TITLE: Central Asia: Issues and Challenges for a New Administration

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Central Asia: 
Issues and Challenges for a New Administration 

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ABSTRACT 

With 50 million, mostly Muslim inhabitants bordering Afghanistan and Iran; with a vast area more than half the size of the continental United States, and as large as East and West Europe combined; with vicious and intractable conflicts that have already exploded under shaky governments; and with a vast arsenal of nuclear weapons, events in Central Asia will likely reverberate far beyond its borders. Further instability in the region could hinder the already precarious reform process in Russia, complicate the shifting alliances in the Middle East, exacerbate regional conflict, and increase the proliferation of narcotics and nuclear materials that has already begun to occur from the former Soviet Union. 

U.S. response to these challenges demands a more sober approach in defining the most serious causes of conflict in Central Asia and shaping the way in which U.S. resources are used. Concern about a potential Islamic threat, for example, should be seen in better perspective, and more attention should be paid to understanding the economic, military, social, political and other factors that are likely to trigger unrest. Humanitarian and technical assistance must be accompanied by a greater degree of follow-through in terms of oversight, accountability, and constant reassessments of U.S. efforts. Issues must be addressed in a coherent, coordinated, and interdisciplinary manner: experiences gained from other parts of the developing world -- such as Africa, Asia, the Middle East or South America -- cannot be readily applied to Central Asia. Specialists more familiar with navigating the particular Central Asian political and economic systems must combine with technical specialists to create policies and projects that address the interests of all sides. 

Most importantly, the motivation behind U.S. policies in this region should not be to offer benevolent or humanitarian assistance to an exotic, faraway region that has little relevance here at home. It should stem from the stark reality that many of these practical issues -- from narcotics trafficking and organized crime, to control of nuclear weapons, environmental devastation, and regional instability -- will directly affect our own national security interests. As these new countries grapple with creating new systems, new priorities, and new directions, it is much cheaper and easier to help address these issues early on than to wait until they have ballooned out of proportion and are far more difficult to control.
Samarkand, Tamerlane, Genghis Khan. The names alone evoke images of a romantic, exotic past. Lying at the heart of the silk route, the meeting place of East and West, Central Asia was long a center of world commerce and of spectacular economic, cultural and political achievements attained centuries ago. Agriculture was well advanced; trade was extensive; and great centers of education, art, architecture, poetry, religion, and scientific thought developed and flourished. By the sixteenth century, however -- as European merchants turned their attention towards the New World and as oceans became a more important mode of transport -- Central Asia's importance dramatically declined. The region seemed stuck in its past, slowly losing its glory, power and relevance as the rest of the world entered the modern age.

Today, Central Asia is no longer a major center of world commerce or scientific thought. But the five new countries that comprise formerly Soviet Central Asia -- Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan -- have once again become important actors on the world stage. Keeping in mind the vicious and intractable conflicts that exploded under shaky governments, the mostly Muslim population of 50 million, the immense territory the size of Eastern and Western Europe combined, and the vast arsenal of nuclear weapons present in the region, it seems likely that events in Central Asia will reverberate far beyond the republics' borders. Further instability in the region could hinder the already precarious reform process in Russia, complicate the shifting alliances in the Middle East, exacerbate regional conflict, and increase the proliferation of narcotics and nuclear materials that has already begun to occur from the former Soviet Union.

These dangers are not hypothetical. Civil war in Tajikistan has already claimed an estimated 20,000 lives, more than were lost in all the combined internal conflicts of the former Soviet Union. The cruel acts committed there are as hideous as those in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the number of refugees from Tajikistan has already topped 0.5 million out of a population of little over 5 million. Weapons flow or military involvement has expanded from Russia, the other Central Asian states and Afghanistan. Other countries, like Iran, Turkey, and Pakistan, are vying for influence in the region and are concerned that the conflict may spread.
In the past, Western attention has focused on questions of Islam and ethnicity as the main catalysts for conflict in Central Asia, and thus the key to any Western response. This analysis has been misleading. Certainly since its introduction in the seventh century, Islam in many ways has formed the basis of life in the region, whose people are more akin to the neighboring Persians and Turks than to the Russians to the north. Russian conquest in the 1860s, and Moscow's subsequent efforts both to eradicate and coopt Islam, not only sharpened differences between Muslims and non-Muslims, but also greatly distorted the population's understanding of Islam and created competing Islamic ideologies among the Central Asians themselves. Likewise, although the major ethnic and national groups in the region -- as well as the borders of these former republics -- are essentially creations of the Soviet period, they, too, have acquired a life of their own, forming the basis for competing claims and rivalries. Today, thousands of people have died in territorial disputes and what have been called inter-ethnic and religious conflicts, and the number continues to grow.

