

EURASIA

CRISIS AND

OPPORTUNITY

Svante E. Cornell

In the wake of September 11th, America identified important interests in Central Asia and the Caucasus. In the short term, the focus was on planning and sustaining military operations in Afghanistan. With strategic access crucial to the prosecution of the war, the republics of Central Asia took center stage in the most important conflict to confront the United States in decades. Although less prominently covered in the media, the states of the South Caucasus were equally vital; situated between Iran and Russia, they were the only practical corridor connecting NATO territory with Central Asia and Afghanistan.

The resulting diplomatic and political effort was remarkable. Within weeks, Washington had not only secured transit, refueling and landing rights in most countries in the region, but had established a major military presence on the ground as well (in southern Uzbekistan and northern Kyrgyzstan, respectively). This achievement is not to be underestimated. The great powers of the region, mainly Russia and China, were adamantly opposed to an American military presence in what they viewed as their geopolitical backyard. Local states, meanwhile, were worried about the long-term consequences of allying with the U.S. The American withdrawal from the Afghan conflict in 1989 and its implications for Pakistan were still fresh in regional memory, while the results of the current conflict were by no means evident. Indeed, concerns regard-



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ing America's staying power were already potent factors at this stage, leading Uzbekistan to seek to put its relationship with Washington in writing in the form of a formal document on strategic partnership.

But if America's short-term goals in the campaign against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan were effectively achieved, the same cannot be said for its long-term interests. These can be roughly separated into three categories.

The first relates to "hard" security matters. Given the realization that America was engaged in a "long war," preserving strategic access to Central Asia and the Caucasus became an important strategic priority. Second, the United States has long worked for the westward export of the Caspian region's energy resources, and this gradually became an even more important issue as energy markets tightened and oil prices soared. Third, the U.S. sought internal reform in the mainly authoritarian countries of Central Eurasia. This objective was both a principled and a pragmatic one. Supporting democratization and human rights had become a moral element of Western foreign policy, shared by both the U.S. and the European Union. Moreover, democracy was increasingly understood as a way of tackling the perceived root causes of terrorism, namely socio-economic backwardness and political repression.

In the years after 9/11, U.S. policymakers have come under fire, both at home and abroad, for these priorities. Security concerns, critics say, have led Washington to once again ally with dictators, thereby ignoring human rights and democracy. But the governments of the Caucasus and Central Asia are not monolithic. In all of them, forces favoring reform coexist with those favoring authori-

tarian rule, the latter often deeply corrupt. Aware of the U.S. and European emphasis on democracy promotion, the corrupt forces are typically opponents of westward orientation and of Euro-Atlantic integration. They instead favor a closer relationship with Russia, which pays little or no attention to the domestic characteristics of government. On the other hand, advocates of reform are typically pro-western, seeing in western institutions the tools, assistance, and guidance for meaningful reform. In this situation, ignoring or shunning state institutions undermines the very progressive forces that are the best hope for gradual political and economic reform, and strengthens the hand of the autocratic forces that western policies are designed to counter. Isolation, exclusion and finger-pointing, which some in the west advocate as the preferred policy toward countries perceived to not comply fully with international standards, are the safest ways to ensure the victory of authoritarian-minded forces there. Instead, engagement and the development of broad relations in multiple fields provide the best course of action for the long-term strengthening of sovereignty, governance, and democracy.

Clearly, interests in security or energy should not be allowed to stifle democratic and institutional reform in the region. But neither should excessive demands for these countries to achieve overnight a level of democracy comparable to leading western states be allowed to suppress legitimate security and energy interests—or, for that matter, the development of trade relations. It is in America's interest to advance these three sets of issues simultaneously, not allowing one to take precedence over the other.

Seeing Eurasia straight

Western governments and international institutions alike have long seen the Caucasus and Central Asia as one and the same, failing to take into account the fundamental differences, both political and strategic, that exist between the two regions. Simply put, the Caucasus is both mentally and geographically closer to the European orbit than is Central Asia. However brief, all three countries in the South Caucasus—Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia—have prior histories of statehood. By contrast, the five states of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) emerged as sovereign nations for the first time in 1991. Prior to their creation as Soviet republics in the 1920s, no entities had ever existed with borders or names that approximated these five entities.

