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U.S. Interests in Central Asia

Policy Priorities and Military Roles

Olga Oliker, David A. Shlapak

Prepared for the United States Air Force

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Central Asia

Preface

The current U.S. military presence in Central Asia is something of an historical accident. The question is whether or not it is also an anomaly. For the first ten years after Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan became independent, sovereign states, the United States saw its interests in the region as limited. What engagement there was demanded little from the U.S. military, and there seemed to be no particular reason that this should change in the future. The region was remote, landlocked, and of little strategic consequence. Although Central Asia's energy resources and proximity to Russia, Iran, and China required some U.S. attention, and the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) infrastructure remaining after the Soviet Union's breakup made for an even more compelling concern, the region was far from critical to the United States.

Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) called on U.S. forces to deploy to and fight in a part of the world where few planners had ever envisioned sending them. Central Asia suddenly became valuable real estate to the United States as it decided how to deploy and maintain forces for that operation. In fall 2001, U.S. forces deployed to Central Asia and set up bases and operations. At the same time, the U.S. government stepped up its cooperation programs with the host countries.

Since that time, forces have been reconfigured, and one host country, Uzbekistan, has requested that the United States remove its military forces from its soil. However, a U.S. presence remains in the region and continues to support ongoing operations in Afghanistan.

Clearly, the United States will continue to need access to Central Asia as long as Operation Enduring Freedom continues. The facilities in place remain critical to the missions they support, even if some are now winding down. Whether OEF indicates a lasting requirement for a U.S. presence there is less clear.

This document argues that although the United States has significant interests in Central Asia and must maintain relationships with the states of the region, the military component of this effort, while essential, is comparatively small. Operation Enduring Freedom creates real requirements, but these will end when that operation does (or as it draws down). Even if the military role is small, however, the evolution of U.S. security policy toward Central Asia will be a critical component of the U.S. national security strategy for reasons beyond OEF itself.

This document should interest policymakers and analysts involved in international security and U.S. foreign policy. Its analysis is based on over a year of research, including travel to the region and extensive interviews with U.S., regional, and global specialists, government officials, and others. It involved a multidisciplinary team of researchers who sought to combine their understanding of politics, economics, and military strategic analysis to bring fresh perspectives to the questions at hand.

This study is one of several reporting the results of this research effort. Others address regional economic development and the interests of several key outside actors. RAND plans to publish each of these studies separately. This report draws on the material in all of those assessments and additional work on regional political developments, the role of Islam, and relations between the Central Asian states to define future requirements and approaches to Central Asia for the United States.

The research reported here was sponsored by AF/XOX and conducted within the Strategic and Doctrine Program of RAND Project AIR FORCE. Comments are welcome and may be directed to the authors and to Andrew Hoehn, director of Project AIR FORCE's (PAF's) Strategy and Doctrine Program. Until late 2003, the previous director of PAF's Strategy and Doctrine program, Edward Harsh-

berger, provided leadership and support. Until late 2004, acting director Alan Vick oversaw the completion of this effort. Research for this report, which was undertaken as part of a project entitled “The USAF in Central Asia: Issues and Prospects,” was largely completed in late 2003, although some updates were made as late as September 2005.

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Summary

For the United States, Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan cast a new spotlight on the independent states of post-Soviet Central Asia. Although the United States had previously developed relationships of varying warmth and intensity with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan during the decade since their independence, the region was far from a priority for Washington. Moreover, the region's geographic position—landlocked and remote from most U.S. interests—made it difficult to envision scenarios for which military access to these countries could be needed. OEF, however, was just such a scenario, bringing the Central Asian states to the front lines of the U.S. campaign against terror. Driven by a variety of policy interests and goals, these states have provided U.S. forces with access ranging from overflight to substantial basing facilities. At the time of this writing, U.S. forces remain in the region, most notably in Kyrgyzstan (see pp. 5–19).

However, although the needs of OEF have seemed clear, long-term U.S. interests in the region require careful consideration and analysis. The region is complex, and its political, economic, and social situation, as well as the foreign policies of its component states, could influence U.S. goals well beyond the borders of Central Asia.

This document identifies the implications for the U.S. Air Force (USAF) of a variety of economic, political, and social trends in the region and of U.S. and other nations' interests in Central Asia. It concludes that the United States has real and significant interests in

Central Asia and must maintain relationships with the states of the region (see pp. 32–37).

A major reason for U.S. interest in Central Asia concerns the potential for failure of political and economic development in the region. The September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States demonstrated that instability, failed and failing states, and economic and political underdevelopment present security concerns, not just to the states that suffer directly from these problems but to the global community as a whole. From this perspective, political, social, and economic trends in Central Asia merit attention.

Since September 11, 2001, it has become clear to the United States that the implications of political and economic problems in faraway states must now be understood as potential security threats, direct and indirect. Add to this the fact that the United States retains an interest in the development of energy resources in Central Asia and that many other states key to U.S. interests have their own concerns about the region, and it becomes clear that Central Asia has the potential to be critically important to Washington (see pp. 19–32).

The evolution of U.S. security policy toward Central Asia will be a crucial component of the U.S. national security strategy, but the military role in this effort, while critical, is a comparatively small one for two reasons:

- First, although the military may have an important role to play, particularly in ensuring the security of regional borders, the key to solving the root problems of Central Asia, which are at the core of U.S. concerns about the region, is advancing economic and political development. There is little evidence to support the contention that the U.S. military presence does this in and of itself (see pp. 32–38).
- Second, there appears to be little cause for significant military presence from a strategic perspective. Few contingencies can be imagined for which the Central Asian states become such critical partners that a permanent presence would be desired (see pp. 39–44).

Therefore, the United States should seek as much as possible to work with other interested parties to advance common economic and political interests. Russia, Turkey, China, India, and various European states share U.S. goals of stability and development in Central Asia. In fact, for many of these countries, particularly Russia, the region is far more critical than it is for the United States. This, combined with the significant interests the United States has in good and cooperative relations with Russia over and above the question of Central Asia, argues strongly for a collaborative approach. Although such cooperation and coordination—complicated as it is by rivalries and distrust on all sides—will be difficult to achieve, it will be critical to a successful U.S. strategy in the region and to the region's own success.

No less crucial is to identify tangible short-term goals in areas where coordination can bring results that benefit all concerned. A model for this process may be the Cold War dialogues between the United States and Russia on such questions as incidents at sea and nuclear arms control, which resulted in agreements that benefited both states. Success, of course, will be measured by whether the small steps can lead to bigger ones—to cooperation on border security and other components of the fight against transnational threats (see pp. 32–37).

The U.S. military's role in Central Asia, though comparatively small, is nonetheless critical, with implications for the USAF. From a purely operational perspective, the key goal for the U.S. military in the region is to build a framework for the smooth and rapid reintroduction of American forces into Central Asia should it be necessary or desirable in the future. Military engagement can also support the attainment of other U.S. goals in the region by helping enhance regional development.

An effective strategy for future U.S. military engagement in Central Asia would have three main components.

Maintenance of a “Semi-Warm” Basing Infrastructure

To facilitate reentry into the region, the USAF should identify a network of suitable potential forward operating locations (FOLs) in the Central Asian republics.¹ These should be selected with an eye toward a range of plausible scenarios and with the deliberate intent of diversifying risks by maintaining options in as many republics as possible. Prepositioning would be limited to only the least expensive and hardest-to-deploy items, such as bomb bodies and some vehicles; to the extent practicable, reliable arrangements should be made to acquire necessary items and materials from the local economy when needed.

A Carefully Chosen Program of Military-to-Military Interactions

U.S. aircraft would exercise permitted overflight routes and periodically use the candidate FOLs for transit and en route basing. Such interactions would help encourage positive attitudes toward the U.S. military through demonstrated benefit and positive experiences; help local militaries address key issues, such as narcotics trafficking and terrorism; and provide a degree of mutual familiarity between Central Asian and U.S. troops. U.S. military engagement in the region needs to avoid entanglement in internal security matters and also needs to be balanced, to avoid exacerbating existing tensions and jealousies among the republics themselves. To this end, multilateral exercises and training events will be important, particularly those that focus on improving partner countries’ defense self-sufficiency and border controls. Also crucial are projects that build regional capabilities to respond to natural and man-made disasters, which could prove useful

¹ By FOLs, we mean both (1) forward operating sites—facilities that support rotational use by operational forces, have a small permanent presence, can support sustained operations, and may contain prepositioned equipment and (2) cooperative security locations—sites with austere infrastructure and no permanent presence, useful for security cooperation exercises, which may contain prepositioned equipment and rely on contractor support.

supplements to bilateral ones. Civil-military cooperation programs could also be useful in this context and could help build more effective relations between local civilian and military agencies and organizations.

Encouraging Basic Interoperability Between Local Militaries and the West

The Central Asian regimes' post-Soviet legacy force structures and military thinking are by and large incompatible with contemporary Western systems. Although Central Asian militaries are probably years away from acquiring new major combat systems, some upgrades to their hardware may prove both affordable and important and should be encouraged. At the tactical level, for example, communications equipment should gradually be made compatible with Western standards. At a higher level, modern concepts and modes of logistics and support and of regional air traffic management and air sovereignty capabilities could prove valuable. Language training and aid in developing a broader understanding of various Western approaches to military doctrine and rules of engagement may also be helpful (see pp. 45–49).

Thus, while the immediate requirement for close ties with Central Asia is limited, not engaging would also be a mistake. A strategic imperative exists to maintain a clear awareness of developments in this region, to build effective ties with governments as appropriate, and to engage in a range of limited military cooperation activities. Central Asia presents a variety of challenges for the United States, and it must be understood in the context of those challenges and the potential gains from building an effective approach. The U.S. Air Force has a small, but important role to play in these endeavors.

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Although we thank all of the above, any errors remaining in the report are the responsibility solely of the authors themselves.

Acronyms

CSAR	combat search and rescue
CTR	Cooperative Threat Reduction (program)
EMERCOM	Emergencies and Elimination of Consequences of Natural Disasters, Ministry of the Russian Federation for Civil Defence
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
FMF	foreign military financing
FOL	forward operating location
FY	fiscal year
IMET	International Military Education and Training
IMU	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
MOB	Main operating base
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCO	non-commissioned officer
OEF	Operation Enduring Freedom
PAF	Project AIR FORCE
PfP	Partnership for Peace
PME	professional military education
SBCT	Stryker Brigade Combat Team
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SOF	special operations forces

SOFA	Status of Forces agreement
USAF	United States Air Force
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WMD	weapons of mass destruction

Introduction: Policy Choices for a Remote but Critical Region

The current U.S. military presence in Central Asia is something of an historical accident. The question is whether or not it is also an anomaly. For the first ten years after Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan became independent, sovereign states, the United States saw its interests in the region as limited. What engagement there was demanded little from the U.S. military, and there seemed no reason that this should change in the future. The region was remote, landlocked, and of little strategic consequence. While its energy resources and proximity to Russia, Iran, and China did require some U.S. attention, and the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) infrastructure remaining after the breakup of the Soviet Union made for an even more compelling concern, the region was far from critical to the United States.

Operation Enduring Freedom called upon U.S. forces to deploy to and fight in a part of the world where few planners had ever envisioned sending them. In deciding how to deploy and maintain forces for this operation, the United States suddenly saw the Central Asian states as valuable real estate. In fall 2001, U.S. forces deployed to Central Asia and set up bases for operations. At the same time, the U.S. government invigorated its cooperation programs with these host countries.