Although these issues are important, however -- and while grievances may well be expressed under the banner of ethnicity or Islam -- historical, ethnic or religious animosities do not adequately explain the causes of conflict in the region. Indeed, the most vicious conflicts that have already occurred in Central Asia have been among Muslims, between Central Asians, and within individual ethnic groups themselves. The civil war in Tajikistan did not erupt as a result of Tajiks fighting other ethnic groups, but because of rival Tajiks fighting one another. The other major conflicts that have erupted in Central Asia -- such as the Uzbeks versus the Meskhetian Turks, the Uzbeks versus the Kyrgyz, or even the Uzbeks versus each other -- have overwhelmingly pitted Muslims against each other rather than against non-Muslims, and Islam has not been their root cause. The new Administration would do well to pay serious attention to the broad mix of other factors -- economic, military, environmental, social, and political -- that may become even greater sources of instability in the region and require a more coordinated and effective response.

It should be stressed that there are large differences among these new states. Although most of the republics have seen little violence so far, Tajikistan has witnessed the outbreak of full fledged civil war. Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are well-endowed with energy or other resources attractive to foreign investors; Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are relatively resource-poor. In Kazakhstan, the Russian proportion of the total population is large; in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, it is small and continues to decline. Although it is still unclear where democratic institutions may ultimately take root, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have been more tolerant of opposition groups on their territory than have the other Central Asian states.

Despite the differences among the five Central Asian states, the broad issues that follow are relatively common to the region, and will demand our attention if we are to respond effectively to events that may challenge Western interests.
Economic Challenges

Growing poverty, unemployment, and economic inequality, for example, are viewed by Central Asians as key causes of the tragic conflicts that have already occurred in that region, and as potentially explosive catalysts for conflict in the future. These republics were long the poorest in the Soviet Union. Today, according to official statistics, a full 98% of Kyrgyzstan’s population lives below the CIS poverty line, a standard that is exceptionally low to begin with; and Kyrgyzstan is by no means the worst off of these new states. Price rises have already triggered serious riots in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and the economies of most of these new countries continue to deteriorate against rising social needs.

Likewise, increasing competition among the newly independant Central Asian states over scarce resources is likely to trigger not only internal disturbances but also serious interstate armed conflicts. Although Central Asian leaders recognize that they must work together if their republics are to survive as viable states, more often the new countries have been competitors rather than partners.

Today, competing claims to water sources, arable land, energy and mineral resources, and the like are viewed as some of the most likely sources of serious conflict among the fledgling states in the near future. Water is plentiful, for example, in the two states where it originates, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, but it barely reaches the western parts of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. Now that water allocation among the new states is no longer centralized in the hands of Moscow, it is being used as a political lever among the new countries. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have made veiled threats to divert this water, the lifeline of the other states, to China and elsewhere in response to pressures from its former Soviet neighbors.

All of these problems are only exacerbated by rapid population growth. With growth rates as high as 3.2% per year, and a population expected to double by the year 2020, demographic pressures on increasingly scarce resources will place greater strains on governments to gain control of important resources and likely intensify popular discontent.

Narcotics Trafficking and Organized Crime

Widespread poverty and corruption, as well as the weakening of law enforcement and customs control, have fueled the expansion of “organized crime” networks and narcotics trafficking. Many Central Asians fear that this could become a major source of instability greatly hindering democratic reform. In a region where natural resources have not been exploited to benefit local economies, for example, narcotics are a readily available source of hard currency. Indeed, the amount of land under opium poppy cultivation in Central Asia has exploded over the past few years, making Central Asia potentially one of the largest opium poppy producers in the world.

Today, Russian sources estimate that opium poppy is growing on roughly 300,000 acres of land in this region. Although this has not been independently verified, the figure would rank Central Asia with Myanmar (Burma) as the two largest opium poppy
growers in the world; Afghanistan, at only 30,000 acres, would be a distant third. Opium production and trafficking into Western Europe and elsewhere have likewise increased dramatically. As one Central Asian put it, "we may well be witnessing the emergence of the new 'Colombia' of Europe -- only this time with nuclear weapons."

Given the poverty of Central Asians, opium products are viewed as providing quick profits otherwise impossible to attain. Indeed, two of these new countries, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, decided in the winter of 1991-92 to legalize the growing of opium for "licit", or medicinal purposes. Although Kyrgyzstan rescinded the decision within weeks, Kazakhstan -- geographically the largest state after Russia to emerge from the former USSR and the possessor of a vast arsenal of nuclear weapons -- did not. Kazakhstan is a major opium producer that boasts an additional 10 million acres of hemp, a plant whose dried flowers are used to make hashish and marijuana.

