
Central Asia's Crisis of Governance

January 2012

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Map of Central Asia



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The Region

Located in a strategically important neighborhood amid China, Russia, Afghanistan, and Iran, and sitting atop vast deposits of oil, gas, gold, and uranium, post-Soviet Central Asia is home to some 50 million people living in five countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. For centuries, the region has drawn the attention of the world's superpowers as they seek leverage over their foes, access to natural resources, or a base from which to influence adjacent regions. For just as long, the societies of Central Asia have been beset by lackluster and often abusive rule, first by warring and insular feudal chiefs, then by colonial conquerors from Russia, and then by their Soviet successors. Since gaining independence from the Soviet Union 20 years ago, the five Central Asian republics have struggled to find viable governance models and to place their economies, long moored to Moscow, on stable footing.

The region's governments have largely failed in that quest. Central Asia faces a bleak political landscape: corruption is rampant, human rights are routinely ignored, economic opportunity is limited, the mass media are sanitized in the best Soviet tradition, civil society is neutered, and even artistic expression is restricted—particularly in Uzbekistan. On the economic front, a qualified exception could be made for Kazakhstan. Aided by the country's generous oil reserves, an authoritarian government there has presided over economic growth. But Kazakhstan also faces real challenges of governance, economic diversification, and equitable distribution of wealth going forward. Elsewhere in the region, pronouncements of economic growth and low inflation—such as those routinely voiced by Uzbek leaders and echoed by international financial institutions—do not tell the full story of the economy's true shape.

Bundled together somewhat patronizingly as

“the Stans” in Western parlance, the five nations of post-Soviet Central Asia share historical and political similarities, though there are crucial differences, too. Oil-rich Kazakhstan, for instance, is a far cry from the poor and fractious state of Tajikistan. And the ongoing political ferment in Kyrgyzstan offers a stark contrast to the sterile political atmosphere of Uzbekistan. The following sections will examine the governance challenges faced by each Central Asian state in detail. The foreign policies of the major powers will be explored as well.

In the early 1990s, well-placed Communist Party officials ascended to presidencies across Central Asia. Twenty years later, three out of five remain in power, with no clear succession plans in sight. The other two departed the scene, leaving behind muddled aftermaths. Guided by autocrats, the region has experienced significant corruption, human rights abuses, conflict, and civil unrest. As Central Asian states grapple with these problems, Washington increasingly relies on the region as a logistical staging ground for the war in Afghanistan and a possible economic development partner for Afghanistan after the 2014 military drawdown; meanwhile, China and Europe covet the region's energy resources.

The recent wave of popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa is a reminder that even seemingly unassailable regimes can crumble quickly, with unpredictable consequences. Central Asia bears some similarities to the political, economic, and demographic structures across the Arab world, a fact that has not gone unnoticed in Central Asian capitals. Of course, Central Asia does not need external reminders of its instability—before there was the Arab Spring, Kyrgyzstan had its own season of political renewal. The country went through two revolutions in the space of five years, both predating regime overthrows

in Egypt and Tunisia. And in 2005, the Uzbek government ordered a violent crackdown on protesters following a prison break in the town of Andijan. Although limited in scope and not aimed at overthrowing the ruling regime, the events in Andijan showcased the government's zero-tolerance approach to protests of any kind. In that, the Uzbek government's reaction was similar to those of Syrian and Libyan authorities as they tried to deal with their own insurrections in 2011. Most recently, security forces in Kazakhstan shot and killed at least 16 people in December protests in a Western oil town—the most serious explosion of violence in the country's history.¹

Watching the Arab unrest, a prominent Kyrgyz politician said, partly in jest, that the Middle East got its revolutionary virus from Central Asia. In Kyrgyzstan, protesters shouted *Ketsin!*—Kyrgyz for “Get lost!”—as they chased out two consecutive dictators. The politician coined a new term: “The Kyrgyz *Ketsinism* is becoming a global phenomenon.”²

Ralph S. Clem, a political geographer at Florida International University, has attempted to quantify the similarities between Central Asia and the Middle East by studying data on governance, economic development, corruption, and wealth gaps from sources such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and Freedom House. Perhaps not surprisingly, his analysis does not bode well for Central Asia. “The empirical data available suggest a very close fit between socioeconomic conditions in Egypt and Tunisia on the one hand and the five Central Asian countries on the other, especially with regard to the youthfulness of the population. In other respects and in some countries, the pre-conditions associated with political unrest are

even more problematic in Central Asia than in North Africa,” Clem writes. He goes on to say that “this comparison [between the Middle East and Central Asia] portends turbulence ahead, particularly for Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.”³

None of this is to suggest that political change in Central Asia will follow the Middle Eastern or Kyrgyz scenarios of street protests and revolutions. For all the structural similarities between parts of Central Asia and the Middle East, there are critical differences, too. The population of Central Asia tends to be depoliticized, and some of its most active members are either content with the relative economic stability (as in Kazakhstan) or are working in Russia (as in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), and they are not clamoring for political change. The tumultuous experience of Kyrgyzstan has given authoritarian regimes in the neighboring countries a resonant, if self-serving, argument: revolutions lead to chaos and bloodshed, and authoritarian stability is preferable to half-baked democratic experiments. In the years to come, political change in Central Asia will likely be driven by inter-elite tussles, particularly during succession struggles following the death, retirement, or incapacitation of longtime rulers.

There are no simple solutions in the region. A rush toward democracy and elections, by itself, will not solve Central Asia's many crises and, in fact, may exacerbate them in the short term. But the status quo is equally fraught with risks.

The precise events that triggered street protests in Kyrgyzstan and the Middle East vary from country to country, but what they all have in common is popular anger at the anything-goes crony capitalism practiced by the ruling elites coupled with a lack of economic opportunity

¹ “Kazakhstan Asks UN to Help Investigate Deadly Clashes,” BBC News, December 22, 2011, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16305005>.

² “В Бишкеке объявили о наступлении глобального киргизского кетсинизма,” (“In Bishkek, the coming of the global Kyrgyz ketsinism announced”), Lenta.ru, February 22, 2011, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://lenta.ru/news/2011/02/22/ketsinism/>.

³ Ralph S. Clem, “From the Arab Street to the Silk Road: Implications for the Central Asian States,” *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, vol. 52, no. 2 (2011): 234, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://bellwether.metapress.com/content/t85t4223321wmr76/fulltext.pdf>.

for many others. As in Egypt and Tunisia, most Central Asian regimes, at one time or another, have fused the privilege to govern with the chance to get rich. At a time when many Central Asian men have to scavenge for livelihoods on construction sites in Russia and send remittances to their families back home, such rapacious behavior by rulers and their relatives and friends is particularly noticeable. “There is even a belief that [it is] Russia saving Central Asian dictatorships from revolutions by ‘sucking out’ from the region the young and active, but unemployed, population,” states Daniil Kislov, the editor of Ferghananews.com, a prominent Moscow-based news source on Central Asia.⁴

Across much of Central Asia, the failures of the ruling regimes and their crackdowns against many forms of dissent have left their citizens with few political alternatives. In the absence of a secular opposition, religious groups may enter the fray, a scenario that is plausible in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, particularly in light of the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan. Despite their façade of invincibility, some Central Asian regimes are inherently unstable, as the example of Kyrgyzstan has demonstrated. But as Kyrgyzstan also shows, the sudden collapse of a dictatorial regime may also have unforeseen consequences and unleash violence.

Given the historical, cultural, and linguistic kinship among the five nations that make up Central Asia, one would expect a degree of regional unity. Such unity could help the states tackle common problems, advance a coordinated position with respect to foreign powers, and ease cross-border travel for Central Asian citizens, to mention just a few possible areas of cooperation. Over the past two decades, though, the opposite trend has emerged across the region: a gradual process of drifting apart that has exacerbated Central Asia’s problems. For instance, an early

effort to foster cooperation on regional defense, through something called the Central Asian Battalion, faltered amid the mistrust typical of the region’s leaders. “They cooperated, but very reluctantly,” recalls retired General Anthony Zinni, who at the time headed the U.S. Central Command and worked closely with the battalion.⁵

The Central Asian states inherited a complex set of borders from centuries of Russian gerrymandering, giving rise to border disputes that continue to this day. The Soviet legacy saddled the region with economic problems, too. In the vast Soviet economic machine, however dysfunctional, Central Asia carried out a resource function: providing the Moscow engine with raw materials, such as Uzbek cotton or Turkmen gas. Moscow would then disburse subsidies to Central Asia. Once those Soviet links were broken, the Central Asian states struggled to create self-sustaining economic systems.

In a region that is dependent on agriculture, management of scarce water resources across borders has sharpened mutual recriminations, particularly between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which historically have sparred on a variety of issues. The region’s primary waterway, the Amu Darya River, flows northwest, giving the countries upstream, including Tajikistan, control over how much water travels downstream to Uzbekistan, where thirsty crops such as cotton require a lot of irrigation. Tajikistan wants to build a large dam and harness the Amu Darya’s power for electricity production, a plan that is causing consternation in Uzbekistan. In a healthier political environment, such disputes could be tackled more amicably. But in keeping with their rivalries, both sides appear to view water management as a zero-sum game, to the detriment of their citizens.

⁴ “Д.Кислов: Киргизия в течение ближайшего десятка лет рискует остаться вовсе без населения,” (“Daniil Kislov: Kyrgyzstan in the next decade remains at risk even without population”), Centrasia.ru, June 6, 2011, accessed February 14, 2012, <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1309897800>.

⁵ Anthony Zinni, telephone interview with the author, August 2011.

The Countries

Kazakhstan: Electoral Authoritarianism

In early April 2011, Kazakhstan treated the world to an elaborately staged display of democracy in action. Nursultan Nazarbayev, the country's only president since it gained independence in 1991, called a surprise election to decide who would rule Kazakhstan for the next five years. Nazarbayev's term in office was not up for another year, but the president felt the need to settle the issue ahead of time. Initially, Nazarbayev wanted to prolong his reign by a referendum. But when that plan met with ridicule abroad and constitutional hurdles at home, his handlers abruptly changed tack and called the election instead.⁶

Of course, the outcome of this vote, like of all the earlier ones, was never in doubt. Nearly everyone who is allowed to vote in Kazakhstan did so that April Sunday, and of those who showed up, almost everyone voted to reelect Nazarbayev. The government said that Nazarbayev won by a crushing margin approaching 100 percent. Leaving a polling station, one rival candidate confessed that he, too, had voted for the incumbent because Nazarbayev was going to prevail anyway.⁷

If there were any doubts that Kazakhstan, Central Asia's economic powerhouse, had mastered the trappings of democracy without heeding its substance, then this election would surely dispel them. Because of its oil supplies, Kazakhstan has vast economic potential. The central question is whether the country's authoritarian system of governance is capable of fully developing that potential—or whether its rigid, top-down regime will hinder Kazakhstan's progress in the years to come.

Kazakhstan Snapshot

Size: Roughly 2.7 million square kilometers

Population: Approximately 15.5 million (July 2011)

GDP: Nearly \$149 billion (2010)

Natural resources: Petroleum, natural gas, coal, iron ore, manganese, chrome ore, nickel, cobalt, copper, molybdenum, lead, zinc, bauxite, gold, uranium

Main exports: Oil and oil products, ferrous metals, chemicals

Corruption Perception Index: 105/178 (2010)

Political rights (1 = most free, 7 = least free): 6 (2011)

Civil liberties (1 = most free, 7 = least free): 5 (2011)

Press freedom: 172/196 (2011)

Sources: CIA World Factbook; World Bank (GDP data); Transparency International; Freedom House.

During his more than 20 years in power, Nazarbayev made sure that no credible political alternative to his rule would emerge. This approach turned Nazarbayev's rule into a self-fulfilling prophecy. After the latest election, a popular Nazarbayev impersonator posted a tongue-in-cheek comment on Twitter: "I didn't expect to win, to be honest. I was scared to go against the giants of national politics. But what can you do? If the people ask for it—you must do it!"⁸

The joke belies the central reality of Kazakhstan's political life: there is no public

⁶ For details, see "Outdoing Himself," *The Economist*, April 5, 2011, accessed January 8, 2012, http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2011/04/kazakhstans_presidential_election.

