

CENTRAL ASIA AND THE WEST

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STRATEGIC PLANNING

United States foreign policy is heavily influenced by domestic forces. Public opinion is a key factor, but it is difficult to predict. The news media -broadcast and print- shape public opinion on international affairs and national security. News coverage and commentary focus the public's attention on certain international stories and, in the process of reporting shifts in public opinion, often set the terms of the political debate. Advocacy groups representing constituencies with particular interests in US foreign policy also try to shape the public's understanding of the choices confronting the US government. The policy judgments that emerge from this interplay of domestic forces are often transitory and do not conform to any strategic design. Ideally, policy making should reflect a long-range strategy -a vision of the future.

The National Strategy Forum is a non-governmental organization composed of 800 private citizens in the midwestern region of the United States who are well-informed, serious students of national strategy. As the name suggests, we provide a venue for citizens who want to exchange ideas and information with policy makers, scholars, journalists, and other experts in matters of national strategy. The National Strategy Forum is strictly non-partisan, and we strive to include a diversity of perspectives in our monthly meetings, conferences, quarterly bulletin, and strategic studies curriculum.

Our goal is to foster a constructive, un-mediated public discourse. We believe that this is the basis for a coherent and sustainable national strategy. Officials of the US government who take part in our programs find them valuable opportunities for testing and refining their judgments. If the United States is to develop and execute an integrated national strategy, US foreign and defense policies must be carefully articulated and must win public support. It is important for officials in Washington -as well as in other capitals- to understand the extent of that support. It is at this stage in the policy-making process that organizations like the National Strategy Forum perform a valuable service.

Turkey established the Strategic Research Centre in 1995, and together with the National Strategy Forum, these institutions provide models for strategic planning centres that could be established in the states of the Caucasus and Central Asia. We envision a network of centres that would focus on emerging national and regional issues -economics, demographics, natural resources, new technologies, environmental concerns, and cultural issues. The dissemination of information and analyses throughout this network would be a vitally important activity. Most conflicts originate in ignorance, suspicion, and miscalculation. States cannot operate in isolation. An understanding of the strategic interests of one's own state and the strategic interests of other states can help political leaders avoid conflict and expand cooperative relations.

The predicate for strategic planning is timely, accurate information. Within the United States, there is a paucity of information about the states of the Caucasus and Central Asia. Strategic centres in that area of the world would, in the process of developing and disseminating information about strategic issues, fill an information void and help expand political and commercial ties with the United States.

We share with you one perspective on emerging regional issues in the accompanying article by S. Enders Wimbush, a member of the National Strategy Forum's Academic Advisory Council, and myself.

KEY EMERGING ISSUES

The West's Interests In Central Asia

The disintegration of the USSR and the consolidation of new borderland states with their own political, economic, and military priorities created a new, fluid strategic environment in Central and South Asia (including Transcaucasia). With Russia's power and influence weakened, at least temporarily, the new states of Central Asia have taken different and frequently conflicting roads toward national consolidation, regional economic and political alliances, their former Russian master, and each other, thereby raising international security and policy issues that did not exist before the fall of Soviet power.

The result is the emergence of what might be termed a new "strategic region" encompassing most of Central and South Asia, including Transcaucasia on the margins, in which the various states' political and economic aspirations and objectives are allowed to interact freely for the first time in modern history. Geographic proximity, economic opportunity, ethnic and cultural ties, and religion work together to influence the evolution of the new strategic region in a southerly direction, toward historical preferences and allegiances that were interrupted by Russia's sealing of Central Asia to its own advantage.

