

Post-ISAF Afghanistan:

*The Security Challenges for
Central Asia After 2014*

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Abstract

This paper is a critical engagement with the competing narratives of the great game politics taking place in Central Asia among China, Russia, and United States. It argues that the region has changed over the past twenty years, and this must be taken into account when examining the regional influence of outside countries. At this juncture, the author suggests that Central Asian countries are increasingly looking at the world not in terms of Russia-versus-the-West, but rather based on a 360-degree view, which means that they are looking to a wider range of nations with which to trade and develop relations. Therefore, they are resorting to the understanding that their future lies not in being dominated by one country or alliance, but rather in establishing “multi-vectored foreign and security policies”. However, this does not imply that countries in the region have unilaterally ended external intervention attempts or coercion. It is rather a consequence of the strengthening of independent political will of Central Asian states, along with the diminishing attraction of the region in global oil and gas markets. Within this general framework, the paper attempts to answer the following questions: Will the security problems of Afghanistan seep into Central Asia after the NATO mission ends in the country, or will it adversely affect the ability of the respective regimes to instill a sense of security within their own territorial boundaries? A further question is whether diminished energy interests and the absence of a major security concern will cause United States to view Central Asia as “unimportant?” If the answer to this question is yes, should we assume that Russia and China are now de facto dominating Central Asia?

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The future of Central Asia recently has been dominated by discussions of the increasing role of China, Russia's strained efforts to remain engaged, and the declining interest of the United States in the region, especially after the drawdown of U.S. troops in Afghanistan and the changing security mission for NATO-ISAF. All of these issues are inextricably linked, and yet not necessarily dependent on one another. At the end of the day, though, each major external actor will carry out programs and policies toward the region in light of their own national security interests. These competing narratives of great game politics are more the domain of pundits and analysts.

The region itself has changed over the past twenty years, and this must be taken into account when examining the capacity of outside countries to influence the regional dynamics. Kazakhstan, for example, is a more confident player in the region and has asserted itself in international organizations such as the OSCE and the OIC, holding the leadership roles of these structures in 2010 and 2011 respectively. The foreign ministry, now headed by Erlan Idrissof, is attempting to gain a stronger presence in countries around the world. Energy firms are dealing with a more competent base of Kazakh talent, and it is clear that the country is increasingly capable of managing its own resources, paralleling the experience of the energy-producing states in the Middle East.

Turkmenistan remains the perennial underachiever of Central Asia. The continued discoveries of gas fields in the country and recurrent symposia of energy experts and companies underscore the fact that the country has great potential. That said, this "potential" remains only partially realized due to the opaque nature of decision-making as well as the limited access outsiders have to government offices and state-run energy firms. Mistrust of these outside actors and a desire to reinforce the policy of "positive neutrality" has limited opportunities for foreign direct investment and indeed understanding of the country itself.

Uzbekistan continues to perfect its autarkic approach to economic and energy development, maximizing its capacity to be self-sustained. Increasingly, it has begun to engage in regional energy and trade networks, ranging from regional energy pipeline routes to the "northern distribution network" designed to supply NATO forces in Afghanistan. Perhaps success in these specific instances as a transit state will lead to a more cooperative and open approach to regional development. Perpetual tensions with its neighbors, especially Tajikistan over the construction of the Rogun Dam and Kyrgyzstan over the plight of ethnic Uzbeks in that country (as highlighted by the 2010 events in Osh and Jalalabad) continue to stymie true regional cooperation.

Finally, both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan face problems of resource scarcity.

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ty, energy dependency, and concerns about being marginalized if large-scale transit routes circumvent their territories. Tajikistan has the added stress of a border with Afghanistan, placing it on the transit route for the narcotics trade originating in Afghanistan. Kyrgyzstan shares the challenges of being a transit state, in addition to managing its internal political and ethnic tensions, which have resulted in periodic outbreaks of violence over the past decade.