⁷ Ellen Barry, "In Kazakhstan, President Appears to Have Won Easily," *New York Times*, April 3, 2011, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/04/world/asia/04kazakh.html>.

⁸ Philip Shishkin, "In Kazakhstan, Even Rivals Vote for the Incumbent," *Asia Blog*, Asia Society, April 4, 2011, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://asiasociety.org/blog/reasia/kazakhstan-even-rivals-vote-incumbent>.

strategy for who might succeed Nazarbayev or how that successor will be chosen. The implications of this political paralysis grow wider as the president gets older—he is now in his early seventies. So far, the strategy has been to extend Nazarbayev’s rule into perpetuity through elections and constitutional changes. “Managing the transition to a post-Nazarbayev era will be a tremendous challenge, particularly given that he has now indicated he plans to be around [for years to come] and the history of potential successors/challengers falling from grace and position or winding up dead,” writes policy analyst Jeff Goldstein.⁹

Much like the inexact art of Kremlinology—divining the fortunes of the Soviet elite—Kazakhstan has produced its own parlor game of tracking the ups and downs of various political players. Nazarbayev’s recent trip to Germany, for instance, gave rise to unconfirmed rumors that he was undergoing surgery and triggered yet another round of speculation as to who might succeed him.

Many analysts in the West have long assumed that economic growth and free-market policies would inevitably prod authoritarian regimes toward greater political openness.¹⁰ In recent years, however, this view has been challenged by the rise of China, where the Communist Party seems to have succeeded in decoupling economic growth and prosperity from political liberalization.¹¹ The financial crisis that crippled the traditional bastions of economic and political freedom—the United States and Western Europe—provided another argument to those who believe that authoritarianism is a viable political model, and not only for China.

In Kazakhstan, supporters of the president can make a case that the country’s autocratic system

has delivered economic results and therefore should be preserved, or at least not changed too quickly. But unlike China, where the Communist Party has a track record of orchestrating peaceful transitions of power from one crop of leaders to the next, Kazakhstan has no such experience. In fact, Kazakhstan’s political system most closely resembles not China’s but Russia’s, where elections have degenerated from fostering genuine competition to simply legitimizing the ruling regime. Russia’s recent parliamentary elections, however, have shown that a significant number of voters are no longer content with such a system. Another similarity is that both regimes have been able, with varying degrees of success, to deploy their oil and gas wealth to cushion themselves from criticism and challenges.

Russia’s and now Kazakhstan’s systems have been deemed, paradoxically, “electoral authoritarianism.”¹² The model, perfected in Russia under Vladimir Putin, has taken root in Central Asia, and nowhere more so than in Kazakhstan:

“Electoral authoritarianism is very convenient for rulers, particularly as it makes the regime presentable to the outside world. For even the most biased observer will admit that a situation where there are no elections, and the opposition is not even formally allowed to participate has nothing to do with democracy. Rather, it is a tyranny. Terms such as a ‘hybrid regime’ or ‘imperfect democracy’ are far more acceptable. They are convenient for Western politicians who do business with these regimes as well as for investors. Nobody wants to have any dealings with a dictator—but an imperfect democrat is quite a different matter.”¹³

⁹ Jeff Goldstein, written response to questions submitted by the author, summer 2011.

¹⁰ This belief is epitomized by Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), published in the euphoric years following the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe.

¹¹ James Mann makes this argument in *The China Fantasy: Why Capitalism Will Not Bring Democracy to China* (New York: Penguin, 2007).

¹² Grigori Golosov, “Lipstick on a Crocodile: Electoral Authoritarianism in Central Asia,” *50.50 Blog*, OpenDemocracy.net, March 11, 2011, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/grigori-golosov/lipstick-on-crocodile-electoral-authoritarianism-in-central-asia>.

¹³ *Ibid.*

Kazakhstan cares a great deal about projecting a modern, democratic image to the world. The country's presidential election was criticized by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE): "Reforms necessary for holding genuine democratic elections have yet to materialize."¹⁴ That criticism, though not new, carried a particular sting this time because Kazakhstan had just finished its year-long run as chair of the OSCE. The Kazakhs campaigned relentlessly for that post, overcoming initial Western reluctance to extend the honor to a country with a patchy political and human rights record. With some justification, Kazakhstan viewed scoring the rotating chairmanship as a diplomatic triumph, a sign that the West was ready to recognize the country's achievements and not dwell on its shortcomings. Kazakhstan swiftly countered the OSCE's election reprimand by publicizing a report from a sympathetic group of foreign election observers. Some of these observers had worked closely with the government of Kazakhstan before, accepting state funding to produce favorable academic reports. "Kazakhstan's democratic roots deepen" is how the group characterized the latest election.¹⁵

It is not often that one gets to peek behind the curtain of Kazakhstan's tightly choreographed public stage. Those glimpses reveal a system of intense competition for power, sometimes tinged with corruption and suppression of dissent. "What is of particular concern is the increasing brutality of Kazakh political life in recent years, which cost the lives of two prominent Kazakh political figures: one on the eve of the 2005 presidential election and the other almost immediately

afterward."¹⁶ More recently, a prominent human rights activist named Yevgeniy Zhovtis was jailed on charges of vehicular manslaughter after a trial that was fraught with irregularities.¹⁷ In late January of 2012, Zhovtis was released from prison in an amnesty tied to the 20th anniversary of Kazakhstan's independence.

In the spring and summer of 2011, a relatively small protest by disgruntled oil workers in the town of Zhanaozen swelled into a more organized labor movement, which presented problems for the government. How it dealt with that protest is indicative of its overall attitude toward dissent and criticism of any kind. The protesters' demands were typical of labor strikes anywhere in the world: higher pay and more power for their union. What is significant in Kazakhstan is that organized protests against anything have been largely nonexistent, reflecting a tacit political compact that has governed the nation for the past 20 years. In return for stability and living standards higher than those across the rest of the crisis-plagued region, Kazakhs have tolerated authoritarian rule. The nightmare scenario for the government would be if the oil movement began to attract other disjointed and weakened strands of political opposition, morphing into a more potent grassroots force.

Faced with the oil protest, authorities zeroed in on Natalia Sokolova, a labor lawyer who had helped the protesters articulate their demands. She was arrested, quickly tried, and sentenced to six years in prison for inciting social discord and organizing illegal meetings.¹⁸ In the meantime, government officials continued to ignore the relatively modest demands of the oil protesters. Despite pumping the lifeblood into the Kazakh

¹⁴ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, "Reforms Necessary for Holding Democratic Elections in Kazakhstan Have Yet to Materialize, Observers Say," news release, April 4, 2011, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.osce.org/odihr/76349>.

¹⁵ Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, "Presidential Elections 2011: Congratulations and Assessments," April 6, 2011, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.kazakhembus.com/index.php?page=presidential-elections-2011-congratulations-and-assessments>.

¹⁶ Martha Brill Olcott, *Kazakhstan: Unfulfilled Promise* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2002), 249.

¹⁷ Open Society Justice Initiative, "Zhovtis v. Kazakhstan," accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.soros.org/initiatives/justice/litigation/zhovtis>.

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch, "Kazakhstan: Criminal Trial of Labor Lawyer," August 5, 2011, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/08/05/kazakhstan-criminal-trial-labor-lawyer>.

economy and cash into lavish lifestyles for the elite, oil workers themselves faced grim conditions and staged a sit-in on Zhanaozen's central square.¹⁹

In December, security forces launched a crackdown. Amateur video indicates that in some cases, police shot and killed unarmed protesters.²⁰ The crisis put a big dent in Kazakhstan's carefully cultivated image of stability and was deemed serious enough for Nazarbayev himself to fly into Zhanaozen. In the time-honored authoritarian tradition of delegating the blame down the bureaucratic food chain, the president railed against local officials and announced the sacking of his billionaire son-in-law. The man, who has broad influence over Kazakhstan's oil sector, had been rumored until recently to be a leading candidate to succeed Nazarbayev.²¹

Kazakhstan has yet to fully shake off the damaging allegations of corruption reaching the highest levels of government. In 2003, an American oil middleman named James Giffen, who was close to Nazarbayev, was indicted on charges of funneling some \$80 million in bribes to two senior Kazakh officials to help secure six lucrative oil deals for major American firms. One of those officials went on to spend \$180,000 on jewelry, while the other spent \$45,000 on his daughter's tuition in a Swiss private school, according to the indictment.²² The U.S. government eventually dropped most of the charges against Giffen following disclosures that he regularly had briefed the Central Intelligence Agency on his dealings with the Kazakh regime. The rumor mill alleging corruption and brutality at the very top of the Kazakh elite has

been kept well supplied by Rakhat Aliyev, the disgraced former husband of one of Nazarbayev's daughters. From exile, Aliyev hurled lurid accusations against Nazarbayev, many of them collected in a book called *Godfather-in-Law*, which, of course, is banned in Kazakhstan. Aliyev's allegations should be treated with skepticism, as he himself has been implicated in murky dealings inside Kazakhstan.

All of these allegations point to corruption and intrigue at the very top of Kazakhstan's pyramid of power. So far, that pyramid has proven relatively stable, mostly because of Nazarbayev. Idolized in the state media and in at least one theater production, Nazarbayev enjoys some popularity, which has a dampening effect on any rival's political ambitions. Spooked by the political and economic calamities in the rest of the region, many Kazakhs appear content with—or resigned to—the way their government is run and do not clamor for change. But events such as the Zhanaozen oil strike should temper any hasty pronouncements about the long-term stability of the Kazakhstan model. The wise thing for Nazarbayev to do now would be to use his political strength to map out a strategy for succession—one that would include a real role for the population—and not just a deal among the political and economic elites, as is more likely to be the case.

¹⁹ Elena Kostyuchenko, "Zhanaozen" (in Russian), *Novaya Gazeta*, December 20, 2011, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/50191.html>.

²⁰ "Kazakhstan: Video from Zhanaozen of Police Beating up a Wounded Man," *Ferghana News Agency*, December 22, 2011, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://enews.ferghananews.com/news.php?id=2171>.

²¹ Robin Paxton, "Analysis: Kazakh Leader Reinforces Power with Oil Sackings," Reuters, December 23, 2011, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/12/23/us-kazakhstan-succession-idUSTRE7BM0M820111223>.

²² United States Attorney, Southern District of New York, "American Businessman Charged with \$78 Million in Unlawful Payments to Kazakh Officials in 6 Oil Transactions; Former Mobil Corp. Executive Indicted for Tax Evasion in Kickback Scheme," news release, April 2, 2003, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.justice.gov/criminal/fraud/fcpa/cases/giffen/04-02-03giffen-press-indict.pdf>.

Kyrgyzstan: The Land of Perpetual Revolution

The case of Kyrgyzstan is a paradox in that it provides both a hopeful scenario of democratic transformation and a cautionary tale of violence and upheaval for a region beset by authoritarianism. In the space of five years, two consecutive corrupt regimes crumbled in revolutions, making Kyrgyzstan a significant outlier in post-Soviet Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan may hold important lessons for the rest of the region: “Kyrgyzstan’s experiments with regime change in the past six years are something neighboring states might face in the coming years. Kyrgyzstan has shown that a regime change entails uncertainty and insecurity.”²³ What Kyrgyzstan also shows is that political repression coupled with rampant corruption and poverty creates a groundswell of popular anger that eventually may find an outlet.