Some observers have referred to the new situation as a reemergence of the Great Game, in which the United States replaces Britain as Russia's main contestant for influence in Central Asia and, ultimately, the Indian sub-continent. This description is simplistic and masks more than it reveals. In fact, the number of regional actors has expanded significantly since the 19th century, as has the number of political, economic, and military scenarios, potential conflicts, and outcomes. The new strategic equation is extremely complex, and it poses a variety of vexing and unforeseen policy questions for the Western alliance. What happens in Central Asia affects Western interests directly, for example through the impact of the competition in Central Asia on long-time allies Turkey and Pakistan. The Western interest in gaining access to Central Asian oil and other raw materials is clear, as is its interest in protecting its investments in the region. The Western alliance has a direct stake in slowing the growing drug trade from and through Central Asia, preventing public health emergencies, and ensuring the safety of the highly suspect nuclear power infrastructure.

Importantly, Central Asia is the only region in the world where the impact of five nuclear powers comes into play: Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, and India. The West's interest in containing nuclear proliferation and in preventing military conflict between or among Central Asian actors is self-evident.

With more independent actors and fewer restraints on independent action, Central Asia faces the prospect of greater political instability than at any time since the Soviet take-over. The interests and ambitions of most Asian states, and many Western ones, in some way meet in Central Asia.

The Problem of Definitions

Since the collapse of the USSR, analysts have been scrambling to determine how Central Asia should fit into the complex matrix of US foreign policy concerns. Most efforts have been superficial, reflecting the limited knowledge about the region of many in the policy community, which until 1991 was considered to be simply an appendage of Russia's domestic preoccupations. Thus, many of today's efforts to put Central Asia into some kind of strategic framework focus on the future of the "stans" (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan; Azerbaijan is allowed in on the margins), as if these exotic countries have burst onto the international stage somewhat by accident, and it is now up to Western analysts to determine where these strategic orphans fit in. In this view, the "stans" are less actors in their own right, with coherent economic and political preferences and historical attachments, than objects of others' action. Other analysts seek to link Central Asia to the infinitely variable mosaic of Islamic culture, usually with

warnings about the rise of "Islamic fundamentalism". Not surprisingly, the study of Central Asia is sometimes framed as a logical addendum to Middle Eastern studies, despite the thin historical, political, and ethnic bases for such an approach.

The search for a new analytical model for Central Asia of necessity must be broader and more flexible than this. Central Asian leaders themselves are anxious that Western policy makers will derive assessments from incomplete or misleading analytical contexts, thereby limiting the exploration of different kinds of mutual interests. President Kerimov of Uzbekistan expressed precisely this anxiety to one of the authors several years ago in a highly publicized meeting in Tashkent. Uzbekistan's choices, he insisted, are more varied and complex than the current debate among Western analysts over which road Uzbekistan should now take -the Turkish model, the Iranian model, or the Chinese model. Once the West has decided which road Uzbekistan is taking, he argued, many opportunities for political and economic interaction between Uzbekistan and the West become hostages to prejudices and notions that may have only superficial bases in reality.

Traditional efforts to draw borders around Central Asian studies tend to obscure and obstruct more than they illuminate. Is Central Asia a group of geographically proximate countries, recently freed of the Soviet yoke, yet inextricably tied to Russia in most things? Is Central Asia a (disjointed) community of history and culture, held together by shared ethnicity, language, and religion? Is Central Asia a newly resurgent outpost of the militant Islamic world, where "fundamentalism" might resonate with special power and where "Middle Eastern" conflicts might be played out? Is Central Asia an extension of the Turkic world, the meandering spine of a new Eurasian empire?

During the Soviet period, identifying what Central Asian studies include was decidedly easier, largely because Soviet borders formed the outer circles of the target. Soviet sources composed the basis of most serious academic work. The few Western universities with Central Asian programmes concentrated on the languages, culture and history of this circumscribed area. Central Asian studies, of necessity, was the study of a region. Among the important scholarly efforts, Turkish specialists, following the lead of the great French Central Asian-ist Alexandre Bennigsen, probably came closest to understanding Central Asia as an integrated culture, in which Turkey plays a pivotal role, rather than as a region made distinct by Soviet borders.

