launder money, smuggle weapons and raise cash through the drug trade, especially since Central Asia's regimes,

while broadly authoritarian, are weak and dependent for any stability on aging leaders whose succession is anything but predictable or transparent.

The region provides fertile ground for radical variants of Islam.<sup>4</sup> A community consisting of millions of Muslims emerged in Central Asia soon after the dawn of Islam, but Islam's political role was limited by the constraints imposed during the phase of Russian and, particularly, Soviet imperial control. That imperial period is now over, and Islam's influence – which is already apparent – on civic life and politics will grow. With the end of empire, radical forms of political Islam will also become more prominent. The portents are visible already. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) has forged close links with al-Qaeda, and used Tajikistan as a conduit for operations that focused on Uzbekistan but spilled into Kyrgyzstan as well. The lesser-known Hizb-ut-Tahrir al-Islami (Party of Islamic Liberation) avows peaceful means, but pursues an ambitious goal quite consistent with al-Qaeda's global agenda: a trans-national Islamic community. While the IMU is in tatters with the fall of the Taliban, the Hizb remains entrenched, even if large numbers from its ranks languish in Central Asian prisons.

Globalisation, though the harbinger of Western values rejected by Islamists, will enable the Muslim world to exert a greater influence, as people, goods and ideas from the Islamic world penetrate greater Central Asia. There are also compelling historical reasons why Islam will become a prominent vehicle for social protest in Central Asia. The people of this

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post-colonial setting are casting about for a new identity; Central Asia's culture and religious makeup guarantee greater contact with the Islamic world; and democracy is absent while social and economic problems are plentiful. Islam will not be the only vehicle for protest and reformulating identities, but independence from Russia will surely restore what would have otherwise been Central Asia's orientation: southward towards the larger Islamic world. Terrorism and militancy will not be the main, let alone sole, manifestation of Islam in Central Asia's politics, but there is no doubt that states and organisations from beyond the region have funded mosques and *madrassas* (religious schools) to propagate radical variants of Islam.

The third reason why the American presence in Central Asia is likely to prove long-lasting is that the regimes in the region have good reason to draw the United States into their internal affairs. Autocrats all, Central Asia's leaders are eager to harness America's might and its single-minded focus on terrorism to strengthen their grip on power. The biggest challenge to that hold are not democratic or nationalist opposition movements, which have been shut down or driven abroad; it is radical

Islamic groups, such as the IMU and the Hizb. Central Asia's leaders know that 11 September has helped them gain American support. Now, they are trying to anchor that support by offering themselves as partners in the campaign against Islamist terrorism. They perceive an opportunity to persuade the United States to jettison its obsession with human rights and accept that radical Islam is the only alternative to their brand of authoritarianism. In addition to providing regime security, strong bilateral relations between Central Asian governments and the US may help those governments realise regional geopolitical objectives. Thus, the state most eager to attach itself to the US is Uzbekistan, whose pretensions to regional hegemony and irredentist claims evoke fear and suspicion in neighbouring states, who, in turn, are also keen to clamber on the US bandwagon. Gaining American aid by making their bases available is seen as a both a hedge against Uzbekistan and as a means to ensure that American resources do not strengthen Uzbekistan alone. Furthermore, Central Asian governments are bound to see continued American strategic engagement in their region as a counterweight and safeguard against Russia and millenarian Islamic movements.

Finally, the United States itself is likely to resist retreating from the commitments it has undertaken in Central Asia – even though they may prove costly and perilous – for fear of communicating weakness to adversaries. Resolve and staying power have become paramount in the war against terrorism, and the American leadership will worry that a hasty departure from greater Central Asia will send the wrong message and invite more acts of terror. Accordingly (if paradoxically), the more unstable greater Central Asia becomes, the more pronounced America's nervousness about disengagement will be. Furthermore, the historical record shows that once an American military presence is established abroad various special interests within the United States invariably lobby for its continuation. The list of supporters of continued engagement will doubtless include human-rights advocates, development specialists, hard-boiled realists, idealistic boosters (liberals or conservatives) of democracy and markets, think-tanks and military strategists. The logic uniting these disparate groups will be that Central Asia will be stable only if it is secure, democratic and prosperous, and that these outcomes will not materialise without American leadership.

