

The Changing Security Model in Post-Soviet Central Asia

Gennady Chufirin¹

There are few regions in the world that have experienced such a profound and lasting impact from the events of September 11, 2001 as Central Asia. Ever since the U.S.-led anti-terrorist operation in the wake of these events began in the region, in the form of the a military campaign directed against the Taliban regime and Al Qaeda network in Afghanistan, other Central Asian states—all of them former Soviet constituent republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan)—have also been deeply influenced by these developments, although each of them to a different degree. This paper analyzes the changes in the security situation in post-Soviet Central Asia following the military defeat of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan; the influence of the newly established U.S./NATO military deployment in the region on the policies of regional states; and the reaction of Russia and China to these changes.

Changes in the security situation

By the second half of 2001, the security situation in Central Asia had become increasingly tense. The impoverished population in the Ferghana Valley, which links Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, was deeply disillusioned with official socio-economic policies in the region and was rapidly falling under the influence of the extremist Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which was closely allied with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The IMU militants threatened to start another round of armed conflict (the first two happened in 1999 and 2000), and reasonably expected to receive resolute and active support from the Taliban once the latter achieved a complete victory in the civil war in Afghanistan, an event that seemed close at hand following the assassination of Ahmad Shah Masoud, the charismatic leader of the opposition Northern Alliance. It was quite logical therefore that under these circumstances the U.S.-led anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan was received as a welcome security development by the ruling regimes in the post-Soviet Central Asian states. Not only did these states declare their complete political support for this operation, but most of them also allowed U.S. transport and military aircraft to overfly their territories. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan agreed to lease to the U.S. and its Western allies airport facilities in Khanabad and Manas to be used against Taliban armed forces in Afghanistan.

These dramatic decisions initially looked like short-term contingency arrangements under emergency conditions, but just a few months later they appeared instead to have become an integral part of the new security strategies of the Cen-

¹ Professor Gennady Chufirin teaches at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations, Moscow, Russia.

tral Asian countries. Now, one year after the principal military goals of the anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan seem to have been successfully achieved, neither Uzbekistan nor Kyrgyzstan—nor, for that matter, any other Central Asian states—show any intention to reduce the level of their security and military cooperation with the U.S. and its Western allies. Moreover, in their negotiations with their Western counterparts, the leaders of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, for instance, openly demonstrate their interest in prolonging the Western military presence within their borders.

Thus, with this goal in mind, the Uzbek government allowed the United States to modernize and reconstruct the air base in Khanabad, which the U.S. air force had been using since the beginning of its military campaign in Afghanistan,² and there were press reports that Manas airport near Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan will be reconstructed as well.³ At present the air base in Manas hosts around 2000 servicemen and several military aircraft from the U.S., France, Italy, Turkey, Spain, and several other NATO countries. Formally, the lease of the airport in Manas to these Western members of the anti-terrorist coalition expired at the beginning of 2003. But, if that lease is extended, it will result in a transformation of the still mainly civilian airport into a full-scale military air base capable of accommodating around 5000 servicemen and about 50 military aircraft from the coalition forces.⁴

Like their neighbors in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, the leaders of Kazakhstan, the largest and strategically most important Central Asian state, continue to expand their security and military cooperation with the United States. Although there is no permanent U.S. military presence in the country, U.S.-Kazakh cooperation under the framework of the Partnership for Peace (PfP) and International Military Education and Training (IMET) programs has now become routine, and is constantly growing in its scope and intensity. Among new elements augmenting this cooperation were recent deliveries of U.S. military equipment for the needs of the Kazakh mobile forces.⁵ Tajikistan, too, has been steadily upgrading its security relations with the U.S. and its NATO allies. This process started with Tajikistan offering landing rights to U.S. aircraft at the Dushanbe airport during the first stage of the military operation in Afghanistan, which was followed by Tajikistan formally joining the PfP program, thus completing the list of all post-Soviet Central Asian states as its members.

It is only Turkmenistan that stands somewhat apart from the mainstream of these developments. The decision to refrain from establishing closer security relations with the West is officially explained by the country's neutral status. It seems more likely, however, that having inherited large stocks of armaments, including

² *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, August 9, 2002.

³ *Kommersant*, July 2, 2002.

⁴ *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, March 1, 2002.

⁵ *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, August 9, 2002.

aircraft, after the breakup of the Soviet Union,⁶ Turkmenistan feels comfortable at this point with the state of its military potential.

However, the case of Turkmenistan does not obscure a clear tendency in recent security developments in Central Asia that may be described as an emergence of a new regional security model focused on cooperation with the United States and its NATO allies. It is replacing the previous model, which had the states' relationship with Russia and the CIS Collective Security Treaty (CST) at its core.