Today, for the purposes of serious study and analysis, Central Asia is less a region than a concept. Should Central Asia studies embrace Mongolia and Tibet? Is Azerbaijan part of the Central Asia studies' universe because its population shares Turkic roots, Islam (although Shiite), and a common language family with other Central Asians? How about Tatarstan, for approximately the same reasons? It should be apparent that any effort to impose a geographic boundary around the study of strategic issues that cannot be easily confined can lead only to confusion. Today, the forces that define the Central Asian concept may be as traditional as rivalries among the states that lie at the centre of the region, and as distant as South Korean investors, American oil companies, or cultural transfers from Turkey or Pakistan.

The key emerging issues that drive the interaction of the Central Asian states with the outside world, and which form the basis of Western interests in Central Asia, are multi-layered and overlapping. Some of the most important are:

Russian disintegration and instability combined with geopolitical realignment. Four years ago, Central Asia's outlets to the world were controlled by and from Moscow. Today, the picture is vastly different. The number of political, economic and military actors who can influence the Central Asian future has increased significantly. Most of the factors described below will contribute to the Central Asian states geopolitical reorientation, in different directions and to different degrees, away from their historic Russian anchor. Central Asia's traditional anchor, Russia, is rapidly pulling loose. Moscow's accelerating inability to control its own borderlands, let alone dominate the CIS, is apparent; and it is unlikely that Russia

will be able to play at any time in the foreseeable future the kind of imperial role, or even a dominant one, that characterized Soviet rule in Central Asia. While it is difficult to imagine Russia enforcing a long-term future on the CIS at this time, more conservative Russian forces, for example Yevgeny Primakov, the new Russian foreign minister, have made tying the former Soviet republics that became independent members of the CIS a top priority.

Russian instability and possible disintegration create a range of formidable political, economic and military problems and opportunities for the states of Central Asia. Russian concerns will continue to be played out in Central Asia. Foremost of these is the issue of residual Russian populations (see below). Russian nationalists already are seizing on this issue to advance their imperial programmes for recapturing the former USSR under Russian rule. But Russia's position is paradoxical: without reform it cannot hope to recapture the Russian empire; if it tries to retake the empire, it cannot sustain reform. Thus, Russia's behavior toward its former Central Asian republics probably will be erratic. On the one hand, Russian nationalists will covet Central Asia as something inherently Russian; in power, Russian nationalists might even become militarily assertive of Russia's priorities in the region, as they have been recently in their efforts to attain a dominant position over the disposition of Azerbaijan's oil through the politics of pipelines. On the other, reforming Russian governments are likely to pay little attention to the region and concentrate their efforts elsewhere.

Either Russian approach to the former Central Asian republics will stimulate the latter's search for other geopolitical affiliations. While Central Asian states' political correctness toward Russia and established trading relationships between them will continue for the short-term, most of the Central Asian states are rapidly finding other, more profitable outlets for their goods and services. For example, Uzbekistan's leading trading partner in the year 2000 will probably be China; Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, similarly, are finding China a more energizing and energized economic partner than economically stagnant Russia. Tajikistan's natural economic focus is southward, as is Turkmenistan's. Turkey's economic interest in Central Asia is now clear. Russia's inability to impede this reorientation creates at least a partial vacuum in which the power of other attractions is magnified.

In one way or another, Russian weakness stimulates or encourages most alternatives to Russian political, economic and military dominance.

Chinese assertiveness, expansion, and instability. Chinese movement northward and westward has both a governmental and non-governmental dimension. The Chinese are increasingly active as traders and temporary labourers in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Siberia, and the Russian Far East. Some may become permanent emigrants. The Chinese government is encouraging trade and investment in these regions and is expanding transport links.

China remains anxious about political stability in its Central Asian region. Demonstrations of successful economic and political development just across in the Central Asian borders will encourage China's Central Asian populations (Kazakhs and Uighurs, mainly) to seek greater freedom to develop in association with their ethnic kin in the "stans" and in Turkey. Some transfer of populations is already taking place.

Russian weakness in the face of Chinese economic dynamism could encourage China to expand aggressively and militarily into former Soviet Central Asia. Currently, the Chinese can use their economic strength to bring these regions more fully into its political orbit, but the possibility of military incursion cannot be ruled out.