### **An ambivalent and weak Russia**

The need for a counterweight against Russia was an important consideration that led Central Asian regimes to forge military ties with the United States after 11 September. In the natural order of things, Russia, its myriad problems notwithstanding, would have retained its hegemony in

Central Asia by virtue of proximity, its perceived need for strategic depth and its superior power. Russia, for all of its ailments, has hardly been sidelined in the region.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the South Caucasus aside, Central Asia is the only region in which Russia could claim preponderant influence – until the Americans arrived. Not surprisingly, in both places there is apprehension – with traditionally pro-Russian Armenia the exception – that Russia will prove ruthless in preserving its supremacy, whether by conniving to determine the route of Caspian energy pipelines, retaining existing military bases or attempting to gain access to new ones, aiding separatist movements, seeking to dominate regional peacekeeping operations, or framing its war in Chechnya as anti-terrorist crusade for which it needs access to the territory of states in Central Asia and the South Caucasus.<sup>6</sup> Russia clearly does not intend to allow itself to be marginalised in Central Asia. In December 2002, for example, it signed a military agreement with Kyrgyzstan that provides for the stationing of 20 aircraft (fighter jets and bombers) and up to 1,000 troops at the Kant airbase, east of Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan's capital. The aircraft will bolster the 5,000 troops from Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan that will constitute the 'rapid-response force' that these countries agreed to establish in November 2002 in order to empower the Collective Security Organisation that they organised at Russia's initiative.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, Central Asian regimes eagerly signed security agreements with the United States. These agreements have allowed the United States to build military infrastructure at Khanabad in Uzbekistan, where elements of the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division are deployed, and at Kyrgyzstan's Manas airport, where F-15E and FA-18 tactical aircraft will be based and facilities built to accommodate military transport aircraft ferrying supplies. There are also plans underway to train and equip local militaries and intelligence agencies. These activities point to a deepening, long-term commitment in a new strategic theatre and could encompass Kazakstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, which do not want to be left out. Consider, for example, the decision made in the summer of 2002 to provide military training to Turkmenistan, which had not been key to the American war against the Taliban and al-Qaeda and in fact had been leery about joining the rush to align with the US.

Russia is at best ambivalent about this extension of America's strategic sphere. This ambivalence has sometimes been glossed over in the United States because of the broader upturn in its relations with Russia post-11 September and the belief that Russia has now cast in its lot with the West. True, Russia acquiesced to the scrapping of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty; the US and Russia have agreed in principle to slash their strategic nuclear forces; Russia has gained a substantive consultative role in

NATO; Bush and Putin appear to have established a warm personal rapport; and pundits proclaim a new era of Russo-American harmony and the burial of Cold War suspicions. Yet, the Russian position has not changed as dramatically as some American observers assert.<sup>8</sup> While Moscow desires cooperation, it still suspects that Washington is seeking to undermine Russia's interests and eroding its few remaining positions of power.<sup>9</sup> The proof, to Russian eyes, is in the expansion of NATO (now poised to incorporate the Baltic states); the launching of a missile defence programme and the withdrawal from the ABM Treaty; the war against Iraq; and single-minded US support for the Baku–Ceyhan pipeline, which will carry oil from Azerbaijan (and perhaps eventually Kazakhstan) to Turkey, circumventing Russia and increasing the regional influence of Turkey, America's ally. Now, American power has been projected, apparently for the long term, into Russia's southern flank. Whether the Russian understanding of American intentions is accurate is beside the point: the fact is that Russian assessments are shaped by the downward spiral in all forms of Russian power in a world of unrivalled American supremacy and by the resulting anxiety and suspicions.