Central Asians seem to acknowledge the near impossibility of stopping illegal production of these drugs once even a portion has been legalized, and the increasingly limited legitimate world market for opium products. Several locals have expressed apprehension that organized crime, "narco mafias", and home grown cartels will assume more influence in Central Asia. Many fear this could lead to further instability at home, as it has in Latin America, as well as a surge of heroin on the Western market.

**Military Challenges**

Economic hardship and widespread corruption have made the role of the military and the presence of nuclear weapons reasons for greater concern. Some Central Asians have questioned the reliability of Russian troops -- where disaffection, frustration and personal hardship are growing -- to safeguard the more than 1400 nuclear warheads on Kazakh territory. While they do not expect a mass breakdown of authority, they question whether protection of nuclear weaponry or its components may be much more tenuous than commonly thought.

This concern has been difficult to verify and demands serious investigation. Less ambiguous is the likelihood that the present proliferation of conventional arms throughout Central Asia will provoke further conflagration. Enormous quantities of weapons have become widely available in Central Asia, mainly from Afghanistan and the former Soviet military. Local leaders on both sides of the civil war in Tajikistan have cited this situation as a serious impediment to ending the carnage in Tajikistan, and some have urged Western assistance in disarming the region's population before an even greater bloodbath ensues.

Such concerns are fueled by the discrimination and harassment directed toward Russian military personnel in these new sovereign states, where roughly 96-98% of the officer corps are Slavs and where the republics' independence has increased resentment toward the continued presence of Russian soldiers there. Local Ministers of Defense have repeatedly stated that the majority of Russian military personnel -- most of whom did not want to be in Central Asia in the first place -- would like to return to Russia, but
most cannot. This has been confirmed in public opinion surveys taken within the military ranks. Some have joked that there is nothing more explosive than a population of people who are increasingly frustrated in their daily lives, find mounting difficulties in feeding and clothing their families, face hostility and discrimination as well as personal hardship, and are armed.

All of this is exacerbated by the ambiguous control over local military affairs. Although a large portion of the forces located in Central Asia (roughly eleven divisions) now falls under local budgets, it remains unclear who has authority over these troops and what role Russian forces should play in the region. Interviews in Central Asia have suggested that the bilateral agreements of Russia with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan in mid-1992 do not fully clarify these roles, and that the formation of national armed forces has barely begun. Another disconcerting source of tension for local leaders has been the repeated statements from Moscow, particularly from Russia's Vice President Rutskoi and Defense Minister Grachev, that Russia is prepared to intervene militarily to protect the rights of Russians in the former republics.

**Environmental Issues**

Devastating environmental problems are also serious sources of discontent around which angry grassroots groups have started to form. The Aral Sea is perhaps the best known environmental disaster in this region. Because water has been siphoned off from the two main rivers that feed the Central Asian region, the Aral Sea -- once the fourth largest inland sea in the world -- has now shrunk to about one third of its 1960 volume, and one half of its 1960 geographical size. Huge salt and dust storms, heavy salinization of the surrounding land and water, and soaring rates of intestinal and respiratory disease now abound in what was once a relatively healthy area.

But the Aral Sea problem is only the tip of the iceberg. Heavy use of chemicals and pesticides on the land has massively contaminated local drinking water supplies. With few water treatment plants, the Turkmen Minister of Health stated in the mid-1980s that much of Turkmenistan's population drank from contaminated irrigation ditches, canals, or from the Amu Darya river itself -- in his words, from "nothing better than a sewage ditch". Today, the situation is worse. Severe air pollution has been identified in public opinion surveys as an even greater concern.

The cumulative result has been a dramatic rise in death and disease. Infant mortality, often used as an indicator to measure a population's health, has risen by as much as 50% in the Central Asian states over the past twenty years, to levels among the highest in the world. In some areas, infant mortality has officially reached as high as about 111/1000 -- meaning that more than one out of ten children born does not live to reach his first birthday. Most informal estimates are almost double that figure. As Central Asians watch their loved ones die in greater numbers than before, the legitimacy of those in power begins to dwindle.
Social and Political Issues:

All of this has been compounded, of course, by the enormous upheaval that has so fundamentally affected Central Asians' everyday lives. It is often difficult to fathom the degree to which the social fabric of the former Soviet Union has been rent in the chaos, dislocation and frustration caused by the breakup of the USSR.