In spite of these challenges, all five countries of Central Asia are increasingly looking at the world not in terms of Russia-versus-the-West, but from a more panoramic perspective. Each country's official foreign and security documents look to a wider range of nations with which to trade and develop relations. Moreover, there is a greater understanding that their future lies not in being dominated by one country or alliance, but rather in establishing "multi-vectored foreign and security policies."

A further limitation is that with the passing of time, the attraction of engaging in Central Asia has diminished for external actors. It is no longer seen as a "new region of development" or the object of a "new great game." This

was the rhetoric of the 1990s, when numerous conferences and writings focused on the lure of Central Asian natural resources. This has now been replaced by a more sober and selective approach to the region. This is especially telling with respect to energy. In the 1990s, the focus was on "where would the main export pipeline be?" This "either-or" approach has been replaced by an "and-and" view of potential pipelines. As the global energy market has changed, especially with the introduction of shale gas and shale oil, in addition to new discoveries in different parts of the world, the global appeal of the broader Caspian region has diminished. Regardless of trends in other parts of the world, the Caspian basin could remain critical for its *immediate* neighbors, but it now has to compete for attention and investment to bring in outside interest.

Having raised these initial points, what are the challenges presently facing the Central Asian countries? The business and policy climate of Central Asia will be dependent on a number of issues, in the short term, looking ahead to 2014 and 2015, but also on longer-term projections, toward 2035 or 2050.

1. What is the state of the respective legal regimes in the countries of Central Asia? Can they ever be strong enough to manage and maintain cross-border traffic and commerce?
2. What is the investment and finance climate in each of the countries? At

what point will foreign direct investment go beyond energy and engage with other sectors?

3. To what extent does corruption remain a fundamental challenge to the region? According to international NGOs like Transparency International and Freedom House, corruption continues to plague economic development in Central Asia. More to the point, it erodes the ability of the respective regimes to maintain legitimacy among the populations.

4. Can the infrastructures of the Central Asian countries allow for greater local usage and engagement? With all the discussion of “modern Silk Roads” and “new Silk Roads,” is the local capacity sufficient to render these sustainable? The *physical* conditions of the regional transit routes are of varying quality, and to ensure effective cross-border trade, these must be brought to a level to make it possible to trade.

5. How critical is environmental degradation to the economic stability of the region? Non-governmental organizations such as Crude Accountability highlight this in their own research. Even the research offices of the Peoples’ Liberation Army (PLA) of China have focused efforts on the impact of environmental degradation on regional security. Such topics are now higher up on the agenda, underscoring the connection between environment and societal stability.

6. On the issue of stability and security,

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the paramount concern for the Central Asian countries is without doubt the situation in Afghanistan. Will the security problems of that country seep into the region of Central Asia, and specifically, will it damage the ability of the respective regimes to instill a sense of security within their own territorial boundaries? Central Asian security is at risk in three key ways:

1. Actual insurgent groups based in Afghanistan can cross over into Central Asia and create problems within the countries. This is a concern in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and to a lesser extent in Kyrgyzstan.
2. The instability in Afghanistan will perpetuate a power vacuum in the region, allowing for transnational threats to cross over: not just specific terrorist actors noted above, but drug traffickers and other illegal groups that will adversely affect the local social and economic conditions in Central Asia.
3. Instability in Afghanistan will thwart any regional plans –

to include pipelines such as TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) or the so-called “Modern Silk Road” efforts advocated by the United States and other outside powers.

This list is by no means exhaustive, but it demonstrates the range of problems that must be concurrently addressed. Moreover, for the countries of Central Asia to tackle all of these issues, it is evident that external engagement is required, and that the region needs to focus on its interests abroad. External powers could provide funding, expertise, and perhaps a leadership role in some of the more complex cross-border concerns. In an ideal world, such a power would not then be an “elder brother” to the Central Asian states, but a partner.