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For now, Russia can at best hope to be an adjutant to the United States in Central Asia, a region it has dominated since the mid-nineteenth century. This hierarchical arrangement will stem from the disparity between American and Russian power, itself a product of Russia's multifaceted problems.<sup>10</sup> Russia has had three years (2000, 2002 and 2003) of good economic growth, but the spurt has been more the result of soaring oil prices and arms sales (which netted large export revenues) and a falling rouble (which increased demand for goods produced at home) than breakthroughs in fundamental economic reform. Many problems that could slow or even end this growth persist, among them rampant corruption, capital flight and anaemic foreign investment, Byzantine regulations that perplex investors, crumbling infrastructure, the diminishing quality of human capital on account of HIV/AIDS, high suicide rates, a drug-resistant strain of tuberculosis, alcoholism and drug abuse.<sup>11</sup> The news on the military front is even worse. Steep cuts in Russia's military forces are not based on well-conceived reforms; rather, they represent a collapse driven by the inability to pay and house soldiers, afford weapons and training exercises, or even pay the bills to keep electricity flowing to Russian bases. The war in Chechnya, despite the recent referendum and Putin's attempts at normalisation, is another burden and could increase the terrorist threat to the Russian heartland.

Russia was too weak to block the American intrusion into its putative sphere of influence. So it has, under the pragmatic approach of Vladimir Putin, made a virtue of necessity, hoping to benefit from its cooperation in the long term. But it made this choice only after its attempts to pressure Central Asian states to limit military cooperation with the United States failed, a fact rarely noted. The payoff is expected in arms control, economic assistance, better relations with NATO and a more understanding American attitude towards the war in Chechnya. Meanwhile, the Russians calculate that if the American venture into Central Asia extirpates Islamic radicalism (a task beyond Moscow's abilities but an outcome very much in its interests), so much the better. Russia, like the regimes of Central Asia, fears militant Islam, even more so because of the war in Chechnya and revolutionary Islamists in greater Central Asia. But even if all of these dividends are paid, Russia has been co-opted in greater Central Asia, and appears consigned to cooperating in the erosion, bit by bit, of its position there. Central Asia, as well as the South Caucasus and the Tajik-dominated government in Kabul (whose members worked closely with Russia and received its arms when they constituted the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance), look to the United States to balance Russia, and regard it as the better bet when it comes to economic benefits. The slippage in Russia's position will become most apparent when Uzbekistan, the linchpin in the region's balance of power and the state most eager to reduce Russian influence, forges stronger economic and military ties with the United States.

Russia's self-image as a great power with entitlements will make this diminution of its standing in greater Central Asia even harder to accept, especially when the tangible gains from cooperating with the United States remain unclear and perhaps elusive. Russia's Hobson's choice, then, rests in this: America's success in Central Asia will end Russia's predominance there; its failure, while offering Moscow momentary *schadenfreude*, will bring trouble to Russia's door at a time when Russia is too weak to deal with it independently. The problems that could flow from greater Central Asia into Russia include militant Islam, terrorism, refugees fleeing states broken by civil war, transnational crime and narcotics' traffic.

### **New patterns in South Asia**

Even before the post-11 September American intervention in greater Central Asia, a strategic realignment was underway between the US and India. Once the Soviet Union imploded, India began to rethink its grand strategy, particularly after the advent in 1998 of a coalition government led by the nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, which was unencumbered by the anti-Americanism or socialism of the Congress governments that



had governed India since its independence. President Clinton's visit to India in 2000 initiated a rapprochement, and it gained momentum once the Bush administration took office.<sup>12</sup> The principal foreign policy and national security officials in the new American government believed that, with the Soviet Union gone and China looming as a challenger, India, not Pakistan, was the worthier partner.

Immediately after 11 September, India took a bold and unprecedented leap: it offered the US bases for military operations in Afghanistan. Washington delayed, courted Pakistan, and eventually rebuffed India's offer. India's leaders were angered and perplexed: they had expended considerable political capital only to be embarrassed when the US embraced Pakistan. In Indian eyes, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) was the prime patron of the Taliban, and Pakistan's president, Pervez Musharraf, had been a steadfast supporter, his subsequent incarnation as an avatar of anti-terrorism notwithstanding. Some Indian strategic analysts were quick to claim that America had not changed, and that it remained an unreliable partner.