The seeds of Kyrgyzstan’s unique path were planted in the early years of statehood when a civil society began to emerge. Kyrgyzstan’s first president, Askar Akayev, was not a natural autocrat. A respected former physicist, Akayev initially did not evince the same crush-the-opposition instincts fully developed by his peers in the region. Akayev had come to power on a wave of popular support and street demonstrations. Buoyed by his initial openness, a host of non-governmental agencies descended on Kyrgyzstan in the 1990s, promoting everything from rural health care to civic institutions. “Akayev once joked that if the Netherlands is a land of tulips, then Kyrgyzstan is a land of NGOs.”²⁴

By the time Akayev’s regime was mired in corruption and authoritarianism, civil society was strong enough to challenge him. The regime’s halfhearted attempts to silence its

Kyrgyzstan Snapshot

Size: Roughly 200,000 square kilometers

Population: Approximately 5.5 million (July 2011)

GDP: Approximately \$4.6 billion (2010)

Natural resources: Hydropower, gold, rare earth metals

Main exports: Cotton, wool, meat, tobacco, gold

Corruption Perception Index: 164/178 (2010)

Political rights (1 = most free, 7 = least free): 5 (2011)

Civil liberties (1 = most free, 7 = least free): 5 (2011)

Press freedom: 155/196 (2011)

Sources: CIA World Factbook; World Bank (GDP data); Transparency International; Freedom House.

critics only inflamed the outrage, and in 2005, Akayev was overthrown in a peaceful revolution. During the storming of the presidential palace, protesters grabbed ties out of Akayev’s closet and drank French wine from his kitchenette. They took turns sitting in Akayev’s chair. Observing the situation from a distance was an employee of the presidential administration: “You see how many new leaders have piled in here?” he asked. “Tomorrow they’ll rip each other’s throats out.”²⁵ The prediction would prove prescient.

In the euphoric months after the uprising, high-profile investigations alleged high levels of corruption and nepotism. A Federal Bureau of Investigation report even talked about something called the “Akayev organization.”²⁶ The hope was that once the bad regime was removed, a better

²³ Erica Marat, written response to questions submitted by the author, spring/summer 2011.

²⁴ Philip Shishkin, “In Putin’s Backyard, Democracy Stirs—With U.S. Help,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 25, 2005, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://web.archive.org/web/20070927174401/http://www.iri.org/newsarchive/2005/2005-02-25-News-WSJ.asp>.

²⁵ Interview with the author, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, March 2005; name withheld at the interviewee’s request.

²⁶ Adam Roston, “A Crooked Alliance in the War on Terror?” MSNBC, October 10, 2006, accessed January 8, 2012, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15448018/ns/nightly_news-nbc_news_investigates/t/crooked-alliance-war-terror/.

one inevitably would follow. In Kyrgyzstan, that hope failed spectacularly. Amid the early optimism, a former factory director named Kurmanbek Bakiyev became president, vowing to fight corruption. But during his five-year reign, nepotism and graft surpassed the excesses of the previous regime, while government opponents began to suffer suspicious deaths. In the words of Russia's Vladimir Putin, the master of the one-liner, Bakiyev "stepped on the same rake" that had whacked his predecessor on the head.²⁷

In a small country with few economic resources, the temptation to leverage political power to gain personal wealth proved too strong for Bakiyev's inner circle of relatives and associates. In fact, throughout Central Asia, enrichment through proximity to power has long been a tradition. In Kyrgyzstan, a group of opposition leaders—largely the same people who had orchestrated the 2005 revolt and elevated Bakiyev to power—mobilized again and succeeded in channeling the people's economic frustrations into yet another revolution. (The roles of Russia and the United States in Kyrgyzstan's recent history are discussed elsewhere in this report.)

After the revolution, state institutions were weakened to the point of anarchy, especially in the south, where ethnic Uzbeks constitute a large percentage of the population. In the complex political tableau of post-revolution Kyrgyzstan, Uzbeks felt that they lacked political representation and official recognition of their language. Their push for more rights coincided with the rise of Kyrgyz nationalism, with the two trends feeding off of each other. None of this should have led to slaughter, but these tensions had simmered unattended for years. The power vacuum after the 2010 revolution brought forth provocateurs, opportunists, and criminals looking to stir things up. After a few days of

vicious fighting, more than 400 people had been killed and many more displaced.²⁸

With all the violence that followed the 2010 uprising, it is difficult to be unequivocally positive about Kyrgyzstan's recent history. Elsewhere in Central Asia, supporters of the autocratic regimes have been quick to cast Kyrgyzstan as an example of mayhem and instability that made it crucial to preserve their own authoritarian systems. That argument fails to note that the mayhem and instability are, in fact, the direct result of the autocratic systems of crony capitalism that have taken root in the region.

For all its failings, Kyrgyzstan is experimenting with new models of governance that, if successful, might provide a more durable framework for political and economic development. A parliamentary system—loud, adversarial, and at times dysfunctional—has replaced the presidential model, in which the leader rules with king-like powers. Political parties have proliferated, and successful parliamentary elections, perhaps the most democratic ever held in Central Asia, took place in 2010. And in October of 2011, in another landmark event, Kyrgyzstanis went to the polls to elect a new president, paving the way for the first peaceful and voluntary handover of top executive authority in the region.

The press is free and civil society remains strong. None of this means that progress is irreversible. In fact, Kyrgyzstan has enough warning signs to make any predictions premature. Corruption remains rampant, and many political leaders have not demonstrated the ability to look beyond their own parochial interests. Economic development is lagging, and Kyrgyz nationalism has become a destructive force in the country's politics. The judicial system is in shambles. The country's Supreme Court recently denied an appeal of the controversial life

²⁷ Quoted in Deirdre Tyn An, Kadyr Toktogulov, and Yochi J. Dreazen, "Violent Revolt Ousts Kyrgyz President," *Wall Street Journal*, April 8 2010, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304505204575169273901877794.html>.

²⁸ Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission, "KIC Final Report Published," accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.k-ic.org/en/news/364-kic-final-report-published.html>.

sentence for Azimjan Askarov, an Uzbek human rights activist who was accused of inciting the murder of a Kyrgyz policeman.²⁹ There is strong evidence that the case against Askarov rests on hearsay, torture, and a nationalistic fervor to punish the Uzbeks.³⁰ Achieving an acquittal for Askarov became a rallying cry for Kyrgyzstan's civil society activists and a test case of whether the country's justice system could be counted on to move beyond tangential and partisan show trials in this and other cases. The Supreme Court's decision dashed those hopes.

The political whipsaw of the past six years has spawned a culture of protest that has pushed people out into the streets to loudly proclaim their displeasure at perceived injustices. One recent rally, for instance, had as its central demand the removal of an ornate cast-iron fence around the presidential palace, so that protesters could have unfettered access to the inner sanctum of Kyrgyzstan's power.

While this culture of protest is an inevitable by-product of Kyrgyzstan's experiments with democracy, it does have a downside. In its worst forms, the culture feeds on populist sentiment and the parochial interests of certain political groups, and has a paralyzing effect on the business of running the country. In fact, Kyrgyzstan could use a stretch of political calm to give the new government time and space to actually govern. Much will depend on whether new president Almazbek Atambayev is able to co-opt and pacify his political foes from the south of Kyrgyzstan.

On the foreign policy front, Kyrgyzstan appears to be drifting closer to Russia, a reflection of the perhaps inevitable pull of the forces of geography and economy. Shortly after his electoral victory, Atambayev said that he would close the U.S. air base in Bishkek—the major

supply center for the war in Afghanistan—once the current lease expires in 2014.³¹ As the base has been a source of much horse-trading over the years, it is possible that the new Kyrgyz president is simply angling for better financial terms. But it is even more likely that Atambayev has genuinely concluded that the base no longer fits the country's strategic needs. Atambayev has cultivated close ties with Moscow and personal ones with Vladimir Putin, who looks again to be president. That has brought Kyrgyzstan some economic benefits, such as lower tariffs for the import of gas products from Russia.

²⁹ Committee to Protect Journalists, "Kyrgyzstan Supreme Court Upholds Askarov Sentence," December 20, 2011, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://cpj.org/2011/12/kyrgyzstan-supreme-court-upholds-askarov-sentence.php>.

³⁰ Philip Shishkin, "A Murder in Kyrgyzstan," Asia Society, June 10, 2011, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://asiasociety.org/countries/conflicts/murder-kyrgyzstan>.

³¹ Joshua Kucera, "Why Atambayev Might Be Serious About Closing Manas," *Eurasianet.org*, November 10, 2011, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64492>.

Tajikistan: A Failing State

Of all the states in Central Asia, Tajikistan faces perhaps the most troublesome array of threats to its stability. Torn apart by a large-scale civil war in the 1990s, Tajikistan is governed by a strongman who appears increasingly incapable of fully controlling the situation. A recent pickup in activity by insurgent groups has rekindled fears that the country may fracture yet again. Tajikistan shares a long and porous border with Afghanistan, a source of heavy heroin traffic that has been destructive to Tajik society.

Tajikistan was among the poorest republics in the Soviet Union, and 20 years of independence have done little to move the country up the economic ladder. Many Tajik families stay afloat through remittances sent by relatives working menial jobs in Russia. Even that income came under pressure in recent years as Russia went through an economic crisis that hit migrant laborers especially hard. Segments of the poor population with few prospects at home are particularly susceptible to religious radicalization. Corruption is rampant even by the permissive standards of Central Asia.

Any of these challenges alone would prove difficult to tackle for any government, no matter how capable or well intentioned. Combined, these threats may portend a perfect storm that will test Tajikistan's viability as a state. Further exacerbating the situation is the heavy-handed yet ineffectual governing style of Emomali Rakhmon, a skillful political infighter who has been in power since the early 1990s. Rakhmon's recent responses to the many fires that he faces seem to have stoked them even more: according to a recent report from the International Crisis Group, "It is hard to imagine a series of government measures which, taken together would be better designed to provoke a groundswell of outrage."³²

Tajikistan comes into all of this with the heavy baggage of its civil war. Shortly after the breakup

Tajikistan Snapshot

Size: Approximately 143,000 square kilometers

Population: Just over 7.6 million (July 2011)

GDP: Approximately \$5.64 billion (2010)

Natural resources: Hydropower

Main exports: Aluminum, electricity, cotton, fruits

Corruption Perception Index: 154/178 (2010)

Political rights (1 = most free, 7 = least free): 6 (2011)

Civil liberties (1 = most free, 7 = least free): 5 (2011)

Press freedom: 168/196 (2011)

Sources: CIA World Factbook; World Bank (GDP data); Transparency International; Freedom House.

of the Soviet Union, a vicious power struggle pitted the communist-led ruling regime against a coalition of nationalist, Islamist, and pro-reform groups. By the time active fighting was over, nearly 50,000 people had been killed and many more displaced. The war drew in neighboring states, too. Afghanistan supported the opposition, while Uzbekistan—fearful of the specter of Islamism—backed the government. Eventually, a peace settlement was reached. It was significant because it marked the first—and only—time that a government anywhere in Central Asia agreed to share power with the opposition.

The tragedy of the civil war and the political compromise that ended it seemed to give Tajikistan a real shot at stability. After paying such a huge price in blood and destruction, Tajiks were weary of conflict, and the opposition now had a stake in the governing process. "The Tajik society has suffered a shock of civil warfare and is ready to pay a robust price for not having another bloodshed . . . That price includes conflict

³² International Crisis Group, "Tajikistan: The Changing Insurgent Threats," Asia Report no. 205, May 24, 2011, 16-17, accessed January 8, 2012, [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/central-asia/tajikistan/205%20Tajikistan%20-%20The%20Changing%20Insurgent%20Threats.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/asia/central-asia/tajikistan/205%20Tajikistan%20-%20The%20Changing%20Insurgent%20Threats.pdf).

avoidance in a form of reconciliation with low living standards, lack of civil rights and good governance, etc.”³³

As the years go by, these restraining factors appear to lose some of their relevance. For a new generation of Tajiks, the war is a memory experienced mostly by their parents. And the power-sharing agreement did not lead to the creation of a truly inclusive government.

Sanobar Shermatova, who until her death in March of 2011 was one of Russia’s leading experts on Central Asia, noted that Rakhmon agreed to share power not out of any firm belief in a broad-based government, but because he had no other choice. Russia, which at the time led regional efforts to achieve a cease-fire, put enormous pressure on Rakhmon’s government to strike a deal with the opposition. Leaving the Tajik Islamists to stew and recuperate in Afghanistan, which just had fallen to the Taliban, seemed too great a risk for a region that was worried about militant Islam. And so the Tajik opposition was invited into the big tent of government. “However, to continue the course toward national reconciliation would have required a lot of President Rakhmon and his closest allies,” Shermatova wrote.³⁴ To make the arrangement last, Rakhmon would have had to countenance the idea of elections, of the possibility of giving someone else a shot at the nation’s top post. But Rakhmon and his immediate circle pursued the opposite strategy instead: sidelining potential rivals, especially former military commanders who could prove dangerous again. The rifts were exacerbated by the extreme regionalism of Tajik politics.