The reality is that outside states have looked at their policies toward Central Asia in a strategic manner and have, on occasion, acted as “elder brothers” to it. The United States, for example, has often looked at Central Asia in light of other, more pressing security and foreign policy interests. A full analysis of U.S. policy towards Central Asia is not the emphasis of this paper, but one can make a few observations. The reality is that U.S. policy has been fairly transparent for the past 22 years. Official documents and presentations over this time-frame outline the sorts of objectives expressed by the U.S. government. Consistent themes include:

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1. Political development and democratization.
2. Economic development and the creation of free-market economies.
3. Human rights and social stability in the region.
4. Energy development and the diversification of routes and markets.
5. Regional security

For all who followed these trends – or have actually been part of the process – this outline represents nothing new. Of course, the relative importance of each of these specific policy directions has changed over time. In the early 1990s, the focus was on political, economic, and human rights development – at least in rhetorical terms. However, it is important to note that during these early years, the U.S. pursued what one could call a “Russia-First” policy. American and Western European attention was focused on the problems in Bosnia and the broader Balkan region, as well as out-of-theater concerns such as Somalia and Rwanda. A limited num-

ber of policy officials and academics monitored the civil war in Afghanistan, and to an even lesser extent the burgeoning civil war in Tajikistan, but these remained outside the scope of mainstream discussions. To say these were “Russia’s problems” is perhaps overstressing it, but it was clear that Russian security interests trumped others when it came to Cen-

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tral Asia. Arguments ranging from national interests to the personal ties between Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin have been used to illustrate this reality. When U.S.-Russia relations began to fall apart in the mid-1990s, however, interest in the Central Asian (and Caspian) region increased. For the remainder of the decade, one saw a proliferation of “energy studies” efforts in the United States. From PhDs to think-tank programs, Caspian Energy became a useful catchphrase and the topic of countless conferences and programs. This was the “new Great Game” as some readily claimed – thinking that Central Asian energy resources would only go in one direction, as opposed to the multi-directional reality of today.

When Afghanistan became a security concern – after September 11th and the subsequent U.S.-led campaign in Af-

ghanistan, security became a top priority and Central Asia was once again viewed through the prism of another national interest. American concerns about the viability of supporting the campaign in Afghanistan became the core reason to request – and receive – basing and fly-over rights from the Central Asian countries. Bases in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan were the nodes of engagement, but the broader regional interest in making sure that military operations within the Afghan theater of engagement dominated any bilateral negotiations. One should be mindful that even if a particular trend dominated U.S. policy discussions, it did not mean that the others vanished. The “human rights *or* security” dichotomy one saw in academic writings at the time was a bit simplistic and misrepresentative of the efforts made by U.S. government officials in the State Department, the Defense Department, and other offices to continue the lines of policy interest as noted earlier. However, these security efforts were duly noted and understood by the countries in the region and awakened a sense of competition once again. In spite of constant refrains of “no great games or competitions for influence,” the sad reality was that major powers did consider what others were doing and the comparative advantages that each had.

Without question, the fundamental limitations on U.S. engagement will center on the changing nature of the NATO-ISAF mission in Afghanistan

beginning on January 1, 2015. Specifically, on December 31, 2014, the NATO-ISAF mission will cease to exist in its current form. Presumably, the security responsibilities in the country will be taken over by the ANSF and the government of Afghanistan. The U.S. role will be limited to training and some counter-insurgency efforts that have yet to be defined. Troop levels, originally thought to be in the range of 20,000-25,000 are now most likely to be 2,500-8,000, with a distinct possibility that the number will be zero.