Once again, Pakistan appeared to have outmanoeuvred India by leveraging its geography. During the Cold War, it used its location south of the Soviet Union to become – as one of its prime ministers put it – America's 'most allied ally'.<sup>13</sup> It garnered American economic aid and weapons and averted what would otherwise have been Indian preponderance in South Asia. After September 2001, Pakistan could offer America what India could not: direct access to Afghanistan plus a bonanza of intelligence on the Taliban. Musharraf, desperate to avoid a strategic nightmare for Pakistan in which India, its mortal enemy, consolidated a strategic alliance with the United States, did not hesitate.

After the 13 December 2001 attack by Kashmiri terrorists with links to Pakistan on the Indian parliament in New Delhi, US diplomacy assuaged Indian concerns that the US had again tilted toward Pakistan. Some influential Indians even assert that the American engagement with Pakistan could help stabilise it, to India's advantage. Yet it is hard to see an increase in stability in Pakistan since 11 September. The economy is a shambles; the country lurches between corrupt semi-democracy and military rule; the political arena brims with fundamentalist groups; political institutions do not work; the transfer of power often occasions strife; and Islamist parties, traditionally written off as electorally impotent, became a powerful force after the most recent provincial elections, and now control the critical provinces of Baluchistan and Northwest Frontier Province (the latter borders Afghanistan and is an al-Qaeda refuge).<sup>14</sup> Beyond the fixation with Kashmir and India, Pakistan's small political elite has not articulated a coherent and abiding vision for its country.

India, to be sure, has its own profound problems – not least a political leadership obsessed with attaining great power status in a country mired in poverty and illiteracy due substantially to the inadequacy of that very leadership. But its political system is sturdy, its democracy robust and subject to the rule of law and its military subordinated to civilian control. India's potential – exemplified by a vast pool of scientific and technical expertise – has finally begun to show, thanks to the wide-ranging, albeit slow-moving, reforms aimed at modernising and opening up its economy.

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Plans are in the works to sell American defence technology to India; the idea of a strategic partnership has strong support in Washington and has begun in forms such as military-to-military contacts and naval patrols in the Straits of Malacca.

The American attitude towards the attack on the Indian parliament in December 2001 was a far cry from 1971, when the USS *Enterprise* was dispatched to the Bay of Bengal to deter (unsuccessfully) an Indian attack on Pakistan. This time, American and Indian pressure forced Musharraf to arrest fundamentalists at home, and

American officials voiced understanding for Indian outrage. Pakistan's attempts to internationalise the Kashmir problem by invoking root causes, referendums, distinctions between terrorists and freedom fighters, and the dangers of nuclear war, cut no ice with the Americans. Not one Indian battalion was moved back, and the US froze the assets of two major Pakistan-based terrorist groups long condemned by India. Not even China, Pakistan's traditional ally, issued its customary warnings to India. The US leaned on Pakistan to round up militant Islamist groups that infiltrate Kashmir and insisted that it also crack down on infiltration into Kashmir across the Line of Control. There has been no rush of American aid and investment; the US has been unyielding even in easing tariffs on textiles, Pakistan's key export to the US. Musharraf received much praise from American leaders for corralling militant groups, but that did little to change the facts on the ground: 500,000 Indian troops massed along Pakistan's border, with Washington acknowledging publicly that India had the right to protect itself against terrorism.

Musharraf, then, has rather little to show in terms of American gratitude. The 11 September attacks may have accelerated rather than arrested what remains a major problem: Pakistan's possible fragmentation. Musharraf's alignment with the United States against the Taliban and al-Qaeda has alienated Pakistan's powerful Islamists, who see it as betrayal, if not apostasy. The democratic elements in Pakistan regard Musharraf as a coup-maker bent on perpetuating his power by emasculating democracy

through rigged elections and referendums. Pakistan's armed forces and the intelligence services contain elements that were unenthusiastic about the abandonment of the Taliban and that remain sympathetic to Islamist doctrines. In terms of domestic politics, Musharraf has become more vulnerable since 11 September. Given the power he has arrogated during that period, this makes Pakistan particularly unstable. This is hardly good news for India, and not only because Pakistan has nuclear weapons. The geographical, cultural, historical and demographic links between the two countries dictate that India cannot escape the fallout (literal and metaphorical) from Pakistan's fragmentation. India must, therefore, support stability in Pakistan. That means not pushing it to the brink.<sup>15</sup> But Indian restraint depends not just on the foresight of its leaders, but also on the passions of militant groups that the Pakistani government may not effectively control. In South Asia, then, the combination of state collapse and war that could turn nuclear remain big problems – ones in which the US is deeply implicated.