Since independence, Central Asia and the Caucasus have developed in diverging directions. In Central Asia, political pluralism and civil society have progressed slowly, finding roots only in the nomadic societies of Kyrgyzstan (and to some degree Kazakhstan), and prospects for democracy are limited. In the South Caucasus, by contrast, a true tug of war between equally strong forces favoring authoritarianism and democracy has developed. This is most obvious in Georgia, where the “Rose Revolution” of 2003 brought to power a new generation of political leaders committed to meaningful reforms. But also in Armenia and Azerbaijan, young, western-oriented forces exist alongside the older, Soviet *nomenklatura* in government, gradually replacing it in a measured and excruciating process.

The regions also diverge in strategic terms. Central Asia got most

attention after 9/11 due its proximity to Afghanistan. Indeed, access to Central Asia will remain an important objective for the United States, given the reality of a long-term engagement in the War on Terror’s first front.

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Moreover, the ability to project power into the heart of Asia, a region surrounded by Russia, China, Iran and the Indian subcontinent, is crucial for the global role of the U.S. But the Caucasus plays a more complex—and arguably more important—strategic role. To begin with, the region is the corridor through which the West can access Central Asia. This was most obviously shown after 9/11, as virtually all Coalition flights destined for Afghanistan transited the Caucasus, given the unavailability of Iranian and Russian airspace. Secondly, as the eastern shore of the Black Sea, the Caucasus is part of an emerging Black Sea region that will form the southeastern corner of Europe—making the EU an increasingly involved actor there. Third, the Caucasus borders the Middle East, and its border with Iran is particularly important to American interests. Fourth, the completion in 2006 of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline and the accompanying South Caucasus natural gas Pipeline (SCP) makes the Caucasus an integrated part of European energy architec-

ture, a role that is only likely to grow in the future, providing Central Asian producers an independent export route to the West. Finally, the three states of the Caucasus are growing into increasingly solid components of European security through their burgeoning relationships with NATO.

These differences mean that Washington has different prospects in the two regions. In Central Asia, especially after the 2005 collapse of its relationship with Uzbekistan, the U.S. will be forced to work to preserve its presence and regain lost ground. This will require engagement, primarily with Kazakhstan and the smaller countries of the region, pending political change in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. In the Caucasus, on the other hand, American policymakers have far greater ability to work with friendly powers and leaders in order to secure the region, help resolve its conflicts, speed up and support reforms, and strengthen integration with Euro-Atlantic institutions.

The South Caucasus: quarreling allies

The South Caucasus poses a particular challenge for the United States. All states in the region have a stated Euro-Atlantic orientation and attach great importance to relations with Washington. Yet the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the internal conflicts in Georgia—which have pitted the central government against Russian-supported secessionist minorities—are a greater security threat with each year that goes by without a resolution. Frozen along cease-fire lines since the early 1990s, these conflicts have hampered the development of prosperity and democracy.

The foundation of U.S. interests in the region is the pro-western policy pursued by Azerbaijan and Georgia. These two states have been among the most unequivocally independent and pro-American countries of the former Soviet Union and the wider Middle East.

Georgia's "Rose Revolution" was the spark that triggered the Ukrainian "Orange Revolution" and the Kyrgyz upheaval dubbed as a "Tulip Revolution." And whereas Kyrgyzstan has backtracked and Ukraine has stagnated since their respective revolutions, Georgia has continued to pursue a course of determined transformation. Reforms of the police force, public administration, justice system, and other sectors have brought meaningful, if at times difficult, change to the country. In this sense, Georgia deserves—and depends upon—the very clear support that President Bush has given it, expressed most recently during Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's visit to Washington in July 2006. Georgia remains one of the few success stories of the Bush administration's Greater Middle East project, and the U.S. government—no matter which administration is in power—has invested substantial energy, money and prestige in Georgia's success.