Equally important is the domestic situation in the U.S., namely that of budget austerity measures. At present, the U.S. government is wrestling with a mounting national debt and deficit and there is a fundamental shift in how policy is being framed. Indeed, it appears that national security is increasingly based on budgetary grounds (*what can we afford?*), as opposed to national interests (*what should we do?*). Oddly, it is important to stress the budgetary challenges facing any set of programs and potential policies towards Central Asia. This is not going to change because of the political climate in the United States against increasing support for “foreign engagement” with the exception of a limited number of special cases. Moreover, the national debt and deficit crises that have plagued the United States since 2008 continue to affect funding options among government agencies. Whether it is “sequestration” or simple percentage reductions

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in programs (“do more with less”), the past decade of increased money for international engagement will come to an end. And, perhaps the Afghan conflict will fade from the U.S. collective memory in the same swift manner that the Iraq campaign did, and thereby the “value” of Central Asia will drop precipitously, as previously noted. Barring a unique interest on the part of a particular Congressman or Senator, it is unlikely to see the political and economic value of Central Asia ever return to the level of the 1990s.

With the decrease in energy interests and an absence of a major security concern, will it now be the case that the United States views Central Asia as “unimportant?” Given the trajectory of past policies, it would seem that such a conclusion at least merits an honest discussion and debate. Such a discussion must acknowledge the challenges of imagination in relation to how the U.S. views the region. To assume that the states ought to only look westward and maintain ties with NATO, the EU or “Europe and Eurasia” is to ignore the reality on the ground.

Even the curious turn of a phrase “pivot to Asia” that one hears today is vague about whether Central Asia is deemed part of Asia. Suffice it to say, the concern is that this will result in a U.S. move away from Central Asia, to include a lessening of resources, expertise, and attention.

Reviewing the challenges of U.S. policy toward Central Asia leads us to confront a critical reality on the ground: any outside power cannot assume that it is working in a static environment. Indeed, as outside actors’ policies have changed because of their own geopolitical circumstances, the same could be said for the countries in the region.

They are independent states with their own views of national security, national interest, and international relations. One just has to look at the evolution of the Kazakhstan National Security documents from the 1990s to the present. As researched by Roger McDermott, Cold War ideas of state-on-state conflict, global conflicts, and Soviet-era language have been replaced by serious discussions of transnational threats, cooperative security, and engagement in peace support operations so that Kazakhstan can be a security provider in the region, and beyond. Other states in Central Asia have also shifted their views on security to match the current trends.

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involved in the region – so bargains are constantly being made. In terms of economic development and assistance, one sees trade coming from a much broader range of countries. In the 1990s, assumptions were made that economic links would remain within the post-Soviet space, with outside engagement limited to European countries and perhaps the United States. Today, there is a diversity of outside actors, including states in the Middle East/Gulf, South and Southeast Asia, and beyond. The same can be said for security cooperation. Military links, including professional military education, exercises, and weapons purchases are now much more diverse than 10 or 15 years ago.

Media and the news – and how to interpret events – are still subject to filters that the West might not appreciate or understand. Whether one is looking at the coverage of the 2003 U.S. war in Iraq, the 2008 conflict between Russia and Georgia, or the current events in Syria or the international stand-off with Iran, media coverage does tend to maintain some of the older frameworks, especially paralleling those from Russia. Not surprisingly, this colors how citizens of the respective countries view outside nations.

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The U.S. standing in the world has changed from the perspective of Central Asian governments. Whether this is based on a perception that the U.S. was supportive of the so-called “colored revolutions” or the reality of the U.S. fiscal crisis since 2008, the countries of Central Asia are more open to discussing the viability of engaging with other countries around the world. It is not that the United States has vanished from their purview, but rather that it now belongs to a mix of other countries. The truth of the matter is that while the “idea” of the United States has faded a bit, it is not irrelevant to the region as a political actor. That said, one cannot expect to return to the 1990s, at which time the attitudes toward the U.S. were overwhelmingly positive. Nor can one take for granted the “American model of development” that was so enthusiastically embraced years ago.