In the meantime, in a country with widespread poverty, the regime and its allies are alleged to have grafted themselves onto what few

lucrative industries there are. A case in point is the Tajik Aluminum Company, which is among the most profitable factories in the country. According to press reports, some of the company’s revenues end up in secretive offshore accounts and bypass the state budget.³⁵ Such allegations would not surprise most Tajiks. Corruption is widespread and feeds popular discontent with the regime.

No country in Central Asia is more affected by the Afghan vortex of instability than Tajikistan. Afghanistan remains the world’s top producer and exporter of heroin, which is smuggled overland to Russia and Europe. Despite a decade of the U.S.-led war against the Taliban, poppy cultivation in Afghanistan has failed to decline in any meaningful way. Clandestine labs around Afghanistan turn opium into heroin, a business that looks set to continue flourishing as the West winds down its military presence in Afghanistan. Most Afghan heroin has historically been smuggled through Pakistan and Iran, but in recent years, traffickers have ramped up the so-called northern route via Tajikistan. The weaknesses of the Tajik state are a boon to traffickers. Corrupt police and officials allegedly protect the smugglers; even if it wished to do so, the government is unable to effectively patrol a porous border that stretches for 1,400 kilometers. Though most Afghan heroin travels onward to Russia, some gets sold and consumed locally. In fact, compounding its other problems, Tajikistan has had one of the world’s highest growth rates in intravenous drug use in the past decade. The heroin problem touched off an AIDS epidemic, forcing Tajikistan to import antiretroviral medicine.³⁶

One of the biggest wildcards that Afghanistan presents to Central Asia—and to Tajikistan in particular—is the risk of Islamist militancy

³³ Kamoludin Abdullaev, written response to questions submitted by the author; see also Abdullaev, “Conflict Resolution in Tajikistan,” June 1, 2009, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://kamolkhon.com/conflict-resolution-in-tajikistan/>.

³⁴ Sanobar Shermatova, “Что происходит в Таджикистане и как к этому следует относиться?” (“What is happening now in Tajikistan and how should it be treated?”), *Fergana News Agency*, November 17, 2010, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.fergananews.com/article.php?id=6801>.

³⁵ Bank Information Center, “Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Tajik Extractives Industry,” October 20, 2008, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.bicusa.org/en/Article.3934.aspx>.

³⁶ Philip Shishkin and David Crawford, “Heroin Trade Soars Despite U.S. Aid: A Threat to Fragile Democracy, the Drug Spreads Death on Its Route to Europe,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 18, 2006, accessed January 8, 2012, http://uniset.ca/terr/news/wsj_afghanherointrade.html.

spilling over the border. Inside Afghanistan, the Taliban insurgency has proven resilient, while the government of President Hamid Karzai has grown mired in corruption and appears incapable of fully controlling the country. This situation is likely to worsen as the United States starts to disengage militarily, transferring security responsibilities to Kabul's fledgling military and police. For the past decade, the Taliban has shown no known interest in Central Asia, focusing its attention on Afghanistan. But militant groups from Central Asia have historical links with the Taliban: they enjoyed refuge inside Afghanistan and fought alongside the Taliban against U.S. troops shortly after 9/11.

Over the past few years, Tajikistan has shown itself to be vulnerable to homegrown radicalism. In the fall of 2010, a suicide bomber attacked a police precinct in Tajikistan, killing several policemen. Authorities described it as the country's first-ever suicide bombing, and a local Islamist group popped up to claim responsibility. The attack came at a time of renewed tensions and armed clashes between the government and some of the paramilitary commanders who had been cast out of the power-sharing arrangements.³⁷ The government has shown weaknesses in its ability to control parts of the country traditionally dominated by the civil war's old foes. Even more alarming, the government at times has seemed nearly powerless in its own capital: in 2010, a group of militants detained in one of the recent clashes staged a brazen prison break from a jail not far from Rakhmon's official residence.³⁸

It is hard to predict how the various strands of the Tajik and Afghan insurgencies will play out in the next few years. For Tajikistan, the nightmare scenario would be an escalation of tensions between the government and domestic militants coupled with a confident and opportunistic Islamist movement across the border in Afghanistan—in

other words, a return to some of the old realities long believed to be dead and buried. Even assuming the best-case scenario in Afghanistan—a stalemated Taliban focused on its own survival—Tajikistan still would face a difficult domestic situation. Perhaps now more than ever, the country needs a government that is less concerned about its own political survival and focused more on holding the country together. Time and time again, Rakhmon and his allies have shown themselves incapable of providing such leadership.

³⁷ For details, see Roman Kozhevnikov, "Car Bomber Kills 2, Wounds 25 Police in Tajikistan," Reuters, September 3, 2010, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFTRE6821CD20100903>.

³⁸ For details, see Michael Schwartz, "5 Guards Killed in Tajikistan Prison Break," *New York Times*, August 23, 2010, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/24/world/asia/24tajik.html>.

Turkmenistan: A Desert Kingdom Fueled by Gas

Few countries in the world can match Turkmenistan in the breathtaking absurdities of the cult of personality constructed by its first president, a career Communist Party functionary named Saparmurat Niyazov. Much like the rest of Central Asia, Turkmenistan was thrown into post-Soviet independence with little preparation. As a Soviet republic, Turkmenistan depended heavily on subsidies from Moscow, in return supplying the Soviet Union with natural gas abundant under its desert surface. There was little by way of a real economy or a local elite that could step in to run the new country.

Into this void stepped Niyazov, who, like his counterpart in Uzbekistan, grew up in an orphanage. Niyazov molded the new nation around his own quirky persona, famously declaring himself Turkmenbashi, or the leader of all Turkmen. His governing style brooked nothing but slavish devotion, constantly whipped up on state television, which carried his visage as a logo in a corner of the screen. Like Mao in China and Qaddafi in Libya, Niyazov distilled his vision of statehood, history, and society into a book called *Ruhnama*, or “Book of the Soul.” It became required reading in schools. As the years went on, Niyazov’s vision of his own greatness grew ever more sweeping. He renamed the months of the year after matters and people dear to his heart, including himself. A glittering statue of Niyazov decorated the central square of the capital at Ashgabat, where it rotated so that it would always face the sun.

Like all dictators, Niyazov succeeded in eliminating the opposition and instilling fear in his own ministers, gaining a free rein to act on his delusions. In one of his most alarming initiatives, Niyazov ordered rural health clinics closed, insisting that Turkmen travel to Ashgabat to seek medical treatment. In a sprawling country with bad roads, the move was tantamount to denying medical care to a large

Turkmenistan Snapshot

Size: Around 488,000 square kilometers

Population: Nearly 5 million (July 2011)

GDP: Approximately \$20 billion (2010)

Natural resources: Petroleum, natural gas, sulfur, salt

Main exports: Gas, crude oil, petrochemicals, textiles, cotton fiber

Corruption Perception Index: 172/178 (2010)

Political rights (1 = most free, 7 = least free): 7 (2011)

Civil liberties (1 = most free, 7 = least free): 7 (2011)

Press freedom: 195/196 (2011)

Sources: CIA World Factbook; World Bank (GDP data); Transparency International; Freedom House.

segment of the Turkmen population. In the meantime, the regime built large hotels in the capital in anticipation of a flood of businessmen and tourists. The visitors never materialized in the projected numbers, leaving the empty towers as monuments to government waste. Niyazov hired a French firm to build a massive mosque with a gilded dome to commemorate his mother, who had died in an earthquake.

Turkmenistan might have lingered in complete obscurity and isolation were it not for its vast reserves of natural gas. Though precise estimates vary, Turkmenistan is among the top gas repositories in the world, a position that makes it a coveted prize for resource-poor Europe and for China, whose galloping industrial growth calls for ever-greater amounts of fuel. Under Niyazov’s erratic rule, Turkmenistan remained a closed economy, and foreign investors were loath to get involved. What is more, most of Turkmenistan’s gas output went straight into the pipeline network of Gazprom, the Russian gas monopoly, which would then pump it onward

to European markets. Like much of Niyazov's Turkmenistan, the gas business was opaque and beholden to the man at the top. Turkmenistan's annual take from gas exports was estimated at \$2 billion, but "President Niyazov [kept] most of the gas revenues under his effective control in overseas and off-budget funds."³⁹

Though he projected an aura of immortality—of being the state itself—in the end, Niyazov died. A heart attack killed him in December 2006, plunging Turkmenistan into a crisis of succession. Death is one of the few assured outcomes of life, but in Central Asia, the possibility of a leader's death is often treated as a taboo subject—tiptoed around and rarely addressed directly. The rulers of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan—all in the same age group as Turkmenbashi and in power for just as long—have no known succession plans, making their regimes beholden to their presumed longevity. Partly as a result, the region watched Turkmenistan's succession shuffle with trepidation, fearing violence or a long period of uncertainty.

But within months, the Turkmen political system closed ranks behind Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, a dentist by training and a former minister of health. The new president took steps to dismantle some of the most egregious manifestations of his predecessor's personality cult. Turkmenbashi's sun-facing statue, for instance, was removed from Ashgabat's central square. In another break with his predecessor's reclusive policies, Berdymukhammedov signaled that Turkmenistan might be ready to engage with the world and diversify its gas exports beyond the traditional Russian market.⁴⁰

The possibility of bypassing the

Russian pipelines and tapping directly into Turkmenistan's gas reserves came at a critical time for the European Union (EU). With few natural gas resources of its own, Europe counts Russia as one of its main suppliers. To reach Europe, gas from the Russian pipelines must traverse Ukrainian territory. Europe realized the perils of this dependency in 2006, when Russia and Ukraine clashed in a high-profile dispute over gas prices and transit rates. As a result, supplies of gas to Western Europe were disrupted, stoking fears that European citizens may have to shiver in their unheated homes in the middle of winter.⁴¹ The gas dispute spotlighted Europe's strategic weakness and sharpened its apprehensions about having to rely on Russia at a time when the Kremlin became increasingly assertive in its dealings both with the West and with its former subjects in the Soviet empire.

European leaders decided to solve their gas predicament with a grand initiative named Nabucco, after an opera by Giuseppe Verdi. Under the plan, Europe would build a 3,900 kilometer pipeline running from Turkey to a distribution hub in Austria, bypassing the geopolitical and commercial quicksands of Russia and Ukraine. Nabucco would tap into the gas reserves of Azerbaijan, Iraq, and, crucially, Turkmenistan.⁴² Nabucco is expected to launch in 2017, though there are doubts about the project's future.

In the meantime, Turkmenistan's export outlook changed significantly in 2009. In the midst of the global economic crisis, demand for natural gas declined across Europe because of a slowdown in industrial activity. The balance of power in the European gas market tilted toward consumers, undermining the traditional leverage

³⁹ Global Witness, "It's a Gas—Funny Business in the Turkmen-Ukraine Gas Trade," April 2006, 4, accessed January 8, 2012, http://www.globalwitness.org/sites/default/files/library/its_a_gas_april_2006_lowres.pdf.

⁴⁰ For details, see David L. Stern, "U.S. Courts the Visiting President of Turkmenistan," *New York Times*, September 26, 2007, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9407EFD91131F935A1575AC0A9619C8B63&ref=gurbangulyberdymukhammedov>.

⁴¹ For details, see "Ukraine Gas Row Hits EU Supplies," BBC News, January 1, 2006, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4573572.stm>.

⁴² Nabucco Gas Pipeline, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.nabucco-pipeline.com>.

of producing nations such as Russia. Faced with flagging demand, Gazprom reduced production and pared back the level of gas imports from Turkmenistan. In April 2009, a mysterious explosion rocked the main pipeline carrying Turkmen gas to Russia. The Turkmen blamed Gazprom for abruptly cutting the amount of gas flowing through the pipeline. That sudden drop, they said, caused the blast. The Russians blamed Turkmenistan's aging infrastructure for the incident.⁴³ Whatever the truth, the explosion stopped the flow of Turkmen gas to Russia at a time when Gazprom was chafing at the cost of Turkmen imports, which it no longer could resell profitably to Europe. Gazprom used the opportunity to renegotiate the purchase price that it would pay for Turkmen gas once the flow resumed. Though the pipeline was eventually fixed, the gas flow from Turkmenistan to Russia never reached its pre-explosion levels.