Georgia will remain a key country for the United States in the wider Eurasian region for several reasons. First, its location on the Black Sea and on the Caucasian corridor to the Caspian Sea makes it a crucial player in energy security, as well as in access to Central Asia. Second, it is a country whose leadership, as well as the overwhelming majority of the population, is strongly pro-American and likely to remain so. Indeed, there are few countries in Europe and Eurasia where Presi-

dent Bush has been greeted not with anti-American demonstrations but with chants of support by thousands of locals, as happened in May 2005. Third, Georgia's reform process is symbolically important; it was the first democratic breakthrough in a CIS country, and the survival of Georgian democracy is crucial to America's wider regional objectives.

Azerbaijan is, if possible, strategically even more important than Georgia, though somewhat more controversial. The oil-rich country will pump a million barrels of crude a day to western markets by the end of the decade.¹ Given the state of global oil markets, the timing of the arrival of Azerbaijani oil to world markets could not be better. Its oil, supplemented by natural gas deliveries, will provide an important chunk of the projected increase of European energy consumption in the next decade. But Azerbaijan's importance is not limited to its energy resources. As the only country to border both Russia and Iran, it is the virtual key to western access to the Caspian Sea and Central Asia. Indeed, given current political realities, Azerbaijan is the only truly irreplaceable country in the East-West corridor linking Europe and Turkey to Central Asia. Moreover, being a moderate, secular Muslim country, with a potential to strengthen democratic institutions, Azerbaijan has an added symbolic value to the West—particularly at a time of great flux in America's relationship with Turkey.

But Washington has been much slower to embrace Azerbaijan. The reason has everything to do with the slower speed of democratic development in Baku. Concurrent with Georgia's "Rose Revolution," a similar transfer of power took place in Azerbaijan. As in Georgia, it brought to

power a leader from a younger generation. But unlike Georgia, that leader was the son of the ailing incumbent President, Heydar Aliyev, and his election to power was disputed by an angry opposition that denounced it as "dynastic succession." Ilham Aliyev's election to the presidency was indeed controversial, yet during the election, it was clear that he was by no means unpopular—and equally clear that the bickering, unreformed opposition did not possess the popular support that Saakashvili did in Georgia. Although Aliyev's election was marred by recorded irregularities, there is little doubt that he actually won that election and would have done so without the interference of his satraps. And since coming to power, Ilham Aliyev has proven his credentials as a reformer. His coming to power coincided with the marketing of Azerbaijan's oil wealth and the world's highest GDP growth figures, with 26 percent recorded in both 2005 and 2006.² But he has also followed a consistent (though cautious) policy of incremental reform, most notably in the economy, bringing to positions of influence a new guard of younger, often western-educated professionals. The reasons for Azerbaijan's tentativeness are clear: Aliyev has to deal with deeply entrenched, regionally based power groups established during the Soviet period and his father's tenure, groups deeply suspicious of reform and which can only be marginalized gradually and incrementally.

That is not to say that all is well in Azerbaijan. Political reform is still proceeding more slowly than economic reform; the judiciary remains a sector where wholesale change is needed; corruption is widespread among the bureaucracy and key ministries, not least among important institutions such as the interior minis-

try, defense ministry and the customs service; and the country's record in elections as well as human rights protections remain questionable. Yet movement toward reform is palpable in Azerbaijan, all the more so given President Aliyev's clear ambition to bring his country greater respectability in the community of nations. Indeed, Azerbaijan has consistently shown itself to be a country ready to listen and adapt to western advice. All this makes Azerbaijan an obvious ally of the United States—a country that can serve an important purpose and which America can support and influence on its path of reform.

A tour d'horizon of Central Asia in 2006 provides the U.S. with no easy solutions.

The foreign policies of Azerbaijan and Georgia are not only complementary, they are mutually reinforcing. As analyst Vladimir Socor has noted, the two “stand or fall together.”³ This is most obvious in energy security, where the BTC pipeline connects the fates of the two countries—Azerbaijan providing Georgia much-needed energy and transit income, and Georgia providing Azerbaijan with an export route, and with the pipeline providing both with strategic value in the eyes of the West. It is therefore crucial for the U.S. to work to strengthen the positive interaction between Azerbaijan and Georgia, not least by facilitating their integration into NATO.