As long as Operation Enduring Freedom continues, the United States will need access to Central Asia. The facilities in place remain critical to the missions they support, even if some are now winding down (indeed, one country, Uzbekistan, has asked the United States

to withdraw its forces). Whether this indicates a lasting requirement for U.S. presence in this part of the world is less clear.

This document argues that, although the United States has real and significant interests in Central Asia and must maintain relationships with the states of the region, the military role in this effort, while critical, is comparatively small. The military requirements for presence in the region created by Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) will end when that operation ends—and possibly as it draws down. At that point, U.S. presence will become a matter of hedging against future contingencies rather than immediate requirements. But even if the military role is small, the evolution of U.S. security policy toward Central Asia will be a critical component of the U.S. national security strategy, for a number of reasons beyond OEF itself.

In the longer term, U.S. interests in Central Asia stem from the increasing recognition in policymaking circles that instability, failed and failing states, and economic and political underdevelopment in general present security concerns not only to the states that suffer directly from these problems but also to the global community as a whole. The September 11 attacks demonstrated this conclusively in the case of Afghanistan, but there is no question that the lesson thus learned is applicable elsewhere. The Central Asian states—with their economic, political, and social pathologies, combined with local rivalries, weak border controls, and uncertain relations with the great powers on their periphery—are certainly of concern to the United States and others. Already, the region is a source and transit region for illegal trading in weapons, narcotics, and human beings. It was a transit region used by terrorist groups and individuals in the past; there is no reason to think it is not being used the same way today and that this will not continue in the future.

Central Asia is also important to the United States because of the many other nations watching developments there with interest. Russia, China, Iran, Turkey, India, Pakistan, and, to a lesser extent, the European states have their own concerns about Central Asia. Some hope to share in the region's energy wealth. Most are worried about the potential that possible conflict and instability in the region could affect their own interests. Many are concerned about the effect

of the narcotics trade from Afghanistan through Central Asia. All these interested parties are themselves important to the United States for a broad range of reasons. These include the war on terrorism, economic ties, arms control, nonproliferation, and other strategic interests. All are interested in the prospects for and directions of political change in the region. Finally, each of them is watching U.S. actions in Central Asia, both because of their concerns about the region and because they feel that it might represent a testing ground for U.S. foreign policy. As OEF operations grow less intense, they are inquiring why the United States remains in Central Asia.

Regional states, too, are wondering how long the United States plans to keep troops in Central Asia, and one of them, Uzbekistan, has asked that they leave its territory. While it does not appear that U.S. influence over domestic policies in host countries has been particularly augmented by military presence, the U.S. presence has been perceived by some local officials as a signal of broader commitment to their security. Today, the perception of what the United States brings is less certain. To some, U.S. troops in the region are little more than a marker in a struggle for influence with Russia and others.

As operations in Afghanistan wind down, the United States faces some critical choices regarding its future relations with Central Asia and with the various states that have stakes in that part of the world. To support its fundamental interests in the region, the United States will have to ensure that military assistance there supports U.S. and local security goals and sends the right signals about U.S. intentions, both to regional states and to others. It will also have to find ways to advance economic reform, political stabilization, and an improved rule of law, which will be critical to ensure that the region does not threaten U.S. interests in the future. This could be an expensive undertaking in terms of both finances and effort; insofar as Central Asia is but one region of many that present such requirements, the United States will have to make some difficult decisions and find ways to husband its resources. Finally, it will have to consider the effect of its policies in Central Asia beyond the region, because how the United States manages its military and political posture and changes in that posture will be interpreted as signals of broader U.S. policy by a

number of interested parties—many of which are critical to U.S. interests.

This report presents an overview of the situation in Central Asia, drawing implications for U.S. policy generally and U.S. military strategy more specifically. Chapter Two provides an assessment of U.S. interests, derived in large part from analyses of political, social, and economic trends.¹ Chapter Three concludes by presenting the implications for U.S. military forces, including the U.S. Air Force.

¹ Some of this material is treated in more detail in Olikier, Lal, and Blasi (unpublished), and in Mahnovski, Akramov, and Karasik (unpublished).

Defining U.S. Interests in Central Asia

U.S. relations with the Central Asian states date back to the early 1990s, shortly after the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) made these countries independent. Although the contacts involved economic and military assistance and, in the case of Kazakhstan, increasing trade interests, the overall engagement effort of the early 1990s can best be described as limited. The United States assessed its security and economic interests in the region as fairly narrow, and policymakers were uncertain of Central Asian regimes' reliability and concerned about their human rights records and economic and foreign policies.

The extent to which Operation Enduring Freedom changed this assessment is not yet clear. Certainly, the campaign created a strong incentive to gain access to Central Asian bases and infrastructure to support operations in Afghanistan. Moreover, as the countries of the region were generally willing and eager to grant such access, if only for circumscribed activities, the task of deploying to a hitherto unknown environment proved feasible though still challenging. However, such access does not necessarily translate into long-term policy.

U.S. presence in the region led to an intensification of ties and contacts with local regimes (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2 for a graphical representation of the increase in assistance in recent years). However, the same concerns that constrained contact with the Central Asian republics in the 1990s remain and may have been exacerbated by events in 2005. The U.S. government must now wrestle with defining its true interests in Central Asia beyond Operation Enduring

Freedom and identifying the tools that will be most effective and efficient in attaining its goals.

We believe that the United States does, in fact, have critical interests at stake in the Central Asian region. However, the approach that the United States must take with these five countries should be based less on military contacts and bases and more on the advancement of political and economic reforms and coordination with other interested parties, especially Russia, to attain shared goals. These issues are not unrelated, but only by ensuring that the emphasis is right will the United States be able to advance its long-term security interests in that part of the world.

Background

The extent to which the United States should be involved in Central Asia was a topic of significant debate throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s in both the policy and academic communities. While some argued that the energy wealth of the Caspian littoral states made the region critical, most energy specialists saw the region as a fairly small contributor to the global energy market, especially compared with the Gulf states and Russia. Although Caspian oil is sold on the global market, it is very unlikely that there will be enough of it to significantly affect prices. High-end estimates call on the region to produce perhaps one-tenth of the world's oil; more pessimistic analysts are loath to predict production at even one-third of that level. Moreover, whatever the actual amounts, it will be many years before this oil is fully accessed and exploited.

Caspian gas cannot travel far to market and will thus not affect U.S. interests. Getting gas from the Caspian region to the West involves a tremendous transport challenge. While oil can be shipped over water, gas can only be moved this way if it is first transformed into liquid form, an expensive process. And underwater pipelines are neither cheap nor simple to lay. Although there are hopes for gas pipelines to eastern markets, these would necessarily transit Afghanistan and Pakistan, and thus their success is dependent on the evolu-

tion of the political situation in those countries, which remains uncertain.

This is not to say that the United States has been disinterested in Caspian energy—having more sources of oil and gas for global markets is certainly in the U.S. interest. However, the region's resources fall short of making it a clear priority. U.S. policy was formulated accordingly. The United States was unambiguous in its support for “multiple pipelines” for Caspian oil, so as to ensure that these exports would not be controlled by Russia or Iran and that U.S. firms would play a significant role in Caspian development. However, this issue never became a top priority for Washington policymakers, although it remained crucial for those who focused specifically on Central Asia.

The United States had few economic interests in the area other than energy. The increasing legal, bureaucratic, and other constraints on foreign businesspeople in Uzbekistan led many to leave the country. Turkmenistan never presented a sufficiently friendly environment to attract much foreign investment in the first place. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, although more welcoming, had little to offer the investor. In Kazakhstan, investment was substantial, but it focused overwhelmingly on the energy sector. And even here, recent changes in Kazakh government attitudes toward foreign investors have made the climate less hospitable than it once was. Thus, without significant reform, it seemed unlikely that much U.S. money would be spent in the region.¹ Although U.S. partners in Europe, particularly Turkey, had stronger economic interests, this was not enough to drive U.S. policy.

From the security perspective, the United States was concerned about the potential for Russian imperialism, and some argued that close U.S. relations with these and other post-Soviet states would ensure that Russia remained constrained in its actions. Others argued for the need to limit the influence of China and Iran. However, the United States generally preferred to encourage Turkish efforts to

¹ Mahnovski, Akramov, and Karasik (unpublished).

build strong ties with the Central Asians rather than to allocate significant resources of its own.² The argument for closer relations was further damaged by the unfortunate human rights records of many of the local regimes, which created a continuing battle to justify the relationships that were being built to the U.S. Congress, human rights organizations, and other groups.

The United States was also concerned about the prospect of instability in this region. Insofar as U.S. policy in the 1990s focused in large part on preventing threats from emerging in what appeared to be a relatively benign foreign policy environment, the United States became involved in global peacekeeping and peacemaking efforts and sought to promote the development of democracy and economic reform in a variety of places throughout the world. It also looked for mechanisms to limit the emerging dangers of WMD proliferation, international terrorism, and transnational crime.³

U.S. policy in Central Asia reflected these ideas. The first priority in the region was the elimination of strategic nuclear weapons and associated infrastructure from Kazakhstan to reduce the threat of proliferation. This was accomplished through the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program which since that time has also done significant work in addressing the threat posed by nonnuclear weapons of mass destruction and related infrastructure in the region.⁴ The United States also provided economic and democratization assistance throughout the region, tried to bolster the efforts of U.S. firms willing to invest in Central Asia, and began to build low-level military contacts with Central Asian militaries, both bilaterally and through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) Partnership for Peace (PfP) program. However, it stopped far short of security guarantees to any of the Central Asian states, and its resource expenditures

² Olikier, Lal, and Blasi (unpublished).

³ See discussion in Olikier (2003).

⁴ A high-profile example is "Project Sapphire," which in 1994 removed 581 kg of highly enriched uranium from Northern Kazakhstan and transferred it to the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee. The uranium was left over from the Soviet Union's secret Alfa submarine program. For more on this, see NIS Nuclear and Missile Database (2001).

in this region were limited, especially compared with U.S. spending on other post-Soviet states such as Ukraine.⁵

The United States was walking a fine line. On the one hand, it wanted to build ties and promote peace and democratization in the region; limit Russia's ability to strong-arm its former vassals; and mitigate, if not eliminate, the threat of WMD proliferation. On the other hand, it had to avoid the dangers of aligning itself too closely with potentially unsavory regimes; of alienating Russia, a critical partner for a variety of other U.S. global goals; and of finding itself embroiled in whatever conflictual situation might emerge from the ethnic and transnational tensions in the region. Moreover, because the interests of the United States in Central Asia were by no means unique to the area and because its resources were limited, it had little desire to devote too much effort or money to that part of the world. The low-key, low-cost, proliferation-first policy that the United States developed worked well in meeting all of these needs.⁶

From the perspectives of the Central Asian states, U.S. policy was sometimes confusing, sometimes disappointing, but about as much as could rationally be expected. Uzbekistan continued to see closer ties with the United States as a potential mechanism for eliminating Russian leverage, economic or political, and Uzbek President Islam Karimov's foreign policy was to some extent centered on demonstrating independence from Moscow. However, U.S. concerns about his human rights record and slow pace of economic and political reform, combined with a limited desire on Washington's part to damage relations with Russia, precluded Karimov from attaining his goals of alignment with the United States.⁷

Early on, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan had come to the realization that Russia's proximity guaranteed it a role of some sort, and U.S. interests were not sufficient for developing close ties. Good rela-

⁵ See, for example, U.S. Department of State (FY 2000), specifically the appendix listing aid allotments through that year, available at <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/2378.pdf> (accessed December 23, 2004).

