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U.S. Interests in Central Asia
Policy Priorities and Military Roles

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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 re-introduction 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. 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.