Yet America must also continue to cultivate its relationship with Armenia. Dependent on Russia to a great degree because of its conflict with Azerbaijan and its unsettled relationship with Turkey, Armenia has nevertheless in the past several

years struggled to ensure that it is not left standing on the platform as the Euro-Atlantic train boarded by its two neighbors races off. It has upgraded its relationship with NATO and been even more careful to tend to its relationship with the European Union. It is thus important to keep working for Armenia's integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions and simultaneously seek to resolve the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, something the U.S. admittedly has invested substantial energies in, but so far to no avail.

Finally, as long as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remains unresolved, the U.S. will face a divided Caucasus, a situation which serves the purposes of its Russian and Iranian rivals. Only if that conflict finds a solution will Armenia fully be able to realize its potential as a part of the Euro-Atlantic community and become a full member of the cooperative ventures developing in the South Caucasus. The opportunity cost of failing to resolve the conflict is high, given the potential gains of a solution and, not least, the horrible price the entire region will pay in the event of a renewed war.

Central Asia: partners, anywhere?

If the central problem in the Caucasus is the troubles among America's partners, the main impediment for Washington in Central Asia stems from regional perceptions of the United States. A *tour d'horizon* of Central Asia in 2006 provides the U.S. with no easy solutions. Until recently, Washington enjoyed a privileged relationship with the region's strategic pivot, Uzbekistan. But as a result of numerous factors—the Uzbek government's continued reluctance

to reform and the violent repression of an uprising in the eastern town of Andijan, America's distraction in Iraq and its consequent failure to fulfill the provisions of the strategic partnership treaty inked with Tashkent, and Washington's neglect of all issues other than human rights in Uzbekistan—the relationship went sour in 2005.⁴ The consequences have been nothing short of catastrophic; after a decade of seeking to escape Russia's embrace, Uzbekistan has rejoined the Russian fold, practically cutting ties to the United States and expelling the U.S. military from the Kharshi-Khanabad base near the Afghan border. The prospects for a rapprochement between Washington and Tashkent are remote, and whatever trust existed in the constantly troubled relationship has evaporated. In the short term, the U.S.-Uzbekistan relationship is unlikely to be repaired, but this should not prevent the United States from seeking to rebuild it, either with the Karimov regime, if possible, or with a future government that may have less baggage than the current one.

With Uzbekistan lost for the time being, Kazakhstan has emerged as America's best friend in Central Asia. Since 2000, it has become the region's economic powerhouse. If Uzbekistan provides the majority of Central Asia's population, Kazakhstan single-handedly provides the majority of its economic output. This is mainly related to the oil industry, scheduled to produce three million barrels a day by 2010,⁵ but also to others that exploit Kazakhstan's rich natural resources. With impressive growth rates for a decade now, Kazakhstan has sped ahead of the rest of the region, and with it has come a feeling of independence, despite a troubled history and rela-

tionship with Russia. Indeed, 40 percent of the Kazakh nation was killed during Stalin-imposed collectivization in the 1920s, and the remainder was subjected to strong "russification" and the in-migration of Slavs, making Kazakhs a 30 percent minority on their own land several decades later. By the time of their country's independence in 1991, Kazakhs had recuperated somewhat, and out-migration of Russians ever since has led the Kazakhs to now form close to two-thirds of the population, spurring a revival of national pride and of the Kazakh language.

All this has enabled Kazakhstan to gradually stake out an increasingly independent foreign policy. Under the decade-long guidance of foreign minister Kasymzhomart Tokayev, Kazakhstan has embraced a balanced relationship to all three major powers in Eurasia—Russia, China and the United States. At present, it is the only state in the region to overtly chart such a policy, leaving room for long-term cooperation with the U.S. Thus, by default and also because of its economic and political development, an important pillar of any American role in Central Asia will have to be a deepening relationship with Kazakhstan.