Does this mean that the United States will fade into irrelevance as far as the Central Asian region is concerned? That risk does exist, especially if the limiting factors noted above are amplified. In addition, as priorities develop in other parts of the world, it is clear that the U.S. will be unable to project

power so readily, and may have to direct its engagement on a more selective basis. If this is the case, would a crisis in Central Asia trump one in the Middle East? East Asia? Latin America? At the same time, should one readily assume that Russia and China are now de facto dominating Central Asia? One must not ignore the fact that both of these countries face their own limitations, and could well experience crises that would further challenge power projection in the classic definition of the term. Russia itself has to focus on other border regions, such as the South Caucasus and Europe, and is limited in terms of what it can militarily provide/support. For Russia, the early 1990s saw a period wherein Central Asia was considered

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as the so-called “Near Abroad” and the general assumption was that these states would play a subordinate role to Russia for the foreseeable future. As ties frayed, and other countries engaged more effectively in the region, most of the Central Asian countries saw their levels of cooperation with Russia decrease. The past decade has seen the level of Kazakh-Chinese, Kyrgyz-Chinese, and Tajik-Chinese trade increase so much that the neighbor to the east is now the dominant economic actor.

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While discussions of China's inevitable domination of energy resources and minerals in the region are ongoing, Beijing's ability to effectively project power – economic and security – is still a “work in progress.” Debates about how to manage China's increasing presence in the world continue within the country's leadership, and a clear direction for future action has yet to be determined. Equally important, internal challenges may arise that will require the government to devote greater attention to the economy, the environment, social stability, and so on.

Indeed, for these major countries, as well as for other, less-involved states, the appeal and usefulness of Central Asia could be limited. This is in terms of energy development, economic trade and exploitation, and even security. It is the “security” emphasis that has been most regularly placed on Central Asia with respect to outside powers. An illustrative example is the status of the Manas Transit Center in Kyrgyzstan operated by the United States. Over the past eight years, regular conversations and speculations about the imminent closure of the facility have

swirled around policy communities in Washington, Bishkek, Moscow, Beijing, and Kabul, to name a few. At its basic level, the transit center is an essential component of the military operations taking place in Afghanistan. It provides opportunities for refueling of close air support, reconnaissance, and transportation missions of the U.S. air force. It has also become the de facto transit point for the majority of U.S. military personnel going into and out of Afghanistan. When troop levels were at their peak, roughly 30,000 personnel transited through the center in any given month. Once the total commitment of U.S. personnel in Afghanistan drops from nearly 100,000 to 8,000 by 2015, there is no question that the utility of Manas will decrease. If air missions can be conducted from other bases, the Manas transit center could actually be closed down without damaging the U.S. mission in Afghanistan. There will come a point that the service fees for using Manas are simply not economically viable for the U.S. government.

Assessments of other outside powers lead to similar conclusions. Dispensing with a Cold War framework, it is possible to evaluate the interests of other countries in Central Asia. As has been noted in other writings, the economic interests of countries such as Russia and China are fairly obvious – control of raw materials, hydrocarbon reserves, and potential trade and commercial routes. It is when these interests converge that opportunities for cooperation arise. This

is most evident in the regular discussions on the security challenges presented by “Afghanistan post-2014.” The worst-case scenario presented by Russian analysts entails Afghanistan imploding or taken over by Taliban-like forces. Civil war ensues, and transnational extremist groups, drug traffickers and the like are free to base out of the country and adversely affect neighboring states, including those in Central Asia. While this would never pose an existential threat to Russia itself, it would require the country to expend more resources and attention on defending its southern borders, to invest more heavily in the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and potentially to base additional military units in the Central Asian region. Maintaining stability in Central Asia – and managing chaos in Afghanistan – would become a policy without any real end and Russia has no true capability to genuinely resolve those problems. Moreover, it would draw resources and attention away from either the European or East Asian regions, where greater national interests exist. In short, a chaotic Afghanistan post-2014 would impose a “tax” on Russia’s security forces and the economy in general.

The same could be said for China, a country that is investing billions of dollars in Afghanistan and Central Asia, particularly in the areas of transportation and resource extraction. While the Central Asian operations would not necessarily be hindered, increased security requirements would

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escalate the price and risk of any business undertaking in the region. Moreover, as a country that is not used to projecting hard power outside of its borders, China would have to consider stationing troops and participating in region-based security frameworks that go beyond conversations and photo opportunities.