The United States has little choice but to work towards developing a more stable Pakistan. The rub is that attempts to do so will draw America deeper into Pakistan's internal affairs. That carries the risks of a backlash (of which there is already considerable evidence) in a country where anti-American feelings run deep. Nation-building in Pakistan also will not come cheaply. While neither the American public nor its political leadership have much enthusiasm for what promises to be a messy and costly venture, indifference is not an option. Pakistan's descent into civil chaos would send shock waves into Afghanistan and Central Asia, making both susceptible to the depredations of a reconstituted al-Qaeda and its local sympathisers. If Russia faces a Hobson's choice in Central Asia, so does the US in South Asia.

### **China's losses**

India's budding alignment with the United States unsettles China almost as much as it does Pakistan. Japan is already an ally and a platform for the projection of American power; Taiwan is defended and armed by the United States; a substantive strategic partnership with India would, from the Chinese perspective, amount to encirclement. Unlike Central Asia, Russia, Pakistan and India, China has made no solid gains from the changes in US policy after 11 September. Before, the consolidation of Chinese influence into Central Asia seemed inexorable, given Russia's weakness and China's proximity and ascendancy. By acquiring oil fields in Kazakhstan, expanding trade and communication links, and building strategic ties with Russia, the Central Asian states, Iran and Pakistan, Beijing set about laying the groundwork for long-term advances. The

Chinese leadership sees Central Asia as a critical new region. It adjoins Xinjiang, an energy-rich province far from China's centres of power in the east, whose indigenous people, the Turkic-Muslim Uighurs, chafe under Chinese rule and are closer culturally and ethnically to Central Asians than to Han Chinese. Islamic fundamentalism and pan-Turkic movements from Central Asia are not likely to stay locked up regions (which are no more than arbitrary and tidy administrative conceptions); they will ignore such borders and travel through terrain defined by religious and ethnic kinship. Chinese leaders have acknowledged as much and have made the crackdown on Uighur nationalist groups in Central Asia a priority in talks with the region's leaders. Official Chinese commentaries underscore the menace to Xinjiang from foreign-trained Islamist secessionist movements, and the 2002 Chinese White Paper, 'China's National Defense in 2002', discussed the problem at length.<sup>16</sup>

The events of 11 September roiled the waters of Central Asia at a time when China was navigating them with assurance. The United States, which has long positioned forces on China's eastern flank, has now deployed them on its western flank as well – and apparently for the long haul. And China's two putative allies of convenience, Russia and Iran, seemed willing to accommodate US interests in Central Asia. The former had built a 'strategic partnership' with China, which included the

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formation in 2001 of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), consisting of China, Russia and the Central Asian states (minus Turkmenistan), designed to combat Islamic radicalism. It now appears that the United States will take the lead against terrorism in Central Asia with Russian and Central Asian cooperation, and the future of the SCO is uncertain. Washington has rebuffed Iran's erratic efforts for better relations with the US, but that may offer scant comfort to Beijing, for the rumblings of change evident in Iranian society could yet transform

the US–Iran relationship in ways that do not work to Beijing's advantage, especially if a democratic Iraq were to emerge from the ashes of Saddam Hussein's regime. Pakistan, which for decades looked to China for support against India (a common enemy), now hosts American troops and is reining in anti-India organisations.

Despite the disruption of al-Qaeda and the Taliban's collapse, weapons and radical Islamist ideas continue to flow into Xinjiang. Fundamentalism has few adherents among the Uighurs, although some did take part in al-Qaeda operations, and China claims that the Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) has been trained in al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan. Yet the majority

of Uighurs are not linked to radical movements, but still sees the regime in Beijing as an alien force that controls their homeland through coercion, Han immigration and restrictions on Islam and the Uighur language. Even though Uighur nationalism is resilient, it has only sporadically expressed itself through violence and terrorism and has been proved manageable.<sup>17</sup> The emergence of militant Islam in Central Asia is therefore a problem for China. The tentative regional stability established by America's post-11 September deployments and Washington's decision in 2002 to designate ETIM as a terrorist organisation may enable China to better control its 'Uighur problem'. But there are major tradeoffs. China's drive for influence in Central Asia will become harder now that the United States has ensconced itself in the region, and the American military presence on its western edge complicates China's strategic planning.