⁶ Olikier (2003).

⁷ Olikier (2003).

tions with Turkey, the United States, and a variety of Western states were a means of obtaining useful training, equipment, and economic aid (and, in Kazakhstan's case, significant investment), but good relations with Russia were also necessary. From Kazakhstan's perspective, U.S. support for multiple pipelines aligned with its desire to ensure economic independence from Russia, but there was little reason to alienate Russia politically, given its immediate proximity and the large number of ethnic Russians living in Kazakhstan. Kyrgyzstan was far too weak to risk poor relations with any major power—Russia, the United States, Turkey, or China.⁸

For Tajikistan, there was no debate—its lengthy civil war had left it politically and economically weak and with a sizable Russian military presence, which in many ways kept the country together in the aftermath of conflict. Thus Tajikistan built little in the way of ties with any other power. Increasingly isolationist Turkmenistan ignored most overtures, whatever their source.⁹

As Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan became more and more concerned about radical Islam in general and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) specifically, this issue became the focus of a good deal of the security assistance they requested and received. The United States, Russia, Turkey, and Uzbekistan all provided Kyrgyzstan with support in the wake of IMU incursions into that country in 1999 and 2000.¹⁰ The United States also shifted its program of assistance to Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan toward Special Forces joint training and the provision of nonlethal military equipment, an effort that was paralleled by (and sometimes, because of poor consultation, redundant with) Turkish efforts along the same lines.¹¹ The United States also provided some Special Forces training in Kazakhstan, where the CTR effort had over time evolved into a more general program of International Military Education and

⁸ Olikier (2003).

⁹ Olikier (2003).

¹⁰ Socor (2003).

¹¹ International Crisis Group (2001); Olikier, Lal, and Blasi (unpublished).

Training (IMET), export control, and other activities, which were also undertaken with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Although revelations of Kazakh arms sales to North Korea did some damage to the bilateral relationship, it had largely recovered well before the beginning of OEF.¹²

Operation Enduring Freedom: Access and Reward

While some argue that the security relations the United States built over the preceding ten years with the Central Asian states contributed significantly to those states' decisions to grant the United States access to their territories for OEF, other factors were also in play, making that argument somewhat questionable. The United States certainly gained from being able to identify the right interlocutors in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, a capacity developed through the military contacts built in recent years. Yet the United States also gained access to facilities in Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, two countries with which military ties were all but nonexistent before 2001. There may be some correlation between willingness to grant access and a prior interest in building a relationship, particularly on the part of Uzbekistan, given the Uzbek government's long-held desire for closer and better ties with the United States. However, it is worth noting that OEF was unique in that a wide range of countries offered their assistance out of a genuine desire to assist the United States in defeating the Taliban in the wake of the September 11 attacks. Moreover, some hoped that the granting of access would produce benefits, both political and economic, for their states. But there is little to suggest that

¹² Kazakh officials were implicated in plans to deliver MiG fighters to North Korea. In fact, more than 20 aircraft had already been delivered when the deal came to light in 1999. The Kazakh government conducted an investigation and determined that the officials involved were acting as independent agents. The United States placed sanctions on the firms involved and placed, then waived, sanctions on Kazakhstan as a whole. Although the Kazakh leadership removed Defense Minister Altynbayev from his position as a result of the scandal, he was named to the same post at the end of 2002. See "The High Price of Kazakhstan's MiG Affair" (1999); Rubin (1999); NIS Nuclear and Missile Database (2001).

prior contacts had a significant influence on the decisionmaking of the Central Asian leaders. In fact, it seems more likely that past relationships contributed to the decisionmaking of the United States as it considered whom to ask for help.

The Central Asian states were generous in their support for OEF, as were many other nations. Overflight for humanitarian missions in Afghanistan was granted by all of them. Some were also willing to allow overflight for combat missions, although only Kyrgyzstan made this willingness public. The United States looked at base facilities in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan before making its choice to set up substantial operations in Karshi-Khanabad, Uzbekistan, and Manas, Kyrgyzstan.¹³ Turkmenistan allowed a smaller refueling mission to be based in Ashqabad.

The United States continued its long-term policy of avoiding security commitments in exchange for this assistance, although it did agree to “regard with grave concern any external threat” to Uzbekistan.¹⁴ In exchange, the United States promised, and delivered, a variety of assistance.¹⁵ It rewarded support with more aid, both economic and military. It worked with representatives of the ministries of defense of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to define new packages of assistance. For the Uzbeks, this assistance included two armored cutters (for patrolling the Amu Darya River), radios, helicopter upgrades, language training, non-commissioned officer (NCO) training support, a military modeling and simulation center, psychological operations training, airport navigation system upgrades, and, according to some reports, joint construction with the United States of Il-114 aircraft.¹⁶ Kyrgyzstan received military communications equipment (estimated at over \$1.4 million in value) and various other systems, including night vision capability and reportedly helicopters. Much of

¹³ Karshi-Khanabad may not have been the first choice of the United States, but Uzbekistan very much wanted to avoid a military presence at any of its civilian airports.

¹⁴ “U.S., Uzbekistan Sign Military Cooperation Agreement” (2002).

¹⁵ Milbank (2002); “U.S., Uzbekistan Sign Military Cooperation Agreement” (2002).

¹⁶ Interviews with and information provided by U.S. government officials, summer 2003; “U.S. to Help Finance Uzbek Aircraft Production” (2003).

this aid focused on border control and was hailed by the Kyrgyz government. Kyrgyzstan also benefited from military medical assistance, Marshall Center slots, and NCO training.¹⁷ Military-to-military contacts were also stepped up, as were high-level visits, such as that of U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who visited Kyrgyzstan in November 2002.¹⁸ In March 2003, a joint exercise, “Balanced Knife,” was held. U.S. troops involved in OEF and Kyrgyz forces (also, reportedly, a South Korean medical team) practiced mountain combat and combat medicine.¹⁹ More joint training with Kyrgyzstan was planned through 2004, involving special forces, peacekeepers, and rapid reaction troops. Help with counterterrorism training and military reform was also promised.²⁰ The Uzbeks, too, benefited from joint military exercises, including informal ones undertaken by U.S. troops and Uzbek Air Force personnel at the Khanabad air base.²¹ Finally, the U.S. military presence itself produced benefits for these two countries. U.S. (and other coalition) forces paid to upgrade facilities in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, building housing and other structures and improving runways, for example. In addition, Kyrgyzstan receives payment for each aircraft takeoff and landing at Manas.²² Figures 2.1 and 2.2 demonstrate how both overall aid and foreign military fi-

¹⁷ The George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies provides training for officials and military personnel from a broad range of countries with the goal of creating “a more stable security environment by advancing democratic institutions and relationships, especially in the field of defense; promoting active, peaceful security cooperation; and enhancing enduring partnerships among the nations of North America, Europe and Eurasia.” Quote from <http://www.marshallcenter.org/site-graphic/lang-en/page-mc-about-1/xdocs/mc/factsheets-about/03-mcmission.htm>, accessed December 24, 2004.

¹⁸ “Kyrgyzstan, U.S. Sign Military Cooperation Agreement” (2002).

¹⁹ Kozlova (2002); “Kyrgyzstan, U.S. Sign Military Cooperation Agreement” (2002); “Joint U.S.-Kyrgyz Military Exercises Held Near Bishkek” (2003); Jumagulov (2003).

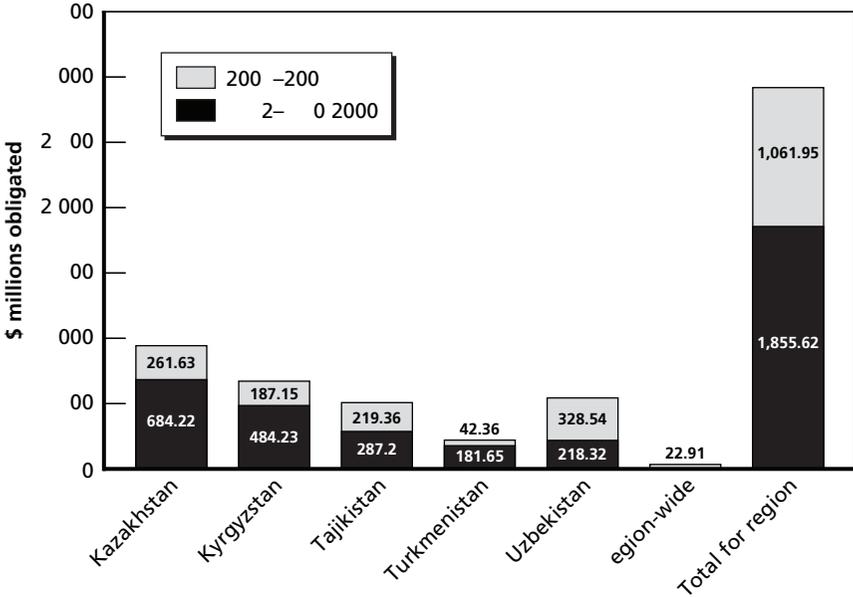
²⁰ Socor (2003).

²¹ Interviews with U.S. personnel at Karshi-Khanabad, May 2003.

²² This payment is reportedly \$7,000 for each takeoff and landing by a U.S. aircraft; see, for example, “ITAR-TASS Russia and CIS News Digest of December 19” (2001). Other sources, however, suggest the payment has varied according to size of aircraft: “Kyrgyz Economy, Citizens Benefit from U.S. Forces Deployment—Kyrgyz Radio” (2002); “Kyrgyz Newspaper Raises Alarm over U.S. Military Presence” (2002).

Figure 2.1

Total U.S. Government Assistance to Central Asia, 1992–2004



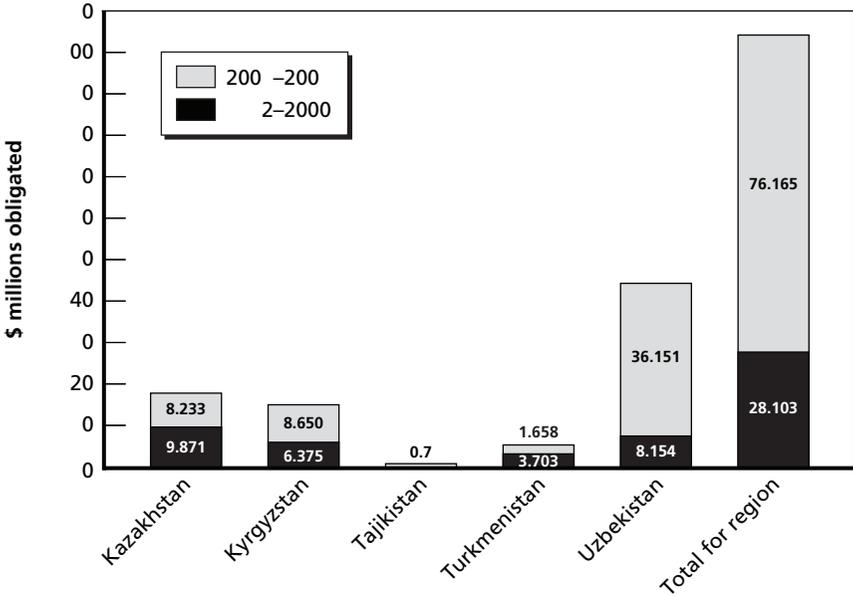
SOURCE: U.S. Department of State, 2004

RAND MG338-2.1

ancing (FMF) and IMET assistance to these countries grew since OEF began. Although at the time this report was written comprehensive data were available only through the end of 2003, it is clear that a disproportionate amount of assistance since the collapse of the USSR was provided in 2001 and after.