For Berdymukhammedov's regime, the pipeline explosion underscored the need to diversify Turkmenistan's gas exports and reduce dependence on Russia. That was good news for the Europeans, whose plans for the Nabucco pipeline were facing frequent delays because of political and commercial complications and logistical hurdles. There were also lingering doubts about the true size of Turkmenistan's gas reserves. Turkmen estimates of the country's gas wealth always came with questions about whether the opaque regime was overselling itself. Those doubts were dispelled in the first major independent survey of Turkmenistan's gas fields. In 2008, Gaffney Cline & Associates, an oil advisory firm, confirmed Turkmenistan's status as the world's fifth-largest repository of natural gas. One field alone, the South Yolotan-Osman field, was estimated to be able to produce up

to 70 billion cubic meters a year, which would roughly double Turkmenistan's current annual output. The Gaffney Cline study confirmed that Turkmenistan really does have enough gas to sustain a multidirectional export strategy—selling to Russia, to Europe via Nabucco, and to China.⁴⁴

In fact, China has long had Turkmenistan in its sights. In 2007, China's national oil company signed landmark deals with the Turkmen government, under which Turkmenistan would export 30 billion cubic meters of natural gas a year to China. That is nearly triple the level of Turkmenistan's diminished gas exports to Russia, the traditional purchaser of the totality of the Turkmen output. In fact, 2009—the year of the mysterious blast on the Turkmenistan–Russia pipeline—was also the year in which China quietly completed construction of a new pipeline bringing Turkmen gas to China.⁴⁵ As in much of the rest of Central Asia, China's economic juggernaut is swiftly supplanting the historical influence of Russia in the region's economy.

Inside Turkmenistan, Berdymukhammedov's steps to dismantle his mercurial predecessor's personality cult made it politically palatable for the West to engage with the new regime. Unlike China, Western governments are generally constrained, both by public opinion and by law, in their dealings with overtly repressive regimes. Though, over the years, both the United States and Europe have found ways to engage with dictators when it suited their commercial and political interests, such engagement is far easier when an autocratic regime takes steps to craft a softer image.

But even as foreign investors, politicians, and financial institutions embraced

⁴³ For details, see "Turkmenistan: Gas Blast Ignites Turkmen–Russian Row," Eurasia.net, April 9, 2009, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav041009b.shtml>.

⁴⁴ Guy Chazan, "Turkmenistan Gas Field Is One of the World's Largest," *Wall Street Journal*, October 16, 2008, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122409510811337137.html>.

⁴⁵ Raushan Nurshayeva and Shamil Zhumatov, "China Boosts Energy Ties with Central Asia," Reuters, December 12, 2009, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2009/12/12/uk-china-kazakhstan-idUKTRE5BB0PV20091212>.

Turkmenistan, it was becoming clear that Berdymukhammedov's reforms were largely a façade, and that little of substance had really changed in Turkmenistan since the passing of Turkmenbashi. More ominously, the repression of civil liberties continued unabated, with journalists and activists routinely harassed and jailed by the omnipresent security forces. Berdymukhammedov's domestic reforms have been "largely a show—and one for which many Western decision-makers have fallen."⁴⁶ Furthermore, "there's no doubt that energy is playing an important role in the political relationships between the European Union and Turkmenistan. Talk about human rights, democracy, and political concerns take a back seat to discussions of energy every time."⁴⁷

Following a series of large explosions at a munitions depot in the town of Abadan in the summer of 2011, reports of civilian casualties started trickling out despite government efforts to suppress the news.⁴⁸ The government's handling of the accident (there is no evidence to suggest foul play) stoked popular anger and seems to have prompted the president to hint at the opening up of the Turkmen political system. Just a day after the blasts, Berdymukhammedov invited the country's scattered and exiled opposition to take part in the presidential election scheduled for 2012. It is too early to say exactly what that invitation means or whether the Turkmen authorities even intend to honor it. It is extremely unlikely that the opposition candidates—should they overcome legitimate concerns for their safety and run against the incumbent—will be allowed to make any meaningful gains at the polls. But, at a minimum, the invitation suggests

that Berdymukhammedov sees the benefits of constructing a simulacrum of political competition, perhaps resembling the Kazakhstan model.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Crude Accountability, "Reform in Turkmenistan: A Convenient Façade," April 2011, 7, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.crudeaccountability.org/en/uploads/File/turkmenistan/Reform%20in%20Turkmenistan.pdf>.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴⁸ For details, see Institute for War and Peace Reporting, "Internet Paranoia in Turkmenistan," News Briefing Central Asia, July 29, 2011, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://iwpr.net/report-news/internet-paranoia-turkmenistan>.

⁴⁹ Anton Lompov, "A Day After Blast, Turkmen Leader Opens Polls to Opposition," *Silk Road Intelligence*, July 8, 2011, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://silkroadintelligence.com/2011/07/10/a-day-after-blast-turkmen-leader-opens-polls-to-opposition/>.

Uzbekistan: A Police State with Strategic Significance

Central Asia's most populous state, Uzbekistan, has the most repressive regime in the region, combined with a struggling economy that has kept its citizens hostage to an array of predatory policies. There is widespread corruption, alleged to be concentrated around the president's family and allies and the companies they control, and a history of militant insurrections. In other words, Uzbekistan has all the features of Central Asia's crisis of governance, often taken to the extreme. Because of its size—it has 28 million citizens—and a history of violent government crackdowns, Uzbekistan's future appears particularly fraught with the risks of instability that could plunge the wider region into turmoil. For the past 20 years, Islam Karimov, the country's only president, has ruled with an iron fist, eliminating the opposition, jailing thousands of observant Muslims, ordering a massacre of civilians, and creating an overall climate of fear that has kept the system from collapse. Just like his counterparts in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, the 74-year-old president has no known succession plans. He is reported to be increasingly reliant on his powerful security apparatus.

After the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, Karimov started playing a shrewd geopolitical game that turned him into an ally of the West. Uzbekistan, located on Afghanistan's northern border, was an ideal platform for launching the invasion to oust the Taliban. The Pentagon set up a military base inside Uzbekistan with tacit approval from Moscow, which has long viewed the country as being within Russia's sphere of influence. Yet by 2005, Afghanistan no longer seemed a priority, and it became harder for the West to put up with the odious regime in Tashkent. A brutal crackdown on protesters in 2005 ruined

Uzbekistan Snapshot

Size: Around 447,000 square kilometers

Population: Approximately 28 million (July 2011)

GDP: Approximately \$39 billion (2010)

Natural resources: Natural gas, petroleum, coal, gold, uranium

Main exports: Energy products, cotton, gold, mineral fertilizers

Corruption Perception Index: 172/178 (2010)

Political rights (1 = most free, 7 = least free): 7 (2011)

Civil liberties (1 = most free, 7 = least free): 7 (2011)

Press freedom: 191/196 (2011)

Sources: CIA World Factbook; World Bank (GDP data); Transparency International; Freedom House.

Uzbekistan's already tense relationship with Washington, and the Americans were expelled from the military base.⁵⁰

But in recent years, with Afghanistan once again dominating U.S. foreign policy, Karimov has resuscitated Uzbekistan's ruined relationship with the United States, all the while tightening repression at home. Uzbekistan's return to favor in Washington is a consequence of the complexities of U.S. policy in Afghanistan. For years, the United States resupplied its troops in Afghanistan by truck convoys running through neighboring Pakistan. But that route has come under increasing pressure as the U.S. relationship with Pakistan has deteriorated over Islamabad's lax attitudes toward militants within its borders. The fallout over the U.S. killing of Osama bin Laden in his Pakistani hideout further strained an already tense alliance

⁵⁰ For details, see Robin Wright and Ann Scott Tyson, "U.S. Evicted from Air Base in Uzbekistan," *Washington Post*, July 30, 2005, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/07/29/AR2005072902038.html>.

between Washington and Islamabad. In 2010, Pakistani authorities bitterly complained about a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) air strike targeting militants within Pakistan. In response, the Pakistanis blocked truck traffic into Afghanistan, snarling American resupply lines for days.⁵¹ That disruption added urgency to the ongoing U.S. efforts to diversify the supply lines, and Uzbekistan, despite its abysmal human rights record, became an ally again.

Meanwhile, at home, the Uzbek regime continued its course of annihilating dissent in all of its forms. In trial after trial, Uzbek courts sent hundreds of people accused of Islamist militancy to prison. Their crimes often seemed to amount to nothing more than being devout Muslims. Once they enter the prison system, many are subjected to severe torture, according to numerous reports and eyewitness accounts.

Uzbekistan's relationship with Islam is a complicated one. Under Soviet rule, Uzbekistan was a fairly secular place, but independence helped unleash an Islamic awakening in the predominantly Muslim nation. In the late 1990s, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, a militant group battle-hardened in the civil war in Tajikistan, set its sights on toppling the government in Tashkent and allied itself with the Taliban regime in Kabul. Many of the Movement's militants, including its leader, were killed in northern Afghanistan during the U.S. invasion that toppled the Taliban.

The current extent of the threat that militant Islamists pose to Uzbekistan is a matter of some debate. The regime routinely exaggerates the threat to justify its own legitimacy and harsh policies. The government's policy of indiscriminate jailing and torture of alleged Islamists risks turning an extremist threat into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Prisons are incubators of

radicalism. Uzbekistan's Islamists may also draw sustenance from another flaw of Uzbekistan's regime: by methodically destroying the secular opposition, the government strengthens the hand of the religious kind. Unlike secular parties, which need leaders, platforms, and some public space to operate, religious groups tend to thrive in decentralized secrecy. There are parallels between Uzbekistan and Egypt, where decades of repressive rule by the recently deposed secular dictator left the Muslim Brotherhood among the strongest political forces in the country.

The last secular challenge to Uzbekistan's regime was quashed in 2005, when the government imprisoned a prominent Uzbek businessman, Sanjar Umarov, who had formed an opposition political party. Umarov was released in 2009 and fled into exile in the United States.⁵² Much like the case of Mikhail Khodorkovsky in Russia, Umarov's experience sent a strong signal to Uzbek elites: if you value your wealth and freedom, do not challenge the regime.

As the example of Kazakhstan shows, many people in Central Asia may be prepared to tolerate an authoritarian model if it delivers economic benefits to the population. Uzbekistan's brand of authoritarianism, however, has few achievements to show for itself on the economic front. In fact, the government's policies have stirred resentment across a wide swath of the Uzbek population, and nowhere more so than in the countryside, where the vast majority of Uzbeks live. Farmers have complained about land seizures in cases in which they failed to meet state quotas for crops such as wheat or cotton, which is one of Uzbekistan's primary exports tightly controlled by the state. The Uzbek economy still bears some features of the centralized command

⁵¹ For details, see Karin Brulliard, "Pakistan Blocks NATO's Afghan-Bound Supply Trucks After Airstrike Kills 3," *Washington Post*, September 30, 2010, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/30/AR2010093000145.html>.