Kyrgyzstan is by necessity the next country on the list of U.S. priorities, primarily because it hosts America's only remaining military base in Central Asia. Yet bilateral relations between Washington and Bishkek have seen better days. The so-called "Tulip Revolution" of March 2005 brought to power a weak oligarchy of deposed officials that quickly sought Russian support for their position, aware they could be unseated as easily as they had attained power. The new government, under strong Russian and Chinese pressure,

threatened to expel the U.S. military in Spring 2006, settling nevertheless to keep it in July, but extracting an exorbitant price (a yearly fee of some \$150 million). More worrisome still is the fact that the sole justification for the facility is the conflict in Afghanistan. Once Afghanistan is pacified, the U.S. will lose its self-proclaimed reason to retain a presence in Central Asia—implying that these two important objectives are fundamentally at odds.⁶ This leaves America vulnerable to renewed pressure from Russia and China. Meanwhile, Kyrgyzstan's polity has weakened considerably, amid increasing influence from organized criminal groupings and growing political instability. So far, the U.S. has done very little to help Kyrgyzstan stabilize. And, given the remaining tension in relations, it is unlikely to be able to do much in the near future. For the time being, America needs Kyrgyzstan, but the latter risks becoming a scene of almost permanent political instability, ensuring that the U.S. presence there will be controversial and problematic.

It has become exceedingly clear that in virtually all of its dealings with the Central Eurasian states, the U.S. will face the problem of a Russia emboldened by high oil prices and determined to minimize American influence in the region.

This leaves Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. The latter is strategically important, bordering Iran and the Caspian Sea and possessing some of the world's largest natural gas reserves. Yet it is run by the eccentric Saparmurad Niyazov, who turned this tribal land into one of

the most reclusive and isolated countries on earth. As long as Niyazov is in power, the U.S. will have little opportunity for greater engagement. Yet this is no reason for America not to plan on engaging Turkmenistan in the future, should the opportunity arise. Tajikistan, for its part, is a more promising candidate. Recovering from a debilitating civil war, it is gradually rebuilding and has begun to seek a place in the region. While still under strong Russian influence, Tajikistan has shown a willingness to engage western powers. It is desperately poor, possesses few resources aside from abundant water that could be converted into hydropower, and deeply affected by the drug trade from Afghanistan. It is therefore no candidate for a direct role as an American ally in the region, but is nevertheless a country that could in time develop into a more independent actor—a process that Washington should support.

The problem with Russia (and China)

No analysis of America's relationship with the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus would be complete without addressing the role of Russia and, increasingly, that of China. For a decade, the U.S. has sought to build relations with Moscow, seeking honestly to portray its role in Central Eurasia as benign and not directed at Russian interests. Indeed, American diplomats have advanced a vision of a win-win situation, whereby U.S. actions in fact benefit Russia. Stabilizing the South Caucasus, seeking to resolve its conflicts, and removing the Taliban from power in Afghanistan are only some of Washington's efforts that might be seen as useful in Moscow. Yet in

reality, Russian leaders, particularly since Vladimir Putin's ascension to power, have viewed U.S. actions in Central Asia and the Caucasus almost exclusively from a zero-sum perspective: as American encroachment on a Russian sphere of influence.

In response, Moscow has put pressure on Georgia for its NATO aspirations and pro-American policies, severely undermining that country's stability. It has continued to drag its heels on efforts to resolve the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. It has worked hard to lock up Central Asia's oil and gas resources, which it buys on the cheap thanks to its de facto monopoly on regional energy. Finally, Moscow worked successfully to wrest Uzbekistan from its relationship with Washington, exerting major pressure to evict U.S. forces from the Kharshi-Khanabad airbase.

It has become exceedingly clear that in virtually all of its dealings with the Central Eurasian states, the U.S. will face the problem of a Russia emboldened by high oil prices and determined to minimize American influence in the region. A decade of seeking to engage Russia has not changed this reality, and Washington remains at a loss as to how to counter this problem. In all likelihood, the U.S. will be forced to adopt a tougher, clearer position regarding what its core interests are, and communicate these to Moscow while simultaneously leaving the door open for a constructive Russian role in the region and capitalizing on common interests if and when they arise.