One area in which there seems to have been little benefit to either Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan is direct spending in local communities as a result of the base presence. Although some local personnel were hired on and near the bases to provide food and other services, U.S. personnel are largely confined to the base facilities and do not venture out to local restaurants and shops to spend money. This is in contrast, for example, to the German presence in Uzbeki-

Figure 2.2
U.S. Military Aid to Central Asia (IMET and FMF), 1990–2003



SOURCE: U.S. Department of State, 2004.

RAND MG338-2.2

stan and to other coalition forces based at Manas, Kyrgyzstan, who enjoyed considerably more freedom of movement.²³

The United States did not take advantage of Kazakhstan’s offer of base access for U.S. forces in support of OEF. Although the two countries agreed that the United States could use Kazakh facilities in an emergency, this never took place. However, the offer of access itself was unprecedented—the base offered, Lugovoi, had never been visited by U.S. personnel until the offer was made. Moreover, overflight was useful for OEF, and the United States government appreciated the Kazakh willingness to help. As elsewhere in Central Asia, this meant stepped-up assistance.²⁴ Border security is one critical aspect of

²³ Olikier, Lal, and Blasi (unpublished).

²⁴ Interviews with U.S. officials, summer 2003.

this assistance, as is the development of Kazakhstan's new elite peacekeeping battalion.²⁵

The United States did not use Tajikistan as a base for any major operations, although some members of the coalition reportedly made use of Tajik facilities. There have been press reports suggesting that various U.S. military activities took place in Tajikistan, including refueling, but they vary significantly in their descriptions.²⁶ What is perhaps most important is that OEF created a new foundation for cooperation, previously hampered by civil war, Russian occupation, the weakness of the Tajik government, and a relatively low priority placed on relations with Tajikistan by the United States. In the wake of OEF, the last of these has shifted somewhat. Although Washington has not developed anywhere near the scope of cooperation with Dushanbe that it has with neighboring capitals, assistance has grown, predominantly in the humanitarian field but also in security areas. In fiscal year (FY) 2002, Tajikistan for the first time began receiving military assistance from the United States, in the form of FMF and IMET funds (see Figure 2.2). This assistance is geared to reform efforts to ensure that the Tajik military is better able to conduct counterinsurgency and counternarcotics operations and to operate more effectively with other forces, including those of the United States. It includes medical equipment, demining equipment, night vision devices, English language training, and exposure of military and civilian officials to Western-style democracy, civil-military relations, and human rights policies. The United States has also offered aid to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in developing their permanent communications infrastructure, which the Kyrgyzstan government complained had proved insufficient to provide early warning of IMU incursions in the past.²⁷

²⁵ "Turkey, U.S. Assist Kazakh Military" (2002).

²⁶ Gridneva and Zhukov (2002); "Tajik President to Visit U.S., France" (2002); Loeb (2002); Arman (2004).

²⁷ There had been cases of the IMU moving from Tajikistan into Kyrgyzstan to conduct operations in the latter country, creating concerns that this could happen again. "Official:

Turkmenistan is unique in providing access but showing little interest in building a relationship or accepting increased aid. It is particularly notable that Turkmenistan allowed U.S. forces to use its facilities, given the long commitment of President Saparmurat Niyazov's government to what it terms "positive neutrality." The most that U.S. negotiators might have hoped for was likely overflight, some humanitarian support, and perhaps some cooperation in the nonmilitary aspects of fighting al Qaeda, such as asset seizures. The Turkmen willingness to help with the humanitarian effort served as the genesis of the refueling operation. The United States needed such a facility, and a request was passed to the Niyazov government by U.S. embassy staff. The government agreed to the mission as long as the refueling was in support of humanitarian, rather than combat, missions.²⁸ But if other states have seen an increase in assistance in the wake of their cooperation, Turkmenistan has only accepted payments directly associated with the refueling (though it has sometimes asked for payments that were not agreed upon, as well).²⁹

U.S. personnel involved with the negotiation of access and further work in Central Asia in support of OEF report a largely positive experience, but also frustrations as a result of corruption, bureaucracy, and cultural and organizational barriers. One example was the process of arranging access to Karshi-Khanabad Air Base. Uzbek priorities included the security of U.S. forces, a low profile, and ensuring that U.S. forces were based at military, rather than civilian or dual-purpose, facilities. Uzbekistan also sought a new Status of Forces agreement (SOFA), while the U.S. initially hoped to use the agreement already in place from years of PfP activities, which had covered U.S. forces in Uzbekistan in the past.³⁰

Danger of Extremist Incursions into Kyrgyzstan Still Exists" (2003); Federation of American Scientists (2005).

²⁸ Interviews with U.S. officials, spring and summer 2003.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Interviews with U.S. officials, personnel, summer and fall 2003; visit to Karshi-Khanabad, May 2003.

The discussion of the SOFA did not preclude planning for the use of Karshi-Khanabad, however, which continued even as discussions were under way. It is likely that Uzbek officials hoped to use the Status of Forces discussion as a basis for a broader security agreement. An access agreement was signed shortly before combat operations began. Further negotiations were later undertaken on a more comprehensive SOFA; some Uzbek desires were met by the Declaration on the Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Framework between the two countries, which, as mentioned above, called on the United States to “regard with grave concern any external threat” to Uzbekistan.

Turkmenistan, however, did not want to negotiate a Status of Forces agreement at all, for fear that such an agreement would violate its neutral status. Instead, an exchange of diplomatic notes was arranged to cover the status of U.S. forces in the country. The process there was also eased by the tasking of the country’s national security advisor and intelligence chief to be the primary point of contact for U.S. personnel. Unfortunately, when this individual was later purged, relations with the Turkmen government became more challenging, and it was far more difficult to resolve problems when they arose. Negotiations with civil aviation authorities were problematical from the start, and, as noted above, Turkmenistan’s billing of the United States has not always reflected the arrangements agreed to.³¹

U.S. officials have also expressed some worries about the priorities of Central Asian officials in creating their “wish lists” for assistance activities and materials, as well as the procedures involved. Some felt that there is often more interest in the “flash” the assistance provides than in its usefulness, as evidenced in a preference for smaller amounts of more expensive equipment—e.g., radios and other communications equipment—when cheaper substitutes would do just as well and supply far more personnel. There is also frustration with the failure to delegate decision authority to the U.S. interlocutors. In Uzbekistan, for instance, there was a sense among some

³¹ Interviews with U.S. officials, spring and summer 2003.

in the U.S. government and military that the assistance packages were perceived by both donors and recipients as a quid pro quo for access to Karshi-Khanabad and that insufficient attention was paid to assessing and meeting Uzbekistan's actual military and security requirements.³² In Kazakhstan, U.S. personnel also report difficulties they trace to the structures and institutions instilled by the Soviet military system, which was marked by secrecy, bureaucracy, and incompetence. These, they feel, have carried over throughout the post-Soviet space.³³

U.S. Security Priorities Since September 11: Implications for Central Asia

The September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States changed some aspects of how policymakers view foreign interests. Before that date, transnational threats such as organized crime, terrorism, proliferation, and narcotics trafficking were certainly key issues of concern for the United States, but they received relatively little attention. This reflected not their lack of importance but rather the dearth of potential solutions for these particular problems. September 11, however, demonstrated clearly and unquestionably that state failure (and, potentially, state weakness) can present threats far beyond the borders of the state in question (in this case, Afghanistan). Moreover, it showed that threats may well arise because weak, failing, or failed states can create welcoming environments for groups and individuals that seek to threaten nations and populations. Finally, it illustrated the dangerous links that can exist between the transnational threats that flourish in such environments.

In the 1990s the United States sought to battle economic underdevelopment and promote democratization in large part as a moral imperative, combined with the luxury of a low-threat environment.

³² Interviews with U.S. officials and personnel, summer and fall 2003.

³³ Interviews with U.S. officials, summer 2003.

But the September 11 attacks and their aftermath suggested that real security concerns were at stake in such efforts, as well. It became clear that instability in faraway countries due to economic underdevelopment, state weakness, and government failure must now be understood as a security threat to the United States, both directly and indirectly. Ironically, such “soft” policy issues as economic development, democratization, and human rights now must be seen as critical to “hard” security goals, insofar as they contribute to the functioning, effectiveness, and sustainability of regimes and polities throughout the world.

This has significant implications for Central Asia. The region suffers from a broad range of pathologies, including corruption; ethnic, tribal, and religious tensions; popular dissatisfaction; economic underdevelopment; and the dangerous combination of often weak central control mixed with increasing authoritarianism and repression. The latter appears increasingly unsustainable in the face of demographic, political, and economic pressures. The Kyrgyz revolution of March 2005 is one example. The May 2005 events in Andijan may yet prove to be the starting point of another. But the processes of reform, while to be welcomed, are in and of themselves inherently unstable.

All of these problems contribute to and exacerbate the region’s role as a source and transit region for a broad range of transnational threats. This fact has obvious importance for the U.S. effort to combat terrorism and proliferation of WMD and related technology (it is worth remembering that as successor states to the USSR, the Central Asian states continue to pose concerns there, as well).

Although U.S. interests in Central Asia before September 11 were focused largely on energy issues, which were deemed to be of lesser importance, they have shifted since that date. Concerns about Russia, China, and Iran; the dangers of proliferation and other transnational threats; and a general desire to support economic reform and democratization reflect not so much a change in U.S. attitudes as a reassessment of the relative values of each component. If the “War on Terrorism” is to be taken seriously, Operation Enduring Freedom is but one aspect of a long-term, complex battle against a complicated

and interrelated family of threats, and this region will be a crucial battleground. The nations of the region have a wide variety of disagreements over territory and resources. Their borders are porous and the area is a key transit route for narcotics and other smuggled goods, from Afghanistan and elsewhere. It is also a source and transit region for human trafficking (and, to a lesser extent, a destination point, as well). In addition, Central Asia presents a variety of proliferation concerns, and it is a center of transnational organized criminal activity. All of these matters are interrelated, and all of them are directly or indirectly related to the terrorism threat.

Moreover, the increased U.S. priority on transnational threats generally and terrorism in particular does not mean that other interests have disappeared. The United States maintains an interest in the continued independence of these states, in the development of the energy resources of the region, and in the relationships of these states with other countries. All three of these interests are interrelated with the new premium on advancing the goals of long-term stability and growth, which not only will help mitigate transnational threats but will also support continued independence and resource exploitation. Russia, China, Turkey, Iran, India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and various European states all stand to gain from a prosperous and healthy Central Asia—and all stand to lose from disquiet in the region.

Most of these countries have primarily economic motivations for their interest, focused in large part on the region's energy resources, which are geographically more proximate to them than they are to the United States.³⁴ Of course, success here depends on economic development and stability as well as investment-friendly environments and governments. Several states also have more direct security concerns. India is concerned that disquiet in Central Asia may affect its conflict with Pakistan. China is concerned that radicalism could encompass the Uighurs, a Turkic ethnic group predominant in its northwestern region. Thus, stability is a premium for all of these states.

³⁴ Olikier, Lal, and Blasi, unpublished work.