In the event of Chinese instability -for example, a political implosion of the Soviet type- and continued Russian weakness, Central Asia could well be thrown into extended and deep

political turmoil, with other regional actors (e.g., Pakistan, India, Iran) playing increasingly assertive roles.

Competition for economic advantage. Several of the new states possess considerable discovered or suspected wealth. Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan are rich in oil, Turkmenistan in natural gas, and Uzbekistan is thought to possess impressive quantities of both, along with proven quantities of important minerals, such as uranium and titanium. Gaining access to or controlling these assets is likely to be a powerful magnet to other new states' and regional powers' political and economic interests. At the very least, Central Asia's economic ties could become significantly reoriented, if only because of the investment they must receive from outside to develop their extractive industries, such as oil. Investment from Middle East states, Europe, the US, South Korea, Turkey, and Japan is already on the books. Such a reorientation will have implications for the stability of the CIS, in which most states still have membership, and for Russian and Chinese security concerns.

Of particular importance will be efforts by both regional actors and outside interests to dominate what might be called the "oil rectangle": the existing and planned oil producing fields bounded by Kazakhstan and China's Tarim Basin in the north and by Uzbekistan's suspected reserves and the Caspian's proven ones in the south. The "oil rectangle", which lies entirely within Central Asia, contains a significant percentage of the world's known and suspected reserves, and it is likely to become one of the world's leading oil producing regions in the next decade.

Delivering oil from the region will be a particular problem. In this context, the Caucasian states, particularly Georgia, which has excellent ports on the Black Sea, become inextricably linked to Central Asian development. Georgia, in particular, already has established itself as an outlet to world markets for many Central Asian goods, including Uzbek cotton. Georgia's strong and important relationship with Turkey is potentially the key to the Caspian oil pipeline dilemma. The continuing conflict in Chechnya, where Russian oil pipelines are vulnerable, tied to general Russian instability, argues powerfully for a Georgia/Turkey connection for the bulk of Caspian oil. In this context, the Caucasus as an avenue for Central Asian trade is a vital element in the strategic equation.

Internal problems and political dynamics. None of the new states is politically stable or militarily secure; all have serious economic problems; several possess a residual military potential, including nuclear potential, which makes them regionally and, because these weapons can be sold, internationally threatening; most are courted by outside political actors that seek to draw them into political, economic, and military agreements that could threaten many Western interests. A good example is Tajikistan, where political and military developments are likely to continue to be intertwined with developments in Afghanistan. Tajikistan is likely to continue as an area of serious instability. Uzbekistan will continue to be keenly interested in developments in both Afghanistan and Tajikistan and may become more active than it has been to date in intervening covertly or actively to influence the internal affairs of these countries.

Regional instability. The potential for conflict among the new states and other regional actors remains high, as the current conflict between Tajikistan and Afghanistan illustrates. If communist control in China weakens, the Uighur, Kyrgyz, and, especially, the Kazakh populations of Western China are likely to become more openly assertive of their interests and more open in cultivating contacts with ethnic and religion kinsmen across the old Soviet border. Intra-regional conflicts can threaten Western interests in the region, for example the stability of Pakistan, and provoke adventurism by other regional players with expansionist aspirations, ethnic ties, or irredentist claims who are prepared to pursue them more actively in the absence of strong Russian counter-pressure. Both China and Iran could fall into the this category.

The transfer of other political rivalries into the Central Asian heartland. India is the heir to some aspects of the Russian relationship to Central Asia -especially the Tashkent-New Delhi

axis which Moscow encouraged after World War II. Russia will no doubt return to some degree to its long-standing policy of a special relationship with India, but it will no longer automatically dovetail with the interests of Central Asian states, especially Uzbekistan, in cultivating India. Recent indications that India may be upgrading the importance of its relationship with Iran, in the face of Pakistan's ambitious efforts in Central Asia, could be the first signs of India's search for an ally in this competition. If nothing else, it is evidence of a continuing feeling of insecurity among India's decision makers, which can only intensify as it becomes clear that Russia can no longer afford the kind of relationship with India that it sponsored formerly.