As for China, Beijing has for the past several years appeared to forge a common front with Moscow on issues pertaining to Central Asia. Their joint efforts in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization are the most important example of this. Yet it is also clear that

Moscow and Beijing view one another with suspicion. In the long run, Russia is a retreating power, with little to offer the region in economic terms and a deeply troubling demographic development. China, on the other hand, is a rising power, an economic powerhouse bent on establishing influence over Central Asia.⁷ The resulting unease in Russian-Chinese relations is best observed in the energy field: China has spent substantial efforts to seek to avoid dependence on Russian energy, instead seeking to develop direct connections to Central Asian states.

This state of affairs provides the United States with an opportunity. While it has sought to engage Russia on Central Asian affairs, it has yet to make use of its broad economic and political dialogue with China as regards Central Asia. There is, indeed, room for an attempt by Washington to engage Beijing on Central Asian issues and forge both mutual understanding and a level of confidence about American intentions in the region. Such an initiative may be difficult to accomplish, but that will not be known unless it is attempted. Should the U.S. achieve even a modicum of success in such an endeavor, it would go a long way toward increasing its prospects of achieving a durable strategic presence in Central Asia.

Toward real regional engagement

As the past five years have shown, the underlying problem in America's relationship with Central Asia and the Caucasus has been the lack of a clear policy toward both regions. And in the absence of a coherent strategy, inertia and tensions have permeated U.S. policy toward Central Eurasia, with predictable results.

Moving forward, it is clear that the United States must refocus on

building partnerships with the key states of the region. In the Caucasus, it must pay equal attention to Azerbaijan and Georgia, while not neglecting to enlist Armenia in regional planning. Bringing about equitable solutions to the conflicts of the region likewise will remain a key task.

In Central Asia, meanwhile, the U.S. faces a different and more complicated set of challenges. Unquestionably, America's position in the region has deteriorated significantly in recent years. The bright spot in this otherwise murky picture is Washington's growing relationship with an increasingly independent and wealthy Kazakhstan—an emerging bond that must be cultivated. Additionally, nurturing ties with Kyrgyzstan will remain a major American priority. But none of these things will be as decisive as the fate of Uzbekistan. A stable, cooperative and prosperous Uzbekistan will mean a lot to Central Asia's other states, while an unstable and impoverished regime in Tashkent could seriously threaten the progress being made in Kazakhstan or elsewhere. America cannot afford to remain without influence in shaping Uzbekistan's future, and must work to regain a measure of the influence it once possessed.

Today, a lack of strategic clarity has muddled America's message to the region, confusing local leaders as well as policy planners back home. Yet U.S. interests in governance, energy and security need not be contradictory, and can be made mutually reinforcing. A policy that is clearly based on this understanding would provide Washington with new opportunities to develop its interests in this complex yet increasingly crucial area of the world.

1. For more on the economics of Azerbaijani oil, see Jonathan Elkind, "Economic Implications of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline," in S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, eds., *The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline: Oil Window to the West* (Washington & Uppsala: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 2005), 39-60.
2. 2006 estimates from the *Economist Intelligence Unit*.
3. Vladimir Socor, "A Tale of Two Post-Post-Soviet Countries," *Wall Street Journal Europe*, December 19, 2003.
4. See John Daly et al., "Anatomy of a Crisis: U.S.-Uzbekistan Relations, 2000-2005," *Silk Road Paper*, February 2006, <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/inside/publications/0602Uzbek.pdf>.
5. Official statistics from the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources of the Republic of Kazakhstan, <http://www.minenergo.kz/>.
6. See Stephen Blank, "Beyond Afghanistan: The Future of American Bases in Central Asia," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst* 8, no. 15 (2006), 3-5.
7. See Niklas L.P. Swanström, "China and Central Asia: A New Great Game or Traditional Vassal Relations," *Journal of Contemporary China* 14, no. 45 (2005), 569-584.