### **Iran, the Gulf and Turkey**

In the early phases of the American war in Afghanistan, there were signs of a thaw between the US and Iran. While the expansion of contacts with the US potentially offered Iran political and economic benefits, Iran's conservative clerics feared it would bolster and encourage reformist forces. This fear was heightened by scenes, received by thousands of satellite receivers in Iran, of Afghan Muslims, freshly delivered from the Taliban's stultifying grip, dancing in the streets, discarding burkas and rejoicing in their newfound freedom. The implications of such a reaction to the dismantling of an Islamic regime were not lost on the guardians of Iran's Islamic government, who know that the revolution inaugurated by the Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979 has lost support on account of its myriad failures, its draconian moral codes and its deafness to the yearnings of Iran's young, restless population. Rarely has The United States' popularity been higher among young Iranians.

In the Persian Gulf, by contrast, the US arouses much ill will among ordinary people, who blame it for supporting Israel's repression of the Palestinians and for waging what appears to them a war against Islam. Militant Islamists accuse it of propping up corrupt princes and sheikhs, for stationing troops near Islam's holiest sites and for contaminating Arab-Muslim culture through its commodities, advertisements, movies and television programmes. The American decision to wage war against Iraq on the grounds that Saddam Hussein was developing WMD is seen as hypocritical in view of Israel's nuclear weapons and morally bankrupt on account of the hardships imposed on ordinary Iraqis. (That Saddam Hussein has been the greatest oppressor of Iraqis has been obscured by the focus on American motives.) A steady radicalisation of young Arabs bodes ill for greater Central Asia, which will be increasingly exposed to political currents

from the Middle East. The American intervention in a major Arab country will not, of course, have reverberations that bring down governments in greater Central Asia. But it could destabilise Pakistan and Afghanistan and, more broadly, make the fiery, Manichaeian discourses of Islamic militants more appealing and plausible to rootless young Muslim men in greater Central Asia. This is all the more likely if the result of 'regime change' in Iraq is not democracy but anarchy and fragmentation, which destabilises surrounding countries and stokes radicalism in the Arab world.

The projection of American power into greater Central Asia after 11 September could also contribute to a strategic reassessment in Turkey. If Turkey plays a significant role in Central Asia and Afghanistan in the post-Taliban period – for example, through peacekeeping and by providing economic assistance and military training – the balance between its European and Asian orientation could shift in favour of the latter. That is all the more likely if membership in the European Union, which Turkey now covets, proves unachievable. If Turkey focuses on Central Asia and the South Caucasus because it concludes definitively that the EU is an ever-receding goalpost, Turkish political actors who resent the EU's intrusive and humiliating 'requirements' for admission will gain strength. Turkey could then choose a strategy that combines active involvement in the east and an alignment with the US and Israel, particularly if NATO dithers in search of a post-Cold War rationale and its relevance to Turkey's diplomacy and national security become unclear.

A more general consequence of the American war on terrorism, particularly given that the war that destroyed the Taliban has been followed by another that toppled Saddam Hussein, may be to increase the number of states and groups with nuclear weapons. Advances in high-precision weaponry and the availability of off-the-shelf enabling technologies – for example, global position systems – could empower them to deliver nuclear weapons on target, while Pakistan's fragility, Russia's ill-secured military installations and North Korea's nuclear weapons could, together, ease access to fissile materials. Nuclear weapons (or crude variants, such as radiological dispersal devices or 'dirty bombs') may serve as the great equaliser or magic bullet that enables weak states to deter, or failing that, to exact a heavy toll on, the peerless conventional military forces of the United States. The risks that Washington would run in projecting its power to remake countries, as it did in Afghanistan and Iraq, would then be substantially increased.

