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Central Asia and Its Asian Neighbors

Security and Commerce
at the Crossroads

Rollie Lal

Prepared for the United States Air Force

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Summary

The Asian states neighboring Central Asia have historic links and strong interests in the region. China, Iran, Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan are critical players in the security and economic issues that will determine the future of Central Asia and affect U.S. interests in the region. All of these states are of importance to the United States, whether due to the war on terrorism, economic ties, arms control, nonproliferation, or other reasons. China, Iran, and India have all aggressively sought to build trade ties to and through Central Asia, and China and India have also invigorated security cooperation. But regional states are concerned about the situation in Afghanistan, which they fear might lead to a spillover of conflict onto their soil, and they also fear the possibility of Pakistani activity and influence, which has led them to keep that state at arm's length.

China has indicated that security is a primary interest in the region through its initiative in establishing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Russia (pp. 6–7). Concerns regarding China's Muslim Uighur separatists, as well as concerns of U.S. encirclement, underpin China's efforts to promote regional security cooperation (pp. 4–6, 9–10). China has also moved aggressively to expand its economic interests in the region through commodity trade and agreements to import oil via pipeline from Kazakhstan (pp. 7–8).

Iran has a similar perspective toward its Central Asian neighbors. Stability in Afghanistan lies at the heart of Iran's concerns, as the Taliban has historically been anathema to Iran (p. 12). Iran main-

tains that an international, United Nations–led military presence should remain in Afghanistan to prevent a deterioration of the security situation (pp. 11–12). However, U.S. presence there and in Central Asia creates concern in Iran that U.S. intentions are to surround and isolate Iran rather than enhance regional security (p. 16). To increase its leverage in the region, Iran is developing economic links with each country in Central Asia. Transport links are another important initiative, with routes being developed via Afghanistan, connecting Iranian ports and landlocked Uzbekistan (pp. 13–16).

India shares Iran’s concerns regarding the threat of militants based in Afghanistan. However, India welcomes U.S. presence in the region as a stabilizing influence (p. 34). Economic ties are growing, and India is developing transport and energy links to the region via Iran and Afghanistan (pp. 33–34). The Central Asian states have close relations with India dating to the years of the Soviet Union and the Afghan war, a history that negatively affects their relations with Pakistan.

Pakistan’s relations with Central Asia suffer from lingering memories in the region of Pakistan’s role in supporting the Taliban and Islamic militancy in general. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan all remain suspicious of Pakistan’s regional intentions, and trade with Pakistan has been weak as a result (p. 25). The establishment of the Karzai government in Kabul has been a blow to Pakistan’s regional security strategy. Whereas the Taliban regime would have been friendly to Pakistan’s interests, the current government is more open to ties with India (p. 23). Although Pakistan is moving to overcome its regional reputation, robust cooperation will take time and effort (p. 26).

Afghanistan remains critical to the future of Central Asia and its neighbors, as instability in Afghanistan has the potential to destabilize the region (pp. 19–20). A potent combination of drugs, weapons, and militants traverse Afghanistan and cross into Central Asia and beyond. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan fear that Islamic militants trained in Afghanistan may slip back across their borders (p. 20). Iran remains apprehensive that hostile, anti-Shia elements may take control of Afghanistan, putting Iranian security at risk (p. 12).

And Pakistan and India both compete to ensure that the Afghan regime in power is friendly to their interests (pp. 26, 29). Although the countries across Asia do not agree on how to secure Afghanistan against threats, unanimous agreement exists on the fact that a stable Afghanistan is critical to their own security interests.

The U.S. presence has led both the Central Asian states and their neighbors to ponder how long the United States plans to keep troops in the region. U.S. intentions in the region have been interpreted in various ways. Both China and Iran are apprehensive that U.S. military presence and security interests in the area have the dual purpose of containment (pp. 3, 9–10, 11–12, 16). Conversely, Afghanistan would like to see a continued strong role for the United States in combating militancy and fostering stability (p. 22), and Pakistan and India see the potential for security cooperation with the United States in the region (pp. 27, 34). Despite the divergent perspectives of their Asian neighbors, the Central Asian states continue to see a role for the United States in promoting stability in the region.