Not only are U.S. interests aligned in many ways with the interests of these countries, but these states are themselves critical to U.S. counterterrorism and other security efforts, well beyond Central Asia. However, tension and conflict have in the past precluded effective cooperation among all these actors, no matter how similar their goals. The presence of U.S. forces in Central Asia has made many of these countries wonder how its involvement will affect their own efforts. China, particularly, tends to see the U.S. presence as a component of U.S. policy toward China, perhaps with the goal of “encircling” it. Thus, the way that the United States seeks to advance its interests in Central Asia also affects its relations with a wide range of other interested parties.

The situation with Russia fits in this context but is perhaps even more critical. Central Asia was under Russian control from Tsarist times until the collapse of the USSR, and the region’s proximity and continued economic ties to Russia mean that Russia retains both key interests and influence there. Uzbekistan, even at the height of President Karimov’s mid-1990s anti-Russian posturing, requested Russian assistance in times of need. Now, with relations with the United States precarious and Karimov feeling increasingly under siege at home, Uzbek-Russian relations are better than they have been since both countries attained independence. If Russia is sometimes seen as the security partner of last resort, it is as reliable a last resort as is available—other partners have vague interests and weaker commitment. Its similar view of Islamic radicalism as a danger that justifies relatively brutal practices and its less critical attitude on human rights issues and corruption have at times made Moscow an easier interlocutor for the Central Asian regimes. Finally, Russia has long maintained an active military presence in the region. Its 201st Motor Rifle Division has now been converted to a base in Tajikistan, and it continues to command border guards in that country as well, even though it has transferred border authority to indigenous forces.³⁵ In addition, Rus-

³⁵ Ovsiyenko (2004); Poroskov (2004); Tyson (2005); “Drug Trafficking from Afghanistan to Russia Growing” (2005); “Russia Completes Transfer of Tajik-Afghan Border Responsibility” (2005).

sia now also has a base at the Kant Air Base in Kyrgyzstan, and the new Kyrgyz government says Russia is welcome to stay there as long as it needs to.

Throughout the 1990s, Russia was wary of U.S. efforts to build ties in the region (and elsewhere in the post-Soviet space) and saw them as calculated to winnow Russian power and influence at a time when the two countries disagreed on a number of critical global issues, including the former Yugoslavia and missile defense. The Central Asian states that allowed U.S. deployments without consultation with Moscow thus made a very clear statement of independence, which marked a change in their relations to the great powers. Moreover, even though the deployments were not preapproved by Russia, U.S.-Russian relations reached a watershed when Russian President Vladimir Putin described the U.S. presence in the region as “not a tragedy” for Russia.

U.S. Presence and U.S. Interests

Some argue that U.S. military presence can support the goal of stability and even provide incentives for local regimes to democratize and liberalize their policies. However, it is unclear that this has, in fact, happened in Central Asia. It would be difficult, for example, to link the Kyrgyz change of government in 2005 to the U.S. military presence in Manas, although years of U.S.-funded democratization and civil society assistance to that country may have laid some of the groundwork. But despite clear statements by U.S. officials calling on the Uzbek government to change its policies toward its own people and foreign investors and to move forward on political and economic reform, many in Uzbekistan argue that such U.S. efforts have not borne fruit and that the U.S. presence has made the Karimov regime more repressive in its actions.³⁶

³⁶ Interviews in Uzbekistan, May 2003.

In Tajikistan, President Emomali Sharipovich Rakhmonov justified new limits on the Islamic Renaissance Party in part by referring to the requirements of the war on terrorism.³⁷

Moreover, what economic benefits have been gained from U.S. presence throughout the region have tended to reinforce the ethnic, clan, and regional economic and political divides that already exist. Although there are few signs that the U.S. presence is particularly unpopular (perhaps because the local governments have taken care that it is largely unpublicized), those radical groups that are active, such as the Hizb ut-Tahrir, have spoken out against it, and there is concern that it may help radicalize the underground opposition.

Just as the states of Central Asia had their own motivations in pursuing ties before September 11 and in supporting OEF after that date, their interest in continued cooperation also reflects a set of interests that is not entirely in line with U.S. reasons for advancing these relationships. These, in turn, affect the capacity of the United States to influence their behavior. Uzbekistan is both illustrative and particularly important. As previously discussed, Karimov saw ties with the United States as a mechanism of distancing his country from Russia and elevating its own standing regionally. To Uzbekistan, then, the U.S. decision to base forces on its soil was both a tremendous boon and a way of showing others, primarily Russia and its Central Asian neighbors, that the United States was on its side.³⁸ In return, Uzbekistan wanted to demonstrate to the United States that it was a good friend—by supporting the war in Iraq, for instance—even as general Uzbek public opinion reportedly opposed it. Uzbekistan’s government-controlled press was reportedly told to present the war from a “pro-U.S.” viewpoint, and Uzbek television broadcast footage of experts claiming to have “ample” proof (unpresented) that Bagh-

³⁷ Blua (2002); International Crisis Group (2003).

³⁸ The government actually played down the U.S. presence for domestic audiences, strictly limiting press coverage.

dad had both weapons of mass destruction and links to terror groups.³⁹

Over time, however, Uzbekistan grew dissatisfied with the relationship. In its early years, although there were significant gains in terms of assistance⁴⁰ and U.S. military operations in Afghanistan significantly degraded the IMU (a clear security boon to the Uzbeks and their neighbors), Uzbekistan did not receive any alliance-type commitments or security guarantees for the future.⁴¹ The Declaration on the Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Framework Between the United States of America and the Republic of Uzbekistan, signed on March 12, 2002, and discussed above, stopped well short of such commitments by the United States.

The Uzbek government increasingly pressed the United States both for a clearer legal structure to cover the U.S. presence and for some sort of payment for U.S. use of Karshi-Khanabad similar to the payment the United States paid for Manas. U.S. arguments that the payments for Manas reflected the fact that it was a civilian base did not resonate in Tashkent. Moreover, Uzbek officials continued to seek greater refurbishment of Karshi-Khanabad, including repair of the runway. Slow movement in these areas was a consistent complaint.⁴²

Moreover, if Uzbekistan had hoped that U.S. military presence would translate into greater investment, its own policies toward investors have precluded any such developments. And Uzbekistan's relationship with Russia began to improve. A friendly visit from the Russian president in 2003 was marked by statements about the benefits

³⁹ "Unofficial Censorship on War Reporting Instituted in Uzbekistan" (2003); "Five Degrees of Separation: The Central Asia States' Positions Towards War in Iraq" (2003).

⁴⁰ In fact, Uzbekistan at one point asked U.S. forces if they would like to now move to a different base, an offer some believe was made in the hope of refurbishments to yet another facility (Interviews in Uzbekistan, summer 2003).

⁴¹ It should be noted that Uzbekistan also had a good deal to gain from the elimination of the Taliban and that it had been working with Russia, India, Tajikistan, and Iran in a loose coalition that supported the Northern Alliance for many years.

⁴² Discussions with U.S. and Uzbek officials, summer 2005.

of old friends (particularly for energy deals). Clearly, the Karimov regime had begun rethinking the notion that friendship with the United States could make good relations with Russia unnecessary.

In the meantime, the Uzbek regime did not appear to have become less repressive, and popular disaffection in the country also seemed to be on the rise, driven not just by the limited capacity for political expression but increasingly by the economic hardships caused by border closings. Prices rose, and corrupt officials continued to take their share of proceeds. Protests grew, including in rural farming areas.⁴³ Such a situation is particularly worrisome in a repressive environment where there are few mechanisms for nonviolent resolution of conflict. In such cases it becomes increasingly likely that the government will respond with violence to any unrest that does occur.

Indeed, in May 2005 in Uzbekistan's Andijan province, there was a jailbreak, followed by a public political demonstration, which resulted in bloodshed. On the night of May 12–13, a number of prisoners, many of them reportedly held on charges of Islamic radical activism (which they denied) were freed from the local jail by a group of armed men. The armed men took hostages, and, according to Uzbek officials, killed at least some of them. They seized the main municipal building and attempted to capture the national security service headquarters, but failed in the attempt. They then led a street protest in the square in front of the seized municipal building. Local residents joined in complaint against Andijan and Uzbek authorities. Security forces fired into the growing crowd, which included both the armed men who carried out the jailbreak and unarmed civilians. Authorities eventually blocked off and stormed the square, according to eyewitness reports. Uzbek officials report that 187 people died, including Uzbek security personnel. Some human rights groups have cited much higher numbers of dead, in the thousands.⁴⁴

⁴³ Discussions in Uzbekistan, May 2003.

⁴⁴ Human Rights Watch (2005); Discussions with Uzbek officials, summer 2005; Akiner 2005; Nuritov (2005).

The Andijan events heightened Uzbek tension with the United States. Tashkent refused an independent international investigation into the incident, although it did invite the United States and the UK to send representatives to a commission it was forming. Both countries declined. Russia, on the other hand, expressed support for Uzbekistan, as did China, which Uzbek President Islam Karimov visited on the heels of the crisis.

The Andijan incident is indicative of just how easily a situation can turn uncontrollable in Uzbekistan's current environment. Add to this the significant potential that Karimov could die with no appointed successor, thrusting the country into political chaos, or perhaps be overthrown—and the potential for internal conflict in Uzbekistan becomes quite clear.

Neither Kyrgyzstan, under its previous government or its new one, nor Kazakhstan has sought U.S. friendship as a counterweight to other states, working instead to balance good relations with a wide range of countries. However, increasing reports of authoritarianism and crackdowns on the press and political opposition figures in Kazakhstan create concerns as well. In Kyrgyzstan, the regime of President Askar Akaev was accused of nepotism and cronyism in the allocation of contracts related to the Manas base. However, the situation there changed when parliamentary elections in late February and early March of 2005 were roundly denounced as fraudulent, bringing large numbers of Kyrgyz protestors to the capital. The protests that ensued were not without violence, but they eventually resulted in the resignation of President Akaev in April.

A caretaker government ruled Kyrgyzstan until new presidential elections, held in July, brought Kurmanbek Bakiyev, who had been acting as president, to power. His government was largely made up of the leaders of Kyrgyzstan's opposition forces, who had been increasingly oppressed under Akaev and who had also made up the caretaker government. Bakiyev assured both the United States and Russia that both countries' military facilities in Kyrgyzstan could and would remain, and that Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy would not change drastically.

Thus, it appears that Uzbekistan provided assistance in the hopes of strategic gain, which was not forthcoming, and Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan sought to preserve strategic parity, in which they have been largely successful. Turkmenistan and Tajikistan may have had few motivations beyond a general desire to assist with OEF. Both countries saw the Taliban as a proximate threat (as did Uzbekistan), and Turkmenistan had even sought to begin negotiations with the Taliban in the hopes of preventing any actions against its own territory. Both countries also saw the stabilization of Afghanistan as critical for their own security.

Tajikistan is just beginning to reemerge on the global scene after years of civil war. While it would like better relations with the United States, it has no interest in antagonizing Russia, which remains a patron to the Tajik government. Thus, while Tajikistan welcomed badly needed economic assistance and sent President Rakhmonov for his first state visit to the United States, the Tajiks were initially careful and hesitant to ask for much more. That said, as U.S. assistance grew, there was increasing speculation in the Tajik press that the United States might replace Russia as Tajikistan's primary source of security, taking on the job of guarding the country's borders. Although Russian border forces have since departed, however, and the U.S. continues to train Tajik border police, this has, of course, not taken place.⁴⁵ Media accounts also suggested that delays on the continuing Russian negotiations with Tajikistan regarding basing were due to a payoff by the United States to Tajikistan.⁴⁶ Both U.S. and Tajik officials denied these reports, and, with the base agreement now complete, this question has become moot. However, there is some concern that domestic actors may seek to use the relationship with the United States to advance political goals vis-à-vis one another—and Russia.