⁵² For details, see C. J. Chivers, "Uzbekistan: Opposition Leader Sent to U.S. After Early Release from Prison," *New York Times*, November 24, 2009, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/25/world/asia/25briefs-Uzbekistan.html>.

economy of the Soviet Union. Among them is the old Soviet practice of pushing students and state employees onto the fields during harvest time. Uzbek authorities have been accused of conscripting children to serve as cotton pickers,⁵³ a practice that has forced some international companies to ban the use of Uzbek cotton in their products.⁵⁴

Uzbek leaders have been promoting a much more positive economic picture, touting growth across the board. Karimov even published a book holding up Uzbekistan as an example of resilience during the financial crisis that swept the rest of the world in 2008 and 2009.⁵⁵ The official statistics have won qualified praise from international financial institutions and from some officials in the U.S. government.⁵⁶ While there is little doubt that Uzbekistan's isolationist economic policies have distanced the country to some extent from global economic forces—both negative and positive—the parade of upbeat economic figures from the government should be treated with caution.⁵⁷

Uzbekistan's gold deposits have attracted foreign investors, but the state has been erratic and ruthless in dealing with them. In 2006, Colorado-based Newmont Mining Corporation was kicked out of the country. Newmont had been digging gold in a 50/50 partnership with Uzbekistan's government. Then, using a traditional post-Soviet tactic, Newmont was hit with accusations of unpaid taxes, and an Uzbek court quickly ruled in favor of the tax

authorities. Within a month, “the Republic of Uzbekistan caused the seizure of gold, silver, and unfinished products belonging to [the Newmont venture],” according to the company's regulatory filings in the United States.⁵⁸ Newmont has since filed a grievance against Uzbekistan with a World Bank arbitration panel and reached an undisclosed settlement, most likely involving some compensation. The company no longer does business in Uzbekistan.⁵⁹

Not far from Newmont's mine in Zarafshan, another Western company, Oxus Gold, was following developments closely. Oxus' gold mining venture had a similar structure, and it had every reason to fear a similar fate. But something else happened instead: Oxus sold nearly 18 percent of the company to Zeromax, a shadowy Uzbek conglomerate with alleged ties to the ruling regime. Oxus was allowed to continue operating in Uzbekistan until trouble resurfaced in 2011. An Uzbek employee of Oxus was arrested and sentenced to 12 years in prison for espionage, which the company described as a pressure tactic designed to push it out of the lucrative business.⁶⁰

In the meantime, reports of corruption and nepotism near the top of Uzbekistan's regime are feeding into the overall dissatisfaction with the government. For years, Zeromax, the country's most powerful company, was reportedly linked to one of Karimov's daughters, who was considered to be among the top candidates to succeed her father as president. In

⁵³ Environmental Justice Foundation, “Cotton in Uzbekistan,” accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.ejfoundation.org/page142.html>.

⁵⁴ Levi Strauss & Co., “Case Study—Uzbekistan: Addressing Forced Child Labor in Cotton Harvesting,” accessed January 8, 2012, http://www.levistrauss.com/sites/default/files/librarydocument/2010/4/Public_Policy_case_study-Uzbek_cotton_2009.pdf.

⁵⁵ For details, see a review of the book on the website of the Information Agency of Uzbekistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accessed January 8, 2012, http://www.jahonnews.uz/eng/events_and_dates/book_by_president_of_uzbekistan_islam_karimov/presidents_book_republished_in_the_us.mgr.

⁵⁶ Philip Shishkin, “The Enemy We Need: Washington Courts a Repressive Uzbekistan—Again,” *World Affairs*, January/February 2011, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/enemy-we-need-washington-courts-repressive-uzbekistan%E2%80%94again>.

⁵⁷ For a more skeptical analysis of Uzbekistan's economic statistics, see “Узбекистан: Что выросло, то выросло. Цены на товары и услуги в Ташкенте в 2010 году” (“Uzbekistan: What has grown, it has grown. Prices for goods and services in Tashkent in 2010”), Ferghana News Agency, March 24, 2011, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.ferghananews.com/article.php?id=6927>.

⁵⁸ “Zarafshan-Newmont Joint Venture—50% Newmont Owned,” Wikinvest, April 2007, accessed January 8, 2012, http://www.wikinvest.com/stock/Newmont_Mining_Corporation_%28NEM%29/Zarafshan-newmont_Joint_Venture-50_Newmont_Owned.

⁵⁹ For details, see Steve James, “Gold Miner Newmont Resolves Dispute with Uzbekistan,” Reuters, July 23, 2007, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/07/23/us-newmont-uzbekistan-idUSN2336630420070723>.

⁶⁰ “Oxus Gold Employee Convicted in Uzbekistan of Espionage,” UZNews.net, August 12, 2011, accessed January 8, 2012, http://www.uznews.net/news_single.php?nid=17660.

a murky reshuffle of assets, Zeromax has since faced big problems in Uzbekistan.⁶¹

There are indications that American efforts to ship Afghan supplies through Uzbekistan may be benefiting companies with ties to the Uzbek regime, including those long linked to Zeromax.⁶² If that is the case, the United States' reputation in the region may be further undermined.

The many stress factors bearing on the Uzbek system have already proven to be serious enough to lead to violent unrest. In 2005 in the town of Andijan, the regime jailed a group of Islamic businessmen accusing them of a vague antigovernment conspiracy, in the kind of trial that has become commonplace in Uzbekistan. When the businessmen escaped in an armed jailbreak, many Andijan residents gathered for an impromptu rally in the town's central square, expressing frustration at the regime. The government reacted with a massive show of force, ordering troops to open fire.⁶³

As a result, hundreds of protesters were killed. Andijan showed how quickly and unpredictably the situation in Uzbekistan can spin out of control. It also showed that the government will spare no effort to restore its control should a challenge to the system arise again. The influence of the National Security Service has only grown since Andijan, forming the most essential pillar of support on which the Karimov presidency now rests. It is unclear how the system will respond once Karimov is out of office. Absent a broadly acceptable successor, a degree of competition among the various power constituencies—including the National Security Service—is to be expected. Though Karimov's daughter Gulnara was long rumored to be at the top of the list of successors, the spotlight seems to have shifted away from her in recent years. The Uzbek National Security Service is likely

to play a prominent role in whatever path the Uzbek succession ultimately takes.

⁶¹ "Court Shuts Presidential Daughter-Owned Zeromax's Operations in Uzbekistan," UZNews.net, May 14, 2010, accessed January 8, 2012, http://www.uznews.net/news_single.php?lng=en&cid=2&sub=top&nid=13753.

⁶² For a more detailed discussion of U.S. policies in Uzbekistan, see Shishkin, "The Enemy We Need."

⁶³ "How the Andijan Killings Unfolded," BBC News, May 17, 2005, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4550845.stm>.

The Role of Foreign Powers

Central Asia has drawn significant interest from the United States, China, Russia, and the European Union. But for various reasons, and with some exceptions, the foreign policies of outside powers appear to focus on relatively short-term transactional results, an approach that has only deepened the region's crisis of governance. One geopolitical catch is that while Central Asia is important because of its location and natural resources, it is not important enough to sustain a lasting and positive interest on the part of the major powers. "It is often said that Central Asia is no one's top priority," notes David Merkel, a former senior official at the U.S. State Department.⁶⁴ As a result, the United States, Russia, Europe, and China have all struggled to formulate coherent regional strategies, pursuing policies that have only encouraged, sometimes unwittingly, the negative tendencies of local governments. The tussle for regional influence among the big powers—a replay of the so-called Great Game of the nineteenth century—at times has led to unhealthy competition for the attention of Central Asian regimes.

China

China's policies in Central Asia are driven primarily by two priorities: gaining access to the region's energy resources to feed China's galloping economy and buttressing China's Western flank against separatist threats. China has long struggled with unrest in its Xinjiang Province, which is populated by Uighurs, an ethnic group closely related to the Turkic peoples of Central Asia. (Like their Central Asian cousins, and unlike the majority Han Chinese, the Uighurs are Muslim.)

More broadly, China appears to view

Central Asia as a region that could provide the mainland with strategic depth, a wide swath of territory where China can cultivate alliances and build up clout through trade, investment, and loans. These alliances, in turn, could help China contain the influence of the United States, whose military buildup in the region, though directed at Afghanistan for the moment, has alarmed the Chinese leaders. General Liu Yazhou of the People's Liberation Army has described Central Asia as "the thickest piece of cake given to the modern Chinese by the heavens."⁶⁵

Or, in the words of Lifan Li of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, "China would be very happy to see Central Asia as a critical frontier for their nation's energy security, trade expansion, and ethnic stability. State enterprises have reached deep into the region with energy pipelines, railroads, and highways, while the government has recently opened Confucius Institutes to teach Mandarin in capitals across Central Asia, highlighting the important role of China's 'soft power' in this region."⁶⁶

Undoubtedly, much of Central Asia's appeal to China stems from the region's vast deposits of oil and gas. Unlike the politically tumultuous Middle East and Africa, whose underground riches must travel through crowded shipping lanes to reach China, Central Asia is right next door. And although Central Asia has plenty of flashpoints, it is a region where China can exercise more influence over events and strive for a greater degree of energy security. In recent years, China has aggressively pursued energy deals with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, negotiating exploration rights, buying stakes in local companies, and making large infrastructure investments. For instance, China

⁶⁴ David Merkel, written response to questions submitted by the author, spring/summer 2011.

⁶⁵ Edward Wong, "China Quietly Extends Footprints into Central Asia," *New York Times*, January 2, 2011, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/03/world/asia/03china.html?pagewanted=all>.

⁶⁶ Lifan Li, written response to questions submitted by the author, spring/summer 2011.

has built a dedicated pipeline connecting the oil fields of Kazakhstan with China's Xinjiang Province.⁶⁷ And in Turkmenistan, China stepped in to pick up the slack created when Russia drastically cut its imports of Turkmen natural gas.

This latest investment is symbolically significant because it underscores China's gradual emergence as a major economic force in Central Asia, competing with the historical influence of Russia. Since the early 1990s, the volume of trade between Central Asia and China has jumped nearly fiftyfold, to about \$26 billion a year.⁶⁸ Because of its long dominion over Central Asia, Russia remains the chief political, cultural, and economic player across the region. But that dominance is increasingly being challenged by China's economic might, with which Russia simply cannot compete. However, China is at risk of giving the impression that Central Asia is its resource pit. To compete with Russian dominance in the region, Beijing should think about expanding its cultural and philanthropic activities in Central Asia, facilitating educational exchanges, and investing in projects outside of the energy sector.

In the long term, Russia remains wary of China's rise, in part because of its demographic implications for the sparsely populated eastern regions of Russia. On the ground in Central Asia, however, the interests of the two major powers have not yet clashed in any significant way. If anything, there is a Sino-Russian tactical alliance that has sought to prevent or limit the influence of the United States in the region. Bobo Lo, a scholar and a former Australian diplomat in Moscow, describes the relationship between Moscow and Beijing as

the "axis of convenience."⁶⁹ China buys weapons and oil from Russia, while Moscow views Beijing as a necessary, if not always cooperative, counterweight to American hegemony.

Institutionally, China projects its influence in Central Asia through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), an alliance founded in 2001 at China's behest. It also includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Russia. Bankrolled and dominated by China, the organization is an amorphous political construct, most famous for its 2005 declaration calling for the closure of American military bases in Central Asia—an initiative driven by both China and Russia.

The fact that the SCO hews closely to China's priorities was made clear in 2008, when Russia and Georgia fought a brief war. Afterward, Russia recognized two breakaway Georgian provinces as independent states and lobbied intensely but fruitlessly for other countries to give them diplomatic recognition as well. It seemed that the SCO would be a natural place for Moscow to seek support for its Georgian gambit. But in a rebuke to Russia, the organization refused to give the Kremlin the unequivocal backing it had expected.⁷⁰ The main reason was that recognizing the breakaway states would have set a dangerous precedent for China, which has long wrestled with its own separatists in Xinjiang and in Tibet. During July 2009, in a typical incident, rioting broke out in Xinjiang again, with police killing several protesters who had allegedly attacked a police precinct.⁷¹

One of China's main priorities in the SCO is containing regional separatism and making sure that activists from Xinjiang are denied support and asylum among their ethnic kin in Central

⁶⁷ "Pipeline Carries Kazakh Oil to China," Xinhua News Agency, July 30, 2006, accessed January 8, 2012, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2006-07/30/content_652854.htm.

⁶⁸ Official Figures from China's Ministry of Commerce, cited in Wong, "China Quietly Extends Footprints into Central Asia."

⁶⁹ Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing and the New Geopolitics* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008).

⁷⁰ David L. Stern, "Security Group Refuses to Back Russia's Actions," *New York Times*, August 28, 2008, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/29/world/europe/29russia.html?pagewanted=all>.

⁷¹ For details, see Chris Buckley, "Xinjiang Riot Toll Hits 156 as Unrest Spreads," Reuters, July 6, 2009, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/07/06/us-china-xinjiang-idUSTRE5650SW20090706>.