### **Lessons for strategy and policy**

The convention of defining Central Asia as a grouping of five states is of diminishing value for effective policy making and sound strategic analysis.

A seamless web connects Central Asia proper, the South Caucasus, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey and China's Xinjiang province. Thinking in terms of a 'greater Central Asia' captures the bigger picture and reflects how forces from one part of this extended region radiate across borders to other parts. Thus, an axiom of both policymaking and analysis should be that the consequences of a major change in one part of greater Central Asia will affect its other parts, often quickly and dramatically and through multiple networks. With respect to greater Central Asia, at least, area specialists and theorists may have to cooperate if they are to be of use to practitioners.

Practitioners themselves will have their hands full, for the United States is in danger of being drawn more deeply into greater Central Asia. Engagement could end in entrapment, as incremental but cumulatively significant initiatives aimed at creating order in a strife-prone region are implemented. Aside from the operational problems and risks accompanying such 'mission creep', the American public's support for protracted embroilment in the tumult of greater Central Asia states is liable to be thin – and without that support, it will be hard to sustain any policy that involves expenditures, setbacks, frustration and the loss of American lives. Nevertheless, the post-11 September US focus on counter-terrorism is likely to be durable and to dictate engagement in rather than avoidance of the tangled affairs of faraway and fragile countries run by unsavoury leaders. Campaigns against small, clandestine and mobile groups such as al-Qaeda cannot be chiefly waged – whether in greater Central Asia or elsewhere – through balance-of-power politics, deterrence and state-to-state war – the modalities Americans know and prefer. Instead, these operations will involve intrusions into the complex recesses of distant, unfamiliar societies. Witness Afghanistan, where bombings and assassination attempts aimed at destroying a weak US-backed government are routine and have necessitated a protracted and proactive post-conflict US military presence. Pakistan and the Central Asia states could eventually pose like challenges, and so could post-Saddam Iraq.

Wherever such challenges arise, US forces waging campaigns inside the borders of turbulent states will not face professional armies that operate on recognisable fronts and that respect, or even know, the laws of war. Rather, they will encounter chaotic environments, a farrago of irregular forces and fluid alliances that blur distinctions between friend and foe. Such conditions will shatter elegant maxims about committing

*American public support for protracted involvement in Central Asia is liable to be thin*

forces only after a clear mission and an 'exit strategy' are in place: planning will have to yield to improvisation in environments teeming with uncertainties. The enemy may engage American troops at the front. But because irregular, under-equipped forces will not be able to defeat those troops on strictly military terms, their primary goal will be not to win force-on-force-battles at the front, but to prevail in the 'rear' by eroding public support for such campaigns at home.

Finally, greater Central Asia is likely to be prone to instability generated by just such forces for the foreseeable future for a variety of reasons. If the United States wants to reduce the burden and risks of engagement, it must garner the support of its allies, especially given the lack of resilient public support within the United States for peacekeeping and nation-building operations. European governments could provide such support if they were to increase their defence spending and develop more robust forces, but that seems unlikely. But the current state of US–European relations is not conducive to the articulation, let alone implementation, of a multilateral strategy. If Europe's perception that the United States seeks to act unilaterally and to then leave the messy tasks of peacekeeping to its allies becomes even stronger, the prospects for transatlantic cooperation to manage crises and promote stability in Central Asia will fade, worsening the discord between the United States created by the war in Iraq.