⁴⁵ Tyson (2005); "Drug Trafficking from Afghanistan to Russia Growing" (2005); "Russia Completes Transfer of Tajik-Afghan Border Responsibility" (2005).

⁴⁶ "U.S. Will Not Help Protect Tajik Border" (2002); Amelina (2003); "Defense Minister Says Tajikistan Still Wants Russian Base" (2003).

As noted above, Turkmenistan has maintained its isolationist attitude and has generally refused offers of additional assistance. Although the funds spent by servicemen within the city of Ashqabad were no doubt welcome by restaurants and the hotel at which they stayed, and the airport receives a fee for refueling operations, the Turkmen government does not see this effort as providing it with any particular gains. The Ministry of Defense receives no benefits and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs appears to want most of all to keep the operation quiet and low profile. Not only has Turkmenistan turned down offers of military contacts (it has not used the FMF funds allocated to it in over five years) and cut back on its participation in IMET, it also took steps in August 2003 to evict the U.S. Embassy's public affairs section from the building it was occupying (located near the embassy but not on embassy grounds).⁴⁷ That said, Niyazov has discussed prospects for cooperation in energy and natural resources with Washington's ambassador to Ashqabad, although it does not appear that his government plans to facilitate such cooperation with a more investment-friendly legal structure.⁴⁸

For its part, the United States has done little to pressure Turkmenistan, although that state's human rights record has continued to deteriorate. When Ashqabad moved to require exit visas of Turkmen residents seeking to travel abroad and to strip ethnic Russian residents of Turkmenistan of their joint citizenship status, the United States did not respond. In fact, even as reports of these new restrictions were receiving increased attention, Turkmenistan was assured by U.S. State Department officials that it would not lose its Jackson-Vanick exemption in 2003.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ "U.S. Embassy in Turkmenistan Protests Eviction of Public Affairs Section" (2003).

⁴⁸ "Turkmen President Wants More U.S. Technology" (2003).

⁴⁹ The Jackson-Vanick amendment to the United States Trade Law was passed in 1975. It denies Most Favored Nation trade status to any country that does not permit free emigration. It was initially aimed at the USSR in reference to its restrictions on the emigration of Jews. Countries that would in principle be denied Most Favored Nation status, however, can be granted that status by exempting them from the amendment.

The continued U.S. presence has also affected relations with other interested parties, because Russia, China, Turkey, India, Pakistan, and Iran all watch with interest to see how U.S. policy develops and to assess its implications for future U.S. actions in this region and the world. Most of these states were supportive of OEF and are to some extent willing to allow others to ensure the Central Asian stability critical to their own regional goals, if this is possible. However, they also want significant transparency in these processes, to ensure that they can react as the situation changes. Many are concerned that the United States has embarked on a new policy with imperialistic overtones, of which a lasting presence in Central Asia would be but one aspect. Thus, they are all watching the development of U.S. activities with some concern. Insofar as the United States has not been particularly forthcoming with a discussion of its plans, in large part because they remain amorphous, local worries have grown as the U.S. military presence has continued.

Turkey is an example of this attitude. It is willing to follow the U.S. lead but concerned about its limited understanding of U.S. goals and activities. China, too, wants its own relations with the Central Asian states—but not at the cost of antagonizing either Russia or the United States. India also appears to be following this route. All these countries, with the possible exception of China, are unlikely to actively oppose U.S. actions and activities unless they somehow damage their own interests; as long as U.S. efforts support stability, they will not be a problem. However, in the long term, all these countries are concerned about the implications of a continuing U.S. military presence in this part of the world. Thus, there is a real opportunity for cooperation and burden-sharing to attain common goals, but there is also uncertainty and distrust. An effective cooperative approach would require more coordination and communication than has been seen to date.

This is especially true of Russia. With OEF, the United States helped address a security need that Russia not only shared but had been unable to attain over the course of many years: OEF forced the radicals out of power in Afghanistan and brought victory to the Northern Alliance. But Russia's continuing distrust of U.S. motives

remained a problem. Although some in the Putin government may view cooperation with the United States as the best way to attain certain security goals, others had a very different viewpoint, seeing it as an example of U.S. imperialism and an effort to weaken Russia. Russian officials and commentators have emphasized U.S. statements that the military presence in Central Asia is temporary and that it will end when OEF ends. As OEF wound down, and U.S. forces remained, however, this position was heard less and less in Moscow. The situation was exacerbated by deterioration of U.S.-Russian ties, as the U.S. government called Moscow to task for increasing crackdowns on press freedom in Russia and the highly publicized arrest, detention, trial, and conviction of businessman Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

Russian and Chinese concerns combined with Uzbekistan's increasing dissatisfaction with the United States in a July 5, 2005, statement by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which comprises China, Russia, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan. The group unequivocally called for the United States to set a date for the departure of its forces from Central Asia.

Kyrgyzstan soon assured the United States that the timeline need not be set too strictly or too soon, and Kazakhstan, too, assured the United States of continued support. Neither did Tajikistan cancel its contacts and relations with the United States. The statement, however, was indicative of two things. First, it was a clear sign that Russia and China saw in the Andijan crisis and in a cooling of U.S.-Uzbek relations an opportunity to increase their influence at the expense of the United States. Second, it demonstrated that regional states were unsure of just how long the United States would stay—and what the benefits of U.S. presence truly were. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan would continue to seek good relations with all the major superpowers active in their region, but China and Russia were clearly not to be ignored.

A few short weeks later, Uzbekistan officially requested that U.S. forces leave the base at Karshi-Khanabad within six months. The reasons cited included the uncertain legal status of U.S. presence, the question of financial compensation, and the desire that the United States repair the runway at the base. Uzbek officials indicated that the

events at Andijan were not the cause of the eviction notice. Neither, they said, was U.S. pressure on neighboring Kyrgyzstan to release refugees who had fled Andijan in the wake of May's violence to a third country, rather than extradite them to Uzbekistan, as Tashkent had wished. In fact, the Uzbek note indicated a desire for continued cooperation in areas of shared interest.⁵⁰

Defining U.S. Policy Today

The reality of U.S. interests in the region argues for some level of continued involvement. The Kyrgyz revolution, no less than events at Andijan, demonstrates the need for contacts and awareness of how the domestic situations in these countries may develop. The region's status as a continued way station for the narcotics trade and for organized crime and human trafficking, as well as the potential that terrorists and proliferants might transit the area, clearly touch on significant security concerns. And OEF is still ongoing. However, just how this involvement should be structured is a question worth asking. Central Asian facilities, whose operational benefits are discussed in greater detail later in this report, are certainly critical to Operation Enduring Freedom. They also have potential value for future operations in support of U.S. goals. However, they are only tangentially relevant to the real interests of the United States in Central Asia, interests that may argue for a different approach to the region.

The core of U.S. interests in Central Asia is local development and sustainability. These two conditions affect counterterrorism interests, energy concerns, and prospects for cooperation with other states that have an interest in Central Asia—be they allies, friends, or sometime adversaries of the United States. Some military activities can support these goals—assistance with border security is the most critical aspect of this support and one on which the U.S. has already embarked. However, the real nucleus of any effort to ensure that the

⁵⁰ Discussions with Uzbek officials in Washington, D.C., summer 2005.

Central Asian states are part of the solution to global instability, rather than part of the problem, must rely on economic and political reforms. Only reforms will enable the economic growth and political pluralism that can mitigate the dangerous and conflictual cleavages throughout the region.

Past experience has demonstrated that pressure alone, no matter how strong the leverage, cannot effect reforms. Rather, the governments of the countries themselves need to understand that change is in their interests—and that no short-term alternative can enable regimes to postpone the painful processes of reform. This understanding can be aided by carefully planned and leveraged economic assistance, geared specifically to making reform easier and more effective. The assistance can come both from individual nation-states, such as the United States, and from international donor agencies, but it will not be effective if it is not well planned and coordinated and if sanctions are not credible or rational. Moreover, security assistance must also be factored into this equation, so that what is provided truly meets evolving security needs rather than helping inefficient and corrupt political systems and economic structures, thus further damaging prospects for future growth.⁵¹ Much of this means assistance by and to nonmilitary security structures: police, customs, and other internal security organs are at the core of these missions, for both the United States and the Central Asian states.

Thus, although there are military roles to be played, this is not primarily a job for the U.S. military, and it is not a job exclusively for the United States. The wide-ranging Central Asian interests of many other countries in the region mean that there are numerous potential partners for efforts to promote stability and development in Central Asia. Moreover, many countries have much clearer and stronger interests in the region's development than does the United States, due to their greater economic interest and proximity. However, cooperation with Russia and others would require a level of coordination and transparency that the United States has yet to achieve with Turkey,

⁵¹ For a discussion of this phenomenon and recommendations for a global strategy, see Gompert, Olikier, and Timilsina (2004).

much less with any of the other countries with an interest in Central Asia.

Russia is, of course, the most critical state in this regard, for without it, coordination among all the other interested parties would be insufficient. Russia has a stronger and more immediate interest in Central Asia than does any other party. Central Asia is Russia's first line of defense against a broad range of transnational threats: Russia is a market for Afghanistan's drugs and a potential target for terrorists seeking weapons in and transit through Central Asia. Russian criminal networks are closely linked with those in Central Asia, and Russia's own weapons facilities, combined with weak border controls and those criminal networks, create a significant proliferation danger. There can be no solution to these problems without Russian cooperation. Meanwhile, Central Asia is important for the United States, but no more so than many other regions that present similar challenges. In many ways, Russia itself is a higher priority for U.S. interests. These interests include the WMD proliferation threat; Russia's role as a source and transit state for transnational threats; and more traditional but still vital security interests, such as arms control, European policy, Asian policy, and economic interests.

Unfortunately, cooperation between the United States and Russia has been much discussed but little implemented, including with regard to shared interests in Central Asia. A primary reason for this is that in Russia, the United States, and Central Asia, the belief remains that the United States and Russia are competing for influence in the region, a belief that has only increased in recent years. It supports a perception that a gain for one is a loss for the other, with the Central Asian states themselves as prizes to be won or lost. This attitude may be a relic of the Cold War, but it is a relic that retains currency in policy circles in both Washington and Moscow, with prominent thinkers in both capitals espousing a viewpoint that there is no alternative to continued conflict between the two countries. For some in the United States, the U.S. presence in Central Asia is intended to counter Russian neoimperialist efforts, just as some Russian officials see an imperative to reassert control over the region.

This zero-sum attitude can also be found in statements of Central Asian leaders, opposition figures, and in the media. But there is evidence that, in Central Asia at least, it is fading. This is illustrated most aptly by the Manas and Kant airbases, each located a short distance outside of Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, and each hosting U.S. and Russian troops, respectively. The U.S. deployment came first, driven by OEF requirements. Russia's decision to then place a base of its own nearby is difficult to view as anything other than a marker of Russia's continued interest—if not, as one would expect from a zero-sum perspective, as a means to counter U.S. influence. Kyrgyzstan, under both its past and present governments, has chosen to allow both bases as part of its effort not to play into the zero-sum competition and rather to maintain good relations with, and receive assistance from, both countries.