Asia. China has put pressure on Central Asian governments to arrest and extradite suspected Uighur separatists to China, where they may face harsh treatment. The SCO maintains its own extensive blacklist for this purpose. In China's view, the so-called three evils of terrorism, extremism, and separatism all rate as equally grave security threats. In pursuing Uighur separatists beyond its borders, China has sought to transplant the three evils approach to Central Asia. In early 2011, for instance, Kazakhstan extradited a Uighur schoolteacher back to China. The teacher had fled Xinjiang in 2009 after a particularly violent bout of rioting there and obtained United Nations refugee status while living in Kazakhstan.⁷²

In a harsh assessment of the SCO's practices, a group called Human Rights in China recently argued that "the SCO approach to counter-terrorism, modeled on China's three evils doctrine, and highlighting principles of territorial integrity, non-interference in internal affairs, and social stability, contributes to supporting repressive regimes."⁷³ While this approach obviously benefits China, it is also convenient for the Central Asian regimes that have pursued their own domestic enemies across regional borders. Uzbekistan, for instance, has hounded its neighbors to hand over refugees fleeing Tashkent's internal crackdowns.⁷⁴

China's influence in Central Asia is a mixed bag. Its growing investments across the region are undoubtedly a welcome development, particularly for those countries that are mired in poverty. In 2009, for example, when much of the world's economy was shackled by the financial crisis, China offered \$10 billion in loans to Central Asia.⁷⁵ But China's political and security demands at times appear to reinforce the region's long-standing bad habits, including giving short

shrift to human rights. This is not a new criticism for China; Beijing's foreign policy in places such as Africa is often accompanied by a chorus of similar complaints. In Central Asia, China insists that all it wants is regional stability and peace. It is worth noting that China's overt meddling in the domestic matters of its Central Asian neighbors is less frequent than that of Russia and, at times, even the United States. But as China continues to supplant those powers in the region, it is reasonable to assume that its growing trade, investments, and loans will lead to a more muscular and outspoken political influence in the region.

⁷² Chris Buckley, "China Confirms Extradited Uighur Facing Terror Charges," Reuters, June 14, 2011, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2011/06/14/idINIndia-57688420110614>.

⁷³ Human Rights in China, "Counter-Terrorism and Human Rights: The Impact of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," white paper, March 2011, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.hrichina.org/sites/default/files/oldsite/PDFs/Reports/SCO/2011-HRIC-SCO-Whitepaper-Full.pdf>.

⁷⁴ For details, see Gulnoza Saidazimova, "Tashkent Demands Deportation of Andijon Refugees," Eurasianet.org, July 26, 2005, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/civilsociety/articles/pp072705.shtml>.

⁷⁵ For details, see Isabel Gorst and Jamil Anderlini, "China Puts Up \$10bn for Central Asia Loans," *Financial Times*, June 17, 2009.

Russia

Because of its historical dominion over Central Asia—first by the czars and then by the Soviets—Russia remains the preeminent foreign player in the region. Its influence encompasses the areas of politics, business, culture, language, and mass media—a combination that no other foreign power can hope to match. Russia also provides a crucial market for Central Asia’s surplus labor. Over the years, Moscow has not been shy about wielding its influence, sometimes in ways that have invited accusations of neo-imperialism and excessive meddling.

For much of the early 1990s, Russia was content to have little to do with the Central Asian republics, viewing the struggling region as a distraction from its own problems at home and from its aspirations to look westward rather than eastward. Moscow’s relative lack of interest was met with disappointment in the region, where the economies had inherited serious structural flaws from the Soviet days and needed external help. The Russian attitude began to change in the late 1990s, mirroring a broader reordering of Russia’s foreign policy priorities. After a decade of introspection and a focus on the West, Russia began to reassert itself in the former Soviet Union, a geopolitical space known in Moscow as the “near abroad” or the area of “privileged interests.”

One of the early architects of this policy was Yevgeny Primakov, a former chief of Russia’s foreign intelligence service who rose to the post of foreign minister and then prime minister. An old school cold warrior with a realist view of the world—and Russia’s place in it—Primakov was skeptical of the West’s motives and believed that some Western leaders were “actively working to prevent Russia from having a special role in

stabilizing the situation in the former Soviet Union and to hinder their rapprochement with Russia.”⁷⁶ At the time, the U.S.-dominated NATO was preparing an ambitious expansion into Eastern Europe, where the now-defunct, Soviet-run Warsaw Pact long had held sway. NATO’s creep toward Russia—for that is how it was perceived in the Kremlin—further strengthened the hand of the proponents of the so-called Primakov doctrine.

According to Vladimir Paramonov and Aleksey Stokov, the “pursuit of the ‘Primakov doctrine’ required Russia to increase its regional influence. Russia began to see Central Asia in this light as it tried to strengthen its position as the regional Eurasian great power.”⁷⁷ The renewed focus was evident in the active role that Moscow played in negotiating the peace settlement that ended Tajikistan’s civil war in the late 1990s. Russia’s push to reassert itself in the former Soviet Union reached a crescendo with the ascent to power of Vladimir Putin, who famously “described the Soviet collapse as ‘the greatest geopolitical catastrophe’ of the 20th century.”⁷⁸

In his first major foreign policy pronouncement since declaring his intention to reclaim the Russian presidency in 2012, Putin sketched out an idea for a “Eurasian Union.”⁷⁹ The grouping would presumably build on Russia’s existing customs union with Kazakhstan and Belarus, which Moscow has been trying to extend to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The customs union seeks to remove all barriers to trade among its members. Some analysts see it as a controversial idea designed to cement Russia’s economic dominance in the former Soviet space at the expense of broader integration through the World Trade Organization.

⁷⁶ Yevgeny Primakov, *Years in High Politics* (Moscow, 1999), 133, quoted in Vladimir Paramonov and Aleksey Stokov, “The Evolution of Russia’s Central Asia Policy,” trans. Mervyn Brown, Eurasian Home Analytical Resource, July 17, 2008, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.eurasianhome.org/xml/t/analysis.xml?lang=en&nic=analysis&pid=87&qyear=2008>.

⁷⁷ Paramonov and Stokov, “The Evolution of Russia’s Central Asia Policy.”

⁷⁸ “Putin Deplores Collapse of USSR,” BBC News, April 25, 2005, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4480745.stm>.

⁷⁹ Gleb Bryanski, “Russia’s Putin Says Wants to Build ‘Eurasian Union,’” Reuters, October 3, 2011, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/10/03/us-russia-putin-eurasian-idUSTRE7926ZD20111003>.

The post-9/11 deployment of U.S. troops in Central Asia was met with acquiescence in Moscow, which continued to maintain its own pockets of military presence in the region. That acquiescence turned to outright displeasure when Washington started backing pro-democracy movements across the former Soviet Union, including in Kyrgyzstan. In Moscow, these so-called color revolutions were perceived as an American effort to undermine or overthrow regimes that were friendly to Russia and, more ominously, even as a test run for a revolution in Russia itself.

As Dmitry Trofimov of the Russian Foreign Ministry notes, “The fact that the U.S. has been granted the right to use some airports and military bases is not really the point. There’s another factor that is almost certainly more significant: the readiness of Central Asian states to expand their cooperation with the U.S. even at the price of jeopardizing Russian interests in the region.”⁸⁰

Moscow pushed back against this perceived Western encroachment. Russia was one of the architects the Shanghai Cooperation Organization’s call for the closure of American bases in the region. And in Kyrgyzstan after the 2005 Tulip Revolution, Russia engaged in a high-stakes campaign to edge out the U.S. military base. The campaign eventually failed, but it revealed the various strands of influence that Russia wields over Central Asia.

At first, Moscow attempted to win the allegiance of Kyrgyzstan’s president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, by offering the country a large loan, whose disbursement was understood to be contingent on Bakiyev’s pledge to shut down the

American base.⁸¹ When Bakiyev took the money but backpedaled on that pledge, Russia deployed another powerful weapon: Russian state television, which still reaches sizable audiences across Central Asia, a legacy of the Soviet days. State-owned channels had already proven very useful in manipulating public opinion inside Russia. Now, Moscow demonstrated that it was ready to aim that weapon not only at the domestic political opposition, but also at the government of a foreign country. A series of scathing television reports detailing corruption in Bakiyev’s inner circle stirred public anger at the already unpopular regime.⁸²

Russia helped chip away at the regime’s precarious foundation by using another tactic that was gaining prominence in Russia’s dealings with its former Soviet subjects: the supply of oil and gas. Using a customs dispute tied to the provision of aviation fuel to the U.S. air force base in Kyrgyzstan, Russia hiked tariffs on Kyrgyzstan’s imports of petroleum products, a decision that reverberated across the country’s fragile economy.⁸³ Kyrgyzstan’s revolution of 2010 was not a Russian plot, but Russian actions in the run-up to the overthrow of the Bakiyev regime showed the range of pressure points that Russia could squeeze in Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan’s new government did not escape the long energy arm of Moscow, which had recently curtailed gasoline supplies to Kyrgyzstan again. The move was widely interpreted as a tactic intended to get Kyrgyzstan to join the Eurasian Union, a trade grouping that promotes Moscow’s economic and political interests.⁸⁴

Russia’s policies across Central Asia have

⁸⁰ Dmitry Trofimov, “Russian Foreign Policy Objectives in Central Asia,” *Russian Regional Perspectives Journal*, vol. 1, no. 2, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.iiss.org/programmes/russia-and-eurasia/russian-regional-perspectives-journal/rrp-volume-1-issue-2/russian-foreign-policy-objectives-in-central-asia/>.

⁸¹ For details, see Alex Rodriguez, “Kyrgyzstan’s Move to Close U.S. Air Base a Sign of Russian Sway,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 5, 2009, accessed January 8, 2012, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2009-02-05/news/0902050046_1_kyrgyzstan-kyrgyz-officials-air-base.

⁸² Andrew E. Kramer, “Before Kyrgyz Uprising, Dose of Russian Soft Power,” *New York Times*, April 18, 2010, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/19/world/asia/19kyrgyz.html>.

⁸³ For details, see “Russia and Kyrgyzstan in Dispute Over Airbase,” United Press International, March 23, 2011, accessed January 8, 2012, http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Special/2011/03/23/Russia-and-Kyrgyzstan-in-dispute-over-airbase/UPI-15941300912405/.

⁸⁴ For details, see “Kyrgyzstan: What’s the Cause of the Latest Russian–Kyrgyz Energy Row?” *Eurasianet.org*, July 25, 2011, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/63943>.

stirred mixed emotions in the region. For several generations of Central Asians, Russia has been an important cultural reference point, and the Russian language remains the lingua franca, although it is starting to disappear outside urban areas. But Moscow's assertive policies have given rise to suspicions that Russia has not fully reconciled itself to the political independence of the Central Asian states. Features of the Russian political system closely resemble the authoritarian landscape across Central Asia, leading some analysts to suggest that Moscow is much more comfortable dealing with regional strongmen than fostering any meaningful change.

There are significant limits to Russian influence, however. Despite having troops stationed in Central Asia, Russia has been reluctant to get involved in even limited peacekeeping operations. When a desperate Kyrgyzstan asked for Moscow's help in stopping the ethnic violence that erupted after the 2010 revolution, Moscow demurred, sending a powerful signal that local governments should not count on Russian security assistance.⁸⁵ And despite investment by Russian companies across the region, it seems likely that Russian economic influence will continue to decline relative to that of China.

⁸⁵ For details, see Simon Shuster, "Why Isn't Russia Intervening in Kyrgyzstan?" *Time*, June 16, 2010, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1997055,00.html>.

The United States and the European Union

For much of the 1990s, Central Asia was a backwater for American foreign policy, a region overshadowed by the far greater regional challenges posed by Russia, China, Iran, and Eastern Europe. Only Kazakhstan, with its vast energy reserves, merited serious attention from Washington. But even there, U.S. policy makers were concerned mostly with ensuring that Russia did not gain a stranglehold over pipelines carrying oil from the Caspian Sea region. Central Asia's role in American foreign policy changed drastically after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. Located just north of the Afghan border, Central Asia offered a natural staging ground for the campaign to oust the Taliban regime. The Soviets had used the same route for their own ill-fated occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. According to a 2005 RAND Corporation assessment prepared for the U.S. Air Force, "The current U.S. military presence in Central Asia is something of an historical accident . . . Central Asia suddenly became valuable real estate to the United States."⁸⁶

Military expediency has played a prominent role in guiding the U.S. involvement in Central Asia, at times undermining the notions of good governance, transparency, and human rights that American policy makers deemed important for the region. In 2007 alone, the United States provided \$145 million in military aid to the region. That is "six times the amount the U.S. government spent to promote rule of law, democratic governance, and respect for fundamental human rights . . . the U.S. military has acquired an oversized impact on U.S. foreign policy in Central Asia,"⁸⁷ according to a study conducted by the Open Society Foundations.