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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> When I use the designation 'Central Asia,' or 'Central Asia proper,' I refer only to the five states conventionally considered to constitute Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.
- <sup>2</sup> See Robert Ebel and Rajan Menon (eds), *Energy and Conflict in Central Asia and the Caucasus* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).
- <sup>3</sup> See, for example, Jim Hoagland, 'Staying on in Central Asia', *Washington Post*, 20 January 2002, p. B7.
- <sup>4</sup> A balanced assessment of Islam in Central Asia is offered by Roald Sagdeev and Susan Eisenhower (eds), *Islam and Central Asia: An Enduring Legacy or an Evolving Threat?* (Washington DC: Center for Political and Strategic Studies, 2000).
- <sup>5</sup> Rajan Menon, 'In the Shadow of the Bear: Security in Post-Soviet Central Asia', *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Summer, 1995), pp. 149–181.
- <sup>6</sup> Georgia is already contending with such a Russian claim: its Pankisi Gorge region is home to Chechens and a haven for refugees from Chechnya – and in Russia's eyes, a sanctuary for Chechen fighters.
- <sup>7</sup> For details, see *The New York Times*, 4 December 2002 and 7 December 2002.
- <sup>8</sup> See, for example, Robert Legvold, 'All the Way: Crafting a US-Russian Alliance', *The National Interest*, No. 70, Winter 2002/03, pp. 21–32; and Thomas Nicholas, 'Russia's Turn West: Sea Change or Opportunism?' *World Policy Journal*, Vol. XIX, No. 4, Winter 2002/03, pp. 13–22.
- <sup>9</sup> This assessment is reflected in the statement of Russian politicians, military officers, and strategic analysts, as well as in Russian public opinion. See, for example, Col. Stanislav Lunev, 'Moscow Opposes US Presence in Asia', NewsMax.com, 23 February 2002, <http://www.newsmax.com/archives/articles/2002/2/23/142152.shtml>; Dave Eberhart, 'Putin Takes Flack for "Russia's 'Disintegration'', NewsMax.com, 24 February 2002, <http://www.newsmax.com/archives/articles/2002/2/24/135835.shtml>; Mikhail Khodarenok, 'Russia Surrounded By Military Bases', *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, No. 10 (2002), Center for Defense Information, *Russia Weekly*, No. 200, 2002, [www.cdi.org/russia/200-12.cfm](http://www.cdi.org/russia/200-12.cfm); Igor Torbakov, 'Putin Faces Domestic Criticism Over Russia's Central Asia Policy', *Eurasia Insight*, 2 May 2003, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav021202.shtml>; Ian Traynor, 'Russia Edgy At Spread of US Bases in Its Backyard', *The Guardian*, 10 January 2002; Sergei Blagov, 'US, Russia Marching On Central Asia', *Asia Times Online*, 7 December 2002, [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central\\_Asia/DL07Ag02.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/DL07Ag02.html); Stefan Wagtyl and Andrew Jack, 'Putin The Pragmatic', *Financial Times*, 11 February 2002.
- <sup>10</sup> Rajan Menon, 'Structural Constraints on Russian Diplomacy', *Orbis*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (Fall 2001), pp. 579–596.
- <sup>11</sup> On the erosion of Russia's human capital, see Mark G. Field and Judyth L. Twigg, *Russia's Torn Safety Nets* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2000); Vladimir Mikhalev, 'Poverty and Social Assistance', in Lawrence R. Klein and Marshall Pomer (eds), *The New Russia: Transition Gone Awry*

(Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Murray Feshbach, 'Russia's Population Meltdown', *Wilson Quarterly*, Vol. XXV, No. 1 (Winter, 2001), pp. 12–21.

- <sup>12</sup> The changes in the Indo-US security relationship since the end of the Cold War are covered in Juli A. MacDonald, 'The Indo-US Military Relationship: Expectations and Perceptions', study for the Office of Net Assessment, US Department of Defense, Contract # SP00700-98-D-4002/0043 (October 2002).
- <sup>13</sup> Liaquat Ali Khan was alluding to his country's membership in both the South East Asian Treaty Organisation (SEATO) and Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO).
- <sup>14</sup> See Owen Bennet Jones, *Pakistan: Eye of the Storm* (New Haven: Yale

University Press, 2002) for an extensive discussion of Pakistan's problems.

- <sup>15</sup> The summer of 2003 has brought some signs of a thaw between India and Pakistan. The Indian prime minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, sent India's ambassador back to Pakistan – who had been withdrawn after the December 2001 terrorist attack on the Indian parliament – and held out the prospect of negotiations. The Pakistani authorities welcomed the overtures.
- <sup>16</sup> 'Terrorism Emerges as Major Security Threat in Chinese White Paper', *Agence France Press*, 9 December 2002.
- <sup>17</sup> Thomas Beal, 'Uighur Yearning for Freedom: Xinjiang's China Problem', *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, 5 November 2001.