Tensions have certainly surfaced between Russians and Central Asians. By the end of 1992, well over 100,000 Russians, many of whom were valued specialists, had already left these new Central Asian states, and the number continues to grow. In many ways the situation is typical of other countries that have undergone decolonization, as Russian "colonizers" have been reluctant to learn local languages or adapt to local control. One survey in early 1992 indicated that a full 80 percent of the 1.5 million Russians living in Uzbekistan felt more insecure and fearful than they did before Uzbek independence, and 86 percent opposed the creation of an Uzbekistan armed force. These figures have not diminished.

Sources of unrest, however, have also emerged from the turmoil among Central Asians themselves. Multiple and mixed identities -- Muslim and atheist, Soviet and Asian, Turkic and Slav, clan and regional, and individual ethnic identities -- have long coexisted within Soviet Central Asian society, if not within individual Central Asians. Many people viewed themselves as both Eastern and Western, modern and traditional, "believers" and good Soviets simultaneously, depending on context.

With the collapse of the old system, individuals are reasserting old identities and seeking new ways of defining themselves. This is an enormously difficult personal as well as societal transition, leading to frustration and conflict in many parts of Central Asia. "I am 100% Uzbek" said one Uzbek, "but I also feel 98% Russian. Who am I?" My children speak only Russian," lamented a Kyrgyz official, typical of many of his compatriots; "where do they fit in a world where, overnight, that has become scorned?"

The dislocation that has emerged throughout Central Asia has been reflected in a breakdown of social control. In some of these Asian states, soaring crime and homicide rates have rocked small communities, as have more heavyhanded official crackdowns on emerging independant groups. On the whole, the social dislocations in Central Asia today are massive. Many people no longer know where they fit -- creating fertile ground for the growth of social and religious organizations antithetical either to the interests of local governments or to Western interests.

Challenges for a New Administration

All of these issues will present increasingly important challenges not only to the Central Asians, but also to U.S. policymakers. Certainly the opportunities in Central Asia are great: vast energy and agricultural resources, for example, and large deposits of gold and other strategically important metals in some of the new Central Asian states make foreign investment especially attractive. These opportunities will be lost, however, if
the dangers of increased conflagration become a reality. Three guidelines might be useful for the U.S. in its efforts to diminish the potential for future unrest and assist these countries in their move toward democratic reform.

First, these issues must be made a priority. This does not necessarily require greater allocation of already limited resources, but rather demands a more sober approach in defining the most serious challenges in Central Asia and shaping the way in which U.S. resources are used. Instead of magnifying a potential Islamic threat, for example, it would be useful to understand in what ways Islam may play a constructive role in Central Asia in the midst of upheaval and change, and in what ways other factors may trigger unrest. In applying U.S. resources to the region, humanitarian and technical assistance must be accompanied by a greater degree of follow-through in terms of oversight, accountability, on the ground involvement, and constant reassessments of U.S. efforts. The twisted economic, social, and political legacy of Soviet rule means that the experiences gained from other parts of the developing world cannot be readily applied to Central Asia; what worked in Africa, Asia, the Middle East or South America will not necessarily work here. Specialists more familiar with navigating the particular Central Asian political and economic systems must combine with technical specialists to create policies and projects that address the interests of all sides.

Second, these issues must be addressed in a coherent, coordinated, and interdisciplinary manner. None of these problems can be viewed in isolation. Nuclear proliferation, organized crime, or narcotics trafficking, for example, cannot be viewed as purely legal or law enforcement issues in societies in which "organized crime" is often part and parcel of local and national governments, law enforcement is intentionally selective and weak, accountability and oversight of government officials has been non-existent, and corruption and illegal economic activity have been the norm for years.

Likewise, the Aral Sea and other environmental problems cannot be addressed apart from questions of water allocation and resource management, health care delivery, economic and political reform, organized crime, and relations with the other Central Asian states. The visit of Vice President Gore to the Aral Sea two years ago sent a powerful message that the United States sees the Aral Sea tragedy as an important environmental, political, and simply human problem meriting world attention. Today, coordination and coherence are needed if Western follow-up efforts are to have any impact.

Most importantly, the motivation behind U.S. policies in this region should not be, as has often been the case, to offer benevolent or humanitarian assistance to an exotic, faraway region that has little relevance here at home. Instead, it should stem from the stark reality that many of these practical issues -- from narcotics trafficking and organized crime, to control of nuclear weapons, environmental devastation, and regional instability -- will directly affect our own national security interests. As these new countries grapple with creating new systems, new priorities, and new directions, it is much cheaper and easier to help address these issues early on than to wait until they have ballooned out of proportion and are far more difficult to control.