Over the past decade, the American efforts in Afghanistan have consumed significant amounts of money and blood, even as Afghanistan has remained a volatile, corrupt, and unpredictable place. It is only natural that the post-9/11 push to secure Afghanistan would dictate American foreign policy priorities in Central Asia. "Central Asian states are aware of this, and they engage the U.S. accordingly, knowing that other U.S. interests are ephemeral at best. In concrete terms, this has meant the U.S. calls for democratic reform have been viewed by the states in the region as not being serious,"⁸⁸ writes Sean Roberts, a Central Asia expert at George Washington University.

This approach has also created a perception among the region's ruling elites that the United States needs Central Asia more than Central Asia needs the United States. That perception emboldened the region's regimes to flout Western pressure for internal reform, paying lip service to Washington's entreaties about human rights and democracy. Because U.S. engagement in the region is perceived to have an expiration date—the looming withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan—Central Asian governments feel that they can be excused for treating the American presence as a temporary phenomenon, one to be exploited for financial and geopolitical gain but not to be taken too seriously on matters of governance and human rights. Moreover, in recent months, Central Asia has gained even more stature among American military planners because U.S. relations with Pakistan, always difficult, nosedived in the political fallout over the U.S. killing of Osama bin Laden in his home near Islamabad. Most of the Pentagon's supply lines for troops in Afghanistan traditionally have run through Pakistan, but

⁸⁶ Olga Oliker and David A. Shlapak, *U.S. Interests in Central Asia: Policy Priorities and Military Roles*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2005), accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG338.html>.

⁸⁷ Lora Lumpe, "U.S. Military Aid to Central Asia 1999–2009: Security Priorities Trump Human Rights and Diplomacy," Open Society Foundations Central Eurasia Project, Occasional Paper no. 1, October 2010, accessed January 8, 2012, http://www.soros.org/initiatives/cep/articles_publications/publications/occasional-paper-20101015/OPS-No-1-20101015.pdf.

⁸⁸ Sean Roberts, written response to questions submitted by the author, spring/summer 2011.

now the uneasy alliance between Washington and Islamabad has been putting the security of those routes in doubt. To reduce its reliance on Pakistan, Washington started increasing traffic along an alternate network of supply lines running through Central Asia.⁸⁹ This collateral windfall of diplomatic, military, and financial attention to Central Asia is likely unsustainable for the United States after Afghanistan fades as a foreign policy priority. In the simplest terms, the money that has flown into Central Asia to support Pentagon supply lines and military bases will not be on the table anymore, at least not at the current levels.

Military needs in Central Asia have at times come into direct conflict with Washington's declared commitment to human rights and democracy, reflecting internal debates in Washington about how to calibrate its regional priorities. In 2005, for instance, when the Uzbek security forces killed hundreds of protesters in Andijan, Washington faced a dilemma: speak out against the atrocities and jeopardize the American military base in Uzbekistan, or keep quiet to safeguard its military interests.

In his memoir, Donald Rumsfeld, the U.S. defense secretary at the time, quoted Condoleezza Rice, the national security advisor, as saying that "human rights trump security."⁹⁰ That view carried the day: Washington publicly rebuked the Uzbek regime, and the Uzbeks soon retaliated by evicting the Americans from the base. Angered by the dichotomy of human rights versus security, Rumsfeld wrote that "if we took such a good-and-evil view of the world, we wouldn't be able to count on support from any non-democratic country."⁹¹

This view captures one of the central

conundrums that has bedeviled U.S. foreign policy for generations. At the beginning of the twentieth century, President Woodrow Wilson pushed the United States to get involved in advancing democracy and human rights around the world. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, President George W. Bush declared that "the survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands."⁹² The democracy agenda received an intellectual boost from the fall of fascism and communism in the twentieth century, and from the United States' role in the transformation of post-war Germany and Japan and post-Soviet Eastern Europe. But the United States has an equally long history of dealing with unsavory regimes. The post-9/11 counterterrorism campaign, much like earlier efforts to contain communism, pushed the United States into uncomfortable alliances with authoritarian regimes—and Central Asia is no exception.

Just three years after the base eviction in Uzbekistan, Washington quietly rebuilt ties with the Uzbek regime to facilitate the transit of goods to Afghanistan through Uzbek territory; it was security's turn to trump human rights. In dealings with the Uzbek president, U.S. officials learned not to dwell on human rights too much—"democracy and human rights are sprinkled like powdered sugar on top very lightly."⁹³

The situation points to the limits of U.S. influence in Central Asia. Washington likely does not have the economic or ideological leverage to democratize the regional regimes, even if Washington genuinely wanted to pursue that strategy. With the rise of China and the continuing influence of Russia, Central Asian governments have options beyond the United

⁸⁹ For details, see Craig Whitlock, "U.S. Turns to Other Routes to Supply Afghan War as Relations with Pakistan Fray," *Washington Post*, July 2, 2011, accessed January 8, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-turns-to-other-routes-to-supply-afghan-war-as-relations-with-pakistan-fray/2011/06/30/AGffYvH_story.html.

⁹⁰ Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir* (New York: Sentinel, 2011).

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 635.

⁹² George W. Bush, "President Bush's Second Inaugural Address," January 20, 2005, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4460172>.

⁹³ Thomas Carothers, interview with the author, 2010.

States and Europe. And even the ultimate diplomatic sticks—such as a travel ban for top officials or trade sanctions—would not inflict enough pain on local leaders, who can count on the support of Beijing or Moscow, where foreign policy is not preoccupied with the rhetoric of human rights and democracy. According to a senior U.S. official, “Maybe we could have done that 20–30 years ago. But these days we have fewer cards to play. These guys have choices. We have to understand our place in the world, too.”⁹⁴

But such an approach may be deliberately underselling U.S. influence. Despite their sometimes hostile public statements, Central Asian regimes want the United States and the European Union to stay engaged in the region. They want trade and investment, but perhaps even more importantly, they want to use the West as a counterbalance to Russia and China, whose physical proximity and influence are often viewed with apprehension by the region’s leaders. The challenge for the United States is to craft a foreign policy that utilizes Washington’s diminished but still significant influence to extract concessions from Central Asian regimes.

The United States has learned that ignoring local corruption and human rights abuses to advance its security needs is a strategy fraught with pitfalls. In Kyrgyzstan, the United States maintains a large air force base that is crucial for ferrying troops into and out of Afghanistan. After the 2010 revolution overthrew a corrupt dictator, Kyrgyzstan’s new leaders alleged that Washington had condoned graft and abuses of the previous regime in an implicit bargain to keep the base.⁹⁵ Even though Washington denied any quid pro quo, and some of the allegations

have been distorted, the United States’ reputation in Kyrgyzstan took a hit after the revolution. The anger was such that the U.S. ambassador at the time was not a welcome visitor in the makeshift headquarters of the Kyrgyz president.⁹⁶

Washington has recently attempted to formulate a broader regional strategy that seeks to weave the often disparate tapestry of Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and beyond into a more coherent whole fueled by trade.⁹⁷ Grandly titled the “New Silk Road,” the idea is not new: in the distant past, merchant caravans plied these trade routes ferrying textiles, spices, and other goods between Asia and the West. Boosting international trade along the ancient Silk Road is a worthy goal, and one that would benefit the populations of Central Asia and Afghanistan. But the rhetorical push is bound to run into significant obstacles, chief among them the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, which is envisioned as the fulcrum of the New Silk Road. Big international trade projects involving Afghanistan have a difficult history. Enduring tensions among some Central Asian states, and between India and Pakistan, only add to the challenge.

Consider the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline, a long-planned project beset with logistical and political hurdles. The pipeline, whose purpose is to feed the hungry South Asian markets with Turkmen gas, captures perfectly the wider complexities of the New Silk Road. Though the four countries signed a framework agreement on the pipeline in 2010 after more than a decade of false starts, there are perennial doubts about its financing and security.⁹⁸

While the United States has a role to play

⁹⁴ Interview with the author, Tashkent, 2010.

⁹⁵ Interview with the author, Bishkek, 2010.

⁹⁶ Interviews with the author, Bishkek, 2010.

⁹⁷ “U.S. Envoy: New Silk Road Would Bring Prosperity,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 7, 2011, accessed January 8, 2012, http://www.rferl.org/content/us_envoy_says_new_silk_road_would_bring_prosperity/24352531.html.

⁹⁸ “Turkmen Natural Gas Pipeline Tapi to Cross Afghanistan,” BBC News, December 11, 2010, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-11977744>.

in encouraging greater regional cooperation, it is the European Union that potentially could do even more because of its geographic proximity to Central Asia and because of its energy needs in the region. In 2007, the EU unveiled a “Strategy for a New Partnership” with Central Asia, which calls for greater European involvement in the areas of education, rule of law, energy, and human rights.⁹⁹ Through its various economic assistance mechanisms, the EU has become one of the leading donors in the region and the principal trade partner for Kazakhstan. But, as often happens with EU foreign policy-making, spread out among 27 member states, the bloc’s political influence lags far behind its economic sway.

In a recent progress report, the EU acknowledged that it still has “much to do” to achieve its policy goals.¹⁰⁰ A particular challenge lies in nudging Central Asia toward greater respect for human rights and political freedoms. “Overall progress on the ground has been limited and in some instances regression can be observed,” the EU notes in the same report. Germany, which has been an important military player in Afghanistan and maintains a base in Uzbekistan, was instrumental in pushing the EU in 2009 to drop its sanctions against Uzbekistan, which were imposed in the aftermath of the Andijan massacre. The calculus was exactly the same as Washington’s: the easing of political pressure on Tashkent in exchange for the regime’s continued cooperation in the war in Afghanistan. Unlike the American base, the German base avoided eviction, and Uzbekistan could safely ignore the European entreaties on human rights. The EU admits that it made little progress on advancing human rights in Uzbekistan. “The EU’s readiness for cooperation signaled by the

end of the restrictive measures against Uzbekistan . . . has yet to receive a substantial response.”¹⁰¹

More recently, the United States followed the EU’s lead in removing the post-Andijan legal hurdles to dealing with the government of Uzbekistan. Direct military aid to regimes with a track record of hurting their own citizens is restricted by U.S. law. Mindful of its growing reliance on Uzbekistan to secure Afghanistan, the Barack Obama administration has been seeking a congressional waiver that would authorize the United States to disburse military aid to the Uzbek government. Despite a chorus of complaints from prominent human rights groups, the waiver has already cleared a key Senate committee.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ European Communities, “The European Union and Central Asia: The New Partnership in action,” June 2009, accessed January 8, 2012, http://www.eeas.europa.eu/central_asia/docs/2010_strategy_eu_centralasia_en.pdf.

¹⁰⁰ Council of the European Union, “Joint Progress Report by the Council and the European Commission to the European Council on the Implementation of the EU Central Asia Strategy,” June 28, 2010, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/en/10/st11/st11402.en10.pdf#page=2>.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, “Update—Uzbekistan: Congress Approves Waiver on Human Rights Restrictions for Military Aid,” Eurasianet.org, September 24, 2011, accessed January 8, 2012, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64214>.

Conclusion

Central Asia faces a series of internal and external pressures that will make the region a source of volatility and geopolitical tussles in the years to come. Several Central Asian states face unresolved presidential succession issues, which are likely to come to a head soon. There is potential for protests and civil strife across much of the region, a risk that is compounded by a general lack of economic development. The U.S.-led war in Afghanistan has been a boon to Central Asia's authoritarian regimes, which provide the Pentagon with crucial transit and basing arrangements. But the United States is likely to disengage from the region as it winds down the Afghan campaign, with China and Russia poised to increase their influence in Central Asia.

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