All Central Asian states will be interested in good relations with India as well, but the Islamic factor may predetermine a priority for Pakistan. Instead the new Central Asian states are likely to play Pakistan against India for their own advantage -with India and Pakistan, in turn, competing for influence in the new Central Asian states.

India has ambitions to be a global power. China is already recognized as one. The Indian-Chinese rivalry that has led to serious tensions during the past decades is likely to continue. India will continue to display a strong interest in Tibet and Chinese Turkestan (Xinjiang); Pakistan in Chinese Turkestan, less so in Tibet. Trade with East Turkestan is especially important for Pakistan, but India also has a major interest in expanded trade with all parts of Central Asia. China faces a dilemma with this trade; it needs to encourage it for economic and prestige reasons but will continue to be apprehensive about the political side-effects.

Borders. Afghanistan promises to continue as a pressing issue for all Central Asian political players -one they cannot ignore, whether they see Afghanistan as a source of trouble or an arena of occasional political opportunity. The Central/South Asian border region is potentially a region of major tension. Afghanistan is a prime candidate for being divided along ethnic lines, with the Pakistanis exercising strong pressure on the Pathans south of the Hindu Kush and Uzbekistan and Tajikistan competing for dominance in sharing the north. The separation of Afghanistan and the reincorporation of its ethnic parts into other states is possible and imaginable. These and other border issues will almost certainly gain momentum as Russian power diminishes. The Russians' recently renewed commitment to posting "peacekeeping" forces in Tajikistan probably reflects Moscow's concern that this crucial border region is slipping out of its control.

Residual populations. Russian populations, especially in northern Kazakhstan, will remain a touchstone for serious political and military conflict between Russia and the Central Asian states. The outlines of this conflict are visible already in the speeches and writings of open and "closet" Russian nationalists, including those close to Yeltsin, and in the machinations of the Cossack populations of northern Kazakhstan and the Caucasus. While attention has centred on the substantial Slavic population of northern Kazakhstan, observers have ignored the million Kazakhs who live in southern Russia (Urals) and on the Siberian side of the northern Kazakhstan border. Closely related Turkic peoples who have shown strong separatist tendencies inhabit Tuva and the Altay. The Russian population of Siberia and the Far East periodically has good reason to feel neglected and exploited by distant Moscow. Its views of relations with China and Central Asia will not necessarily coincide with views of Moscow's leaders.

Drugs, nuclear infrastructure, public health. Although several of the new Central Asian states possess significant undeveloped wealth, their separation from Russia will cause at least temporary uncertainties in the areas of drug control and enforcement; the stability of the nuclear power infrastructure, which is known to be weak and deteriorating; and in the quality and distribution of public health benefits. Regarding the last, the dramatic rise in infectious diseases throughout Russia, and the Russian failure to halt the increase through systematic immunization, poses a serious health threat to Central Asia and the surrounding regions. The West's stake in each of these areas is evident.

Democratic development/human rights. Tension will persist between the Western commitment to and articulation of human rights standards and those practiced by the governments of most of the new Central Asian states.

Conclusion

Central Asia is being rapidly transformed. The kind and timing of its new political, economic and military attachments must be monitored closely. It is in the interest of the Western alliance for Central Asia to transform peacefully into strong and viable states that can interact fully with their neighbours and with the world. Many forces can derail such a transformation. None is more dangerous than an unstable, fragmenting Russia. To the extent that it is possible to strengthen the Central Asian states' ability to withstand this fragmentation and likely Russian nationalist belligerence that will accompany disintegration, it is in the West's interest to do so. In this respect, the West's best protection against a Russia in turmoil is a periphery that is politically settled and financially prosperous. Central Asia and the Caucasus constitute much of Russia's periphery. The West's opportunity to aid their growth and stability should not be lost.