Russia's interest in the region is probably a longer-term one than that represented by the U.S. presence at Manas. Thus, Kyrgyzstan, through its efforts to cooperate with both countries, may demonstrate a way ahead. This approach is similar to Kazakhstan's and Tajikistan's policies toward the United States and Russia, as well. All these countries recognize the gains to be had from cooperation with their many powerful neighbors as well as with the United States. They are even beginning to find benefits in cooperation with one another. Even Uzbekistan, whose relationship with the United States remains deeply uncertain at this time, has much to gain from continued cooperation with both Moscow and Washington.

If the states of Central Asia continue to attempt to play off interested parties against one another, they are less likely to get the assistance they require to eventually manage their own problems. Effective assistance will require coordination and conditionality from a broad range of donors. These countries need security, investment, and growth. For this, they need the assistance of Russia, the United States, and others, and they need this assistance to be coordinated, coherent, and consistent.

Moscow and Washington also have roles to play to demonstrate that they share goals and interests and are not at odds with one another. This certainly is in the U.S. interest—Washington does not

want to be anyone's bulwark against Russia, and it wants neither to antagonize Russia nor to support unsavory regimes. Even if the United States could afford the expense of being the Central Asian states' primary partner in development or security (either financially or in terms of manpower), it lacks the priority interest in this region that would make such a policy viable.

Russia, too, cannot do this alone. OEF demonstrated the decisive difference that U.S. involvement can make. Although Russia's needs in Central Asia are immediate, its capabilities are limited. Russia itself faces difficulties with crime, corruption, narcotics use, and the like—if it cannot solve these problems at home, it seems unlikely to be able to solve them elsewhere. Moreover, Russia's policies leave much to be desired in the realm of human rights and rule of law. Insofar as an end to autocracy may be critical to long-term development, the current Russian approach to Central Asia is unacceptable—and dangerous to Russian interests. Moscow's support of Karimov and other Central Asian leaders' authoritarian actions may have dangerous repercussions should those regimes be replaced by new actors who are strangers, and perhaps even hostile, to Moscow. Nor can Russia be eager to be the support for these regimes in the face of popular, and likely violent, opposition. But by building and maintaining bridges to both current officials and the opposition, Moscow and the United States both could assist in helping the Central Asian states build the infrastructure that permits stable transitions.

How, then, can the United States move forward and promote cooperation? Aside from distrust on all sides, Russia's own policy in the region does not always appear to support its true interests. All of this creates a challenge for the United States that is difficult but not insurmountable. One critical component is multilateralism. These problems cross borders, so their solutions must do so as well. They cannot be effected completely and immediately—Turkmenistan, for example, is unlikely to engage to the extent necessary until there is a significant change in its government. However, coordinated efforts by Russia, the United States, and others have a better chance of influ-

encing the situation than do individual, uncoordinated policies on the part of each.

No less crucial is to identify tangible goals in the short term, areas where coordination can bring real results that benefit all concerned. A model for this might be the Cold War dialogues between the United States and Russia on such questions as incidents at sea and nuclear arms control, which resulted in agreements on those issues and others (such as search and rescue) that benefited both states. A more recent example is the cooperation between the U.S. FEMA and Russia's EMERCOM.⁵² In Central Asia, the Manas-Kant situation may actually present just such an opportunity, if Russian and U.S. officials take advantage of their simultaneous presence to regularize discussion of common issues such as the airspace over Bishkek. From there, they should seek to move on to more cooperative activities, as officials from both countries have suggested, even if nothing has yet been implemented.

Even in Uzbekistan, it may be possible to cooperate, perhaps by drawing Russia into cooperative programs with the Uzbeks. These could involve areas where U.S. cooperation continues with both partners, such as law enforcement coordination.

Of course, success will be measured by whether these small steps can lead to bigger ones—to cooperation on border security and other components of the fight against transnational threats. This will not be easy. Cooperation with Russia in these areas has been full of pitfalls to date, as has work in the Central Asian states themselves. But the need is real, and there is a foundation to build on.

⁵² FEMA is the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and EMERCOM is the Emergencies and Elimination of Consequences of Natural Disasters, Ministry of the Russian Federation for Civil Defence.

The Military Role in U.S. Relations with Central Asia

After Operation Enduring Freedom: What Comes Next?

The onset of U.S. military operations against the Taliban regime and its al Qaeda allies dramatically heightened the nature and extent of U.S. military engagement with the former Soviet republics of Central Asia. As a result of Operation Enduring Freedom, at the start of 2005 the United States Air Force (USAF) was operating two major bases in the region, at Karshi-Khanabad (known colloquially as “K2”) in Uzbekistan and at Manas International Airport (sometimes referred to as Ganci Air Base, after Chief Peter Ganci of the New York City Fire Department, who died in the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center) in Kyrgyzstan. Karshi-Khanabad, which was shared with the Uzbek air force, hosted the 416th Air Expeditionary Group, tasked primarily with combat search and rescue (CSAR), airlift, and supporting special operations forces (SOF) operating in Afghanistan. There was also a substantial U.S. Army presence there; it was a major logistics hub as well as a base for Army SOF units.¹ Manas, hosting the 376th Expeditionary Air Wing, has served as a major refueling hub and transshipment point for U.S. airlifters flying in and out of the region. A small number of U.S. Marine attack aircraft were

¹ 416th Air Expeditionary Group Transition Brief, undated briefing charts. The CSAR mission has reportedly been moved to a base inside Afghanistan. Interview with senior U.S. official in Uzbekistan, May 2003.

stationed there in mid-2002, and Manas is also the base for the European Participating Air Forces contingent comprising F-16s from Denmark, the Netherlands, and Norway. In addition, the USAF operates a very small “gas-and-go” refueling operation at Ashqabad, Turkmenistan, and has a small-scale presence in Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

Karshi-Khanabad operations were significantly curtailed in June 2005, when Uzbek officials forbade nighttime flights.² Later that month, as discussed in the previous chapter, Uzbekistan formally requested that the United States vacate Karshi-Khanabad within six months.

Even without Karshi-Khanabad, the United States will probably maintain a military presence of some sort in Central Asia at least for as long as American troops are deployed in Afghanistan—which may be quite some time. Manas continues to provide a convenient en route stop for airlift operations, as well as relatively secure locations for rear-area activities such as logistics. The Kyrgyz government appears willing to support a U.S. and Russian presence into the future. But the United States has typically been parsimonious in establishing permanent overseas military lodgments, generally limiting them to arenas where a “clear and present” danger to important U.S. interests exists: Europe during the Cold War, Korea since 1950, and the Persian Gulf since 1990.³ In the end, political factors will determine the scope and duration of U.S. deployments to Central Asia.

Are there operational military reasons for the USAF to desire a continued presence in the region after the exigencies of Afghan operations have passed or been significantly curtailed? If not, what should be the role of the U.S. military, and the USAF in particular, in U.S. relations with the Central Asian republics?

² “Uzbekistan Bans Night Flights at U.S. Base” (2005).

³ Everything is temporary, of course, so when we speak of “permanent” bases or presence we really mean a sustained, continuous deployment of U.S. troops not necessarily tied to an ongoing operation.

Permanent Presence: Two Rationales

Broadly speaking, there are two primary military reasons the United States would seek to maintain a long-term military presence on foreign shores. The first has already been mentioned: the existence of an imminent threat to key U.S. interests. For half a century, for example, the United States has kept Army and Air Force units stationed in South Korea to deter a second North Korean attack and to help defeat it, should deterrence fail. Putting aside the question of whether or not U.S. interests in Central Asia are sufficient to justify an American defensive shield, even if an external threat to the area existed, the facts appear to support the conclusion that no such danger exists. Although Russia is certainly angling to restore its influence in these ex-Soviet territories, there is no hint of a serious military threat. The new Russian base in Tajikistan, which evolved from many years of presence by its 201st Motor Rifle Division, will keep some 5,000 troops in the country, including an air component. Russian border guards have now left the mission in Tajik hands, leaving only an advisory presence. Moreover, Russian forces in Tajikistan are seen by many as bolstering the Dushanbe regime. Similarly, the air base outside the Kyrgyz town of Kant does not appear to threaten Kyrgyz sovereignty.⁴ China, the neighborhood's other heavy hitter, is also anxious to enhance its relationships with the Central Asian republics; it is the lead nation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and has participated in multiple military exercises with various Central Asian countries. Beijing's military attention is focused elsewhere and its designs on the region are economic and political—they do not threaten the Central Asian states militarily.⁵ While aggression among Central Asian actors is sometimes touted as a possibility, none of the region's militaries appear capable of mounting serious offensive op-

⁴ "Putting a Paw Print on Central Asia: Talks on Tajik Base Drag On . . . While Inauguration of Kyrgyz Base Now Set for Autumn" (2003); Ovsienko (2004); Poroskov (2004).

⁵ For a fuller examination of relations between China and the Central Asian states, see Burles (1999).

erations and there are few if any issues at stake between Central Asian nations that would warrant large-scale military action.⁶

A second argument for retaining a permanent U.S. military presence is to provide the United States with a foothold in a crucial region to facilitate rapid response in the event that conflict should erupt there or in the vicinity. This rationale has been used to help justify the continued U.S. presence in Europe after the collapse of the Warsaw Pact; those troops have proven useful in supporting U.S. and NATO operations in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Serbia, and as far afield as Iraq and Afghanistan.

As OEF has amply demonstrated, Central Asian bases can be very valuable assets to military operations in this corner of the globe remote from the United States. It is also easy to conjure up potential future scenarios in which access to and through Central Asia could be very useful: for example, a large-scale humanitarian relief operation in the wake of a nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan.⁷ Bases in Central Asia, especially in Tajikistan, would put U.S. forces considerably closer to the Indo-Pakistan border than would facilities in other likely candidate locations, such as Oman, Thailand, or Diego Garcia. There are, however, at least four reasons why the “foothold” argument may not be sufficient to build a case for permanent U.S. presence.

First, it must be noted that the presence of U.S. forces in a theater offers no guarantee of American freedom of action in employing them when and how Washington sees fit. Even such long-time allies as Great Britain, Germany, France, Spain, and Saudi Arabia have denied the United States the use of forces based on their territory when

⁶ The exception may be the Uzbek military, which one U.S. official assessed as able to “easily overwhelm” the armed forces of the “other ‘Stans.” And Tashkent has indeed sometimes behaved badly toward its neighbors (Oliker, Lal, and Blasi, unpublished work). From an external perspective, however, there have been few if any indications that Uzbekistan is gearing up for anything resembling war against its neighbors. Interviews at U.S. Central Command, April 2001.

⁷ For a description of such a scenario, see Shlapak (1998).

their perceived interests have diverged.⁸ Long-term presence does not translate into “assured access.”

Second, if two governments agree on the need for U.S. intervention, access can be granted quickly even if no U.S. forces are stationed in the host country. It took only a few weeks for USAF aircraft to begin to operate into and out of Karshi-Khanabad, despite the fact that the base had never before hosted substantial U.S. forces and many arrangements for the deployment had to be made on the fly.⁹ Relationships established and infrastructure improvements made as a result of OEF should, all other things being equal, facilitate regaining access to Central Asia for a future contingency if the need arises and host countries are amenable.

Third, adaptation to the requirements of expeditionary operations has greatly improved the USAF’s ability to rapidly deploy into and commence operations from an overseas location.¹⁰ Although USAF responsiveness benefits greatly from prepositioning and other forms of advance preparation, full-time main operating bases (MOBs) are not necessary to enable fast and effective air operations in a theater.