If the future of Afghanistan post-2014 is less hazardous, then the opportunities for Russia and China to engage with the Central Asian countries will increase, and will then be limited by their own interests and capabilities. In this instance, as noted above, they will have to balance out real interests in Central Asia with those in other regions based on their respective strategies. To this end, Central Asia will remain of secondary importance. If the situation in the region is largely stable, and if the United States is thus minimally engaged, one could expect the Russian presence to be more of a “maintaining a presence” without additional expenditures. This would free up the Russian foreign ministry to address issues in the Middle East, Iran, East Asia and Europe – traditional areas of former Russian and Soviet power projection and ones in which the current administration would like to see Russian involvement. For China, a stable Afghanistan and a

resultant stable Central Asia would mean that resources could be shifted elsewhere. Equally important is the belief that such stability would allow the Chinese government to feel more confident about stability within its own borders. Xinjiang next to a stable and friendly Central Asia is less of a problem than next to an unstable and unfriendly region.

Moreover, the perceptions of these powers – just like those of the United States – need to be better understood. Over the past twenty years, Kazakhstan has been able to develop a more sophisticated approach to neighboring powers and, while recognizing the comparative geopolitical advantages held by Russia and China, its efforts to better connect with other states is an effort to balance them bureaucratically. President Karimov's administration in Uzbekistan has had a cyclical relationship with Russia in particular. The second suspension of CSTO activities is important in that it underscores the Uzbek government's concern about being part of organizations that are dominated by a single nation. To the extent that other "outside powers" engage with Central Asia, the past twenty years have shown that Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have been better able to proactively establish their own national security goals. While the same cannot necessarily be said for Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the leaders of both states have at least made efforts to court other countries. President Rahmon's periodic nod to the "Persian commu-

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nity" in the region – Iran, Afghanistan (Dari), and Tajikistan – is a case in point, as is his commitment to fostering better ties with India. In both instances, there has been some flirting with security relations, with the most developed being that between the Tajik and Indian militaries. President Atambayev doesn't quite have that luxury in Kyrgyzstan, although recent debates about the value of the Customs Union and the continued presence of the Manas Transit Center underscore the fact that the country is not completely beholden to either Russia or China.

The post-2014 world should also be considered in terms of two final characteristics. First of all, regardless of how stable or unstable it might be, Afghanistan will still exist in 2015 and the region will not experience a complete breakdown. Indeed, there are those who strongly support the belief that the Taliban will never regain power completely and that, at best, we will see a poor country with lim-

ited capabilities, fighting a long-simmering conflict in specific areas (most notably the eastern provinces). To this end, there will remain a Western and even international organization presence in Afghanistan. So regardless, the “worst case scenarios” ought to be understood, but not necessarily assumed as a *fait accompli*.

The second fact is that the issue of “polarity” is being played out in Central Asia in interesting ways. If it is not a bipolar, unipolar or even multipolar world, can one confidently refer to the future geopolitical space of Central Asia as non-polar? In the geostrategic understanding of central Asia, a non-polar world would suggest that no single power dominates the region, and that there are multiple different dynamics at play – in terms of politics, economics, security, and even non-traditional areas. Thereby the whole conception of the region as a single entity is less relevant. Indeed, in future years, would it be more fitting to focus specifically on bilateral dynamics and to seek to understand the sum total of these parts to explain the interests of regional and international actors? As seen elsewhere, for instance in Latin America, Africa, or Southeast Asia, the need to better understand the powers of the region is increasingly more important than just comparing the roles of outside powers. If the United States foreign policy community can nimbly adapt to this environment, it will pay dividends in the long run. The same could be said for other external powers. And,

most importantly, if this approach is understood clearly by the five Central Asian countries, chances for cooperation and constructive engagement will increase. At the same time, the dangers is that if left unchecked, new dynamics can arise to threaten stability. For the international actors who express interests in Central Asia, these ought to be the real concerns in the coming years.