

## **GEOPOLITICAL ENVIRONMENT OF CENTRAL ASIA**

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In the post-Soviet 1990s, the three key players in the geopolitical space around Central Asia—Russia, China and the United States—achieved a provisional equilibrium. Russia maintained its traditional dominance in its former Southern provinces. China, as it developed its economic relations with the Central Asian countries, gradually increased its own political influence, while seeking to avoid confrontation with Moscow. The United States, despite its preoccupation with other areas of greater strategic significance, kept a wary eye on the region. Despite its interest in the Caspian, Washington relegated the region to the periphery of its foreign policy activities. Post-Soviet Central Asia, as before, remained within the gravitational field of Russia, although China had come to exert substantial influence. The eleventh September altered the existing structure of power and influence radically. It made Central Asia the epicenter of geopolitical shocks on a global scale and redefined the geopolitical situation surrounding Central Asia. The alignment of power has changed: the United States is now the region's main economic donor and security manager.<sup>1</sup>

It is indeed a fact that, 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Rumer, B. (2002), "The Powers in Central Asia," *Survival*, The IISS Quarterly, Volume 44, Number 3, Oxford: OUP, p. 57.

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 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 US into their internal affairs. Finally, the US 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.

### **Central Asia and International Politics**

The situation in Central Asia has undergone a sweeping change since the 9/11. The region has become a pivotal theatre for war against terrorism that enhanced its importance internationally. The five states Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan however have been undergoing painful and complex nation-building processes, which are far from completed. Their inherent shortcomings include both political and socioeconomic structures that continue to remain frozen in a Soviet past.

### **Internal Dynamics**

Central Asia's main problems are primarily within. The post-Soviet political formations, especially the loyalty of the population is getting rest not with national but along regional or tribal-clan identities. With the collapse of the communist structure, people not sufficiently prepared

for democracy instead returned to traditional clan-based polity. Among them, Uzbekistan relatively enjoys a better national consciousness, attributed mainly to Uzbek settled lifestyle, whereas nomadic Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and Turkmenians cling to tribal loyalties. The internal power struggles, particularly in the smaller states are therefore increasingly assuming violent forms, putting in doubt their survivability-unless governments are able to address the domestic issues seriously.<sup>2</sup>

The recent developments in Kyrgyzstan and the Andijan crisis in Uzbekistan have shown the intricate power play among various internal and external forces challenging central authorities. In general, Islamic movement in Central Asia remains externally fuelled and an Afghanistan related phenomenon. Ironically, in Central Asia, any hopes for democratic transformation also remains mutated into anxiety about the spread of Islamic radicalism. Another disturbing aspect in the region is the interstate rivalry over supply of water, gas, and dispute over territory and resources. Ethnic tensions hampered regional cooperation and developing transportation links to the world outside. Clearly, the internal contradictions also get manifested in their external outlooks. e.g. all states, excepting Turkmenistan, tend to follow the 'multi vector' approach to foreign policy – maintaining cordial relations with neighboring states.

### **Central Asia and Current US Policy**

President George W. Bush's appeal to other nations to join the United States in the war on terrorism was quickly answered by the five states of Central Asia- Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. They declared solidarity with Washington and offered, variously, their land and air space for the United States to use in the anti-Taliban campaign. The war against radical Islamic movements waged by the United States in neighboring Afghanistan has benefited and strengthened these regimes, for whom militant Islam had been a real, deadly threat.<sup>3</sup>

Before 11 September the United States declined to exert any control over the region, a policy that would simply require too great an effort

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<sup>2</sup> Stobdan, P. (2007), in Sinha, A., Mohta, M.(Eds.), 'India and Central Asia,' *Indian Foreign Policy: Challenges and Opportunities*, New Delhi: Academic Foundation, pp. 227-228.

<sup>3</sup> Supra note 1.