Finally, the U.S. military is stretched thin to meet all of its many commitments around the world. The political and economic rebuilding of Afghanistan and Iraq could consume enormous resources for years to come. The Korean peninsula remains a potential flash point in Northeast Asia; further south, the China-Taiwan confrontation could escalate at a moment’s notice. And the campaign against terrorism will continue to demand sizable commitments of personnel and materiel. The modest degree of U.S. interest in Central Asia,

⁸ See Shlapak, Stillion, Olikier, and Charlick-Paley (2002), especially Chapter Two.

⁹ For example, the U.S. had no status of forces agreement with Uzbekistan at the time. Planning, deployments, and employment went forward, however, while necessary negotiations took place. Interview with senior U.S. official in Uzbekistan, May 2003.

¹⁰ The Army, too, is working to improve its rapid-deployment capabilities, most notably through the fielding of the Stryker brigade combat teams (SBCT). These formations promise to greatly increase the strategic and operational flexibility of at least a portion of the Army’s force structure and, properly employed, could be a very useful component of a joint expeditionary task force, in Central Asia or elsewhere. See Vick, Orletsky, Pirnie, and Jones (2002).

coupled with the lack of any factor strongly motivating a continued presence there (such as an external threat), suggests that the region might most wisely be treated as an “economy-of-force theater”—one where the U.S. keeps its options open but its forces minimal.

Another way to look at the issue of access is to consider it from the demand side. Without spending too much time arguing about which contingencies belong in what basket, we can say that scenarios identifying which facilities in Central Asia could be valuable can be split into two categories. The first would likely include, for example, humanitarian aid operations. These would be noncontroversial, and gaining the necessary kind and extent of access should prove to be little more than a formality, regardless of whether or not U.S. forces are already present in Central Asia. The second class of contingencies includes those in which either U.S. intentions are seen as more dubious or perceptions of the situation or of the interests engendered by the situation differ between Washington and the regional government. In that event, gaining access will present a challenge to U.S. planners. A long list of historical examples over the past thirty years—from the 1973 airlift to Israel through Operation Iraqi Freedom—argues strongly that ongoing U.S. military presence in a country has little or no impact on a host nation’s decision whether or not to grant access in a given circumstance.¹¹

Based on this overall assessment, we conclude that *there are no strong military arguments for maintaining a sizable U.S. presence in Central Asia after current operations in Afghanistan wind down*. This does not, however, mean that the U.S. military can look forward to simply disengaging from the region once Operation Enduring Freedom wraps up or draws down.¹²

¹¹ This problem is further exacerbated in the case of landlocked Central Asia. Even if the republics’ regimes are inclined to support the United States, access in Kyrgyzstan or any of its neighbors is of mostly symbolic value if the countries that in turn control access to Central Asia—the necessary combination of Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and Turkey—do not grant the basing and overflight rights needed to actually get into the region.

¹² We do not feel qualified to put forward detailed recommendations as to how the USAF posture should evolve to support the course of the ongoing stabilization campaign in Af-

A Strategy for Future U.S. Military Engagement in Central Asia

The job of the U.S. military is to defend and promote U.S. interests as part of an integrated strategy encompassing all of the instruments of national power. In some places—along the inter-German border during the Cold War, for example—the military plays a leading role; in others, it is an important part of the supporting cast. Our analysis suggests that the military's role in Central Asia falls clearly into the latter category. The complex dynamics of the Central Asian region—both among the republics themselves and between them and their neighbors—and the absence of the kinds of security concerns that have typically motivated U.S. military presence strongly suggest that American policy toward Central Asia will be one that predominantly engages the political and economic components of U.S. power, with the Pentagon playing an important but clearly supporting part.

From a purely operational perspective, the key goal for the U.S. military in the region is to build the framework that will allow for the smooth and rapid reintroduction of American forces into Central Asia should this be necessary or desirable in the future. Politically, the most important objective that military engagement can serve is to help preserve and enhance regional stability and development. The region is not stable—the revolution in Kyrgyzstan and events in Andijan demonstrate that. The U.S. goal, then, is to remain aware of

ghanistan. Our knowledge of conditions on the ground, ongoing operations, and future plans is far too incomplete to do so. However, given what we do know, it certainly seems unlikely that, absent dramatic and unexpected events, the Air Force will require a substantially enlarged in-theater footprint. To the extent practical, then, steps should be taken to begin gracefully ramping down the current presence in the region, consistent with mission demands in Afghanistan. Observations from USAF officers serving in, or recently returned from, Manas and K2 suggest that activity levels at the bases had dropped substantially by early 2005 and that some functions previously performed at K2 were migrating elsewhere even before Uzbek restrictions on the base began. Thus, even if Uzbekistan had not made its decision to evict the United States, there may have been reasons to think about vacating that facility. Manas may be preferable for quality-of-life reasons; it also may be preferable for intra-regional political reasons that the main U.S. base in Central Asia not be located in Uzbekistan.

actors and developments and to seek to help the region avoid, for example, (1) political instability that could lead to state failure and widespread unrest; (2) the emergence of regimes fundamentally opposed to U.S. interests, such as the Taliban were in Afghanistan; and (3) outright interstate conflict.¹³ This requires a military strategy resting on three mutually supporting pillars: maintenance of a “semi-warm” base infrastructure, a carefully focused program of military-to-military interactions, and encouraging basic interoperability.

To facilitate reentry to the region, the USAF should identify a network of suitable potential forward operating locations (FOLs) in the Central Asian republics. These should be selected with an eye toward a range of plausible scenarios (e.g., intervention in an Indo-Pakistan war; a sustained mission in support of host-country counterterrorism or counterinsurgency operations; pipeline security) and with the deliberate intent of diversifying risks by maintaining options in as many republics as possible. Base surveys of these candidate FOLs would be performed and kept as current as possible, and limited U.S. investment would be made in the most critical infrastructure, such as operating surfaces, hardstands, fuel systems, and navigation aids. Given the limited likely demand for large-scale combat operations and the still embryonic state of security cooperation between the United States and host governments, prepositioning would be limited to only the least expensive and hardest-to-deploy items, such as bomb bodies and some vehicles; to the extent practicable, reliable arrangements should be made to acquire necessary items and materials from the local economy when needed.

Although the USAF would not maintain permanent or even rotational presence in Central Asia under this scheme, U.S. aircraft would exercise permitted overflight and periodically use the candidate FOLs for transit and en route basing. The bases would also be employed during bi- and multilateral exercises with host-country and other regional militaries.

¹³ This commitment to strategic stability in Central Asia should not be interpreted as suggesting resistance to the kinds of democratic reforms that, in the long term, will be necessary to ensure internal stability within the countries of the region.

These exercises would be a critical component of the second pillar of post-Afghanistan U.S. military engagement in Central Asia: military-to-military (and civilian-to-military, as appropriate) security cooperation. A well-designed program of “mil-to-mil” contacts would produce three kinds of benefits for the United States.

First, these interactions—if successful—help build personal relationships, from the most senior levels down to field- and company-grades, that encourage friendly attitudes toward the U.S. military and can prove most helpful in smoothing the path to regaining access to the region in the future.

Second, some of the security issues confronting the Central Asian republics—border control, particularly with regard to narcotics trafficking and terrorism—are ones in which the United States has an interest in enhancing the local militaries’ effectiveness. Training and equipment sales focused on these narrow areas could be mutually beneficial.

Finally, to the extent that Central Asian militaries become involved in international peacekeeping efforts or other duties that bring them into day-to-day contact with U.S. troops, prior exposure to the American military, especially among company- and battalion-level officers, will provide a useful degree of mutual familiarity.

Care will need to be taken in constructing the particulars of military engagement with the Central Asians. All the regimes in the region have some unsavory aspects, and the United States will need to avoid becoming entangled, or being seen as entangled, in internal security matters of questionable provenance. This will be a particularly fine line to walk in the context of counterterrorism cooperation, where local crackdowns on political opposition from Islamist and other sources can easily become confused with legitimate operations against active cells. Keeping the good guys good and making sure the bad guys really are bad will require a cadre of U.S. officers with rich, in-depth understanding of the political and social context in each of the republics. But the repercussions of failing to engage are significant, and they greatly increase the likelihood that U.S. goals will not be attained.

Reforming the Central Asian militaries—helping make them into sources of national unity and political moderation—is an important goal for U.S. security cooperation in the region. Training opportunities should focus on conveying appropriate messages of respect for civilian authority on the one hand and the rights of individual citizens on the other. To help socialize future leaders of the Central Asian militaries in the appropriate military ethos, the United States should offer opportunities for “rising stars” to receive professional military education (PME) at U.S. service and joint schools.

U.S. engagement in the region also needs to be balanced, to avoid exacerbating existing tensions and jealousies among the Central Asians themselves. To this end, multilateral exercises and training events could prove useful supplements to bilateral ones. Important nonregional militaries, such as Russia, China, and NATO allies, could also be included; although it might prove difficult to generate useful tactical or operational training with such a diverse group of participants, the potential benefits in terms of personal relationships and institutional goodwill could be very great.¹⁴ The transnational nature of many of the important security challenges confronting the countries of Central Asia—smuggling, narcotics, terrorism—certainly seems to be appropriately addressed by a fairly expansive set of participants, and—as visible signs of common goals and cooperative action—exercises could help ease U.S., Russian, and Chinese fears of each other’s intentions in the region.

The final element in the strategy for U.S. military engagement in Central Asia is to encourage the evolution of a reasonable degree of competence in the local militaries and technical interoperability between them and the U.S. military. The republics’ post-Soviet legacy force structures and military thinking are by and large incompatible with contemporary Western approaches. While Central Asian mili-

¹⁴ It should be noted that multinational exercises among Central Asian countries have a mixed track record, with competition often trumping cooperation. It may be hoped that the admixture of external actors would help suppress these tendencies; however, success will be best assured by careful planning that takes into account the high levels of distrust among the Central Asian nations.

taries, not to mention Central Asian economies, are probably years away from credibly acquiring new major combat systems, some upgrades to their hardware may prove both affordable and important. At the tactical level, for example, their communications equipment should be gradually made compatible with Western standards. At a higher level, modern concepts and modes of logistics and support should be introduced. Mission areas such as search and rescue and disaster preparedness could be good starting points for expanding the capabilities of the Central Asian republics' air forces.¹⁵ Still further up the chain, programs such as the Central Asia Regional Airspace Initiative, which is intended to modernize regional air traffic management and air sovereignty capabilities while facilitating compatibility with Western standards, could prove very valuable.

This combined approach—maintaining a “semi-warm” access infrastructure, building a targeted program of military-to-military contacts, and promoting interoperability—can thus be a small but critical component of an overall U.S. policy of encouraging political and economic development in Central Asia while also working with other interested parties, particularly Russia, to ensure transparency of effort and collaboration wherever possible. This approach can ensure that U.S. Air Force and U.S. military efforts in the region are effectively integrated with broader policy goals, both in Central Asia and beyond.

¹⁵ One especially interesting candidate for an early upgrade could be in the area of combat medicine, including the fielding of aeromedical evacuation capabilities to overcome the rugged terrain that characterizes much of Central Asia. According to one U.S. observer, “[b]attlefield medical support, transport, and basic combat lifesaving techniques are . . . lacking across the countries.” (Interview with personnel at USCENTCOM, April 2001.) This deficiency tends to have a deadening effect on the morale of the average soldier; conversely, knowing that, if wounded, he will receive effective first aid and rapid transport to a well-equipped medical facility can substantially increase a soldier's willingness to engage the enemy. We thank RAND colleague David Ochmanek for this insight, derived from his not-yet-published work on U.S. counterterrorism cooperation with the Philippine military.

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