There are a variety of reasons for this fundamental change. The first among them is the ability demonstrated by the United States to act resolutely and effectively in a crisis situation, when it succeeded relatively rapidly in overcoming the open armed resistance of the Taliban forces and in delivering a crushing defeat. The Central Asian leaders could not but compare the efficiency of the U.S. military operation with the very slow and uncertain development of a multilateral anti-terrorist force that had repeatedly been undertaken by Russia and other Central Asian CST members (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) in previous years. Incidentally, it was this lack of efficiency in the CST activities that provoked Uzbekistan to terminate its membership in the organization in 1999.

Also, even though the immediate threat of an armed conflict with the IMU militants was averted by U.S. military successes in Afghanistan, and while the notorious IMU leader, Djuma Namangani, was reportedly killed in action there, Central Asian leaders (in particular those in Uzbekistan) know better than to believe that the danger of extreme Islamist activities in their countries can be ignored. Already another leader of the IMU, Tahir Yuldashev, has declared his intention to continue the struggle against the ruling regime in Uzbekistan, while another radical Islamist organization, Khizbi al Takhri (Party of Correction), is gaining in popularity in this and other Central Asian states.

Thus, while the CIS Collective Security Treaty has thus far failed to address the fears and expectations of Central Asian states, another regional security body, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, has yet to prove its effectiveness in fighting the threats of international terrorism, extremism, and separatism. This organization was established in June 2001 as an heir to the Shanghai Forum—with Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan as its members—and is still in the process of formation.

The Central Asian states have been disillusioned not only by the low effectiveness of these Russia-centered multilateral regional security schemes, but are also often dissatisfied by the state of their bilateral security and military cooperation with Russia. The most outspoken critic of this cooperation is Uzbekistan, which blamed Russia for frequent delays or failures in implementing their ear-

⁶ For more information on this subject see Mark Eaton "Major trends in military expenditure and arms acquisitions by the states of the Caspian region," in *The Security of the Caspian Sea Region*, ed. Gennady Chufirin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

lier agreements that provided for the delivery of Russian weapons, materiel, and accessories to enhance the combat-readiness of the Uzbek national armed forces.

Another important reason for the growing interest of the Central Asian states in promoting security cooperation with the United States and its NATO allies is, of course, financial. Indeed, from the very first stages of the deployment of their military forces in Central Asia, Western countries paid regularly for the use of local airport facilities.

These payments became a sizeable addition to the budget revenues of the host countries. In addition, modernization of these airports and construction of additional housing and storage facilities there created much needed—and well-paid—job opportunities for the local labor force. If the lease of these airports is extended, then additional revenues and more job opportunities will be forthcoming. Thus, for instance, the proposed extension of the lease of the strategically important Manas airport may involve up to \$500 million for its reconstruction. The U.S. is reportedly prepared to meet this cost, and then to pay up to \$300 million annually for the use of the modernized Manas air base.⁷

In other words, the Western military presence in Central Asia is no longer regarded by countries in the region—particularly Uzbekistan, for instance—as something strange, extravagant, or as a short-term arrangement, but is instead considered to be a long-term or perhaps even a permanent element of the regional security architecture.

Reactions by Neighbors

Needless to say, these recent changes in the Central Asian security structure and in the security perceptions of states in the region are of special concern to their neighbors, particularly Russia and China, and are bound to invite their reaction.

For China, the U.S. military presence in Central Asia, which would have been unthinkable only a short time ago, created literally a worst-case security scenario. Considered against the background of growing U.S.-Chinese political and military tensions in East Asia, it was only to be expected that China would attempt to undertake everything possible to reverse or at least to mitigate this situation. To achieve this goal, China facilitated bilateral and multilateral contacts on security issues with the Central Asian states. Thus, for instance, the declared intention of Kazakhstan to offer its international airport in Almaty for the use of U.S./NATO aircraft “in case of emergency” has caused serious concern in China, and has become an important issue during their bilateral meeting recently.⁸ China has also become particularly active in finalizing the formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and in making it a potentially functional regional security body. With this purpose in mind, China was one of the most active participants at the summit

⁷ *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, April 25, 2002.

⁸ *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, August 23, 2002.

meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in St. Petersburg in June 2002 where its Charter was adopted, thus creating a much-needed legal basis for its further activities. In spite of activity it is too early to expect this organization to play a noticeable role in regional security; its Central Asian members would instead like it to be seen as a counterweight to the U.S. security policy in Central Asia.

As for Russia, a country that played a dominant role in Central Asian security affairs until only recently, its attitude towards recent security developments in the region remains ambivalent. On the one hand, Moscow refrains from any formal criticism of reported U.S./NATO plans to extend the duration of their military presence in Central Asia. This behavior appears to be a logical continuation of Russia's earlier policy of extending support for the international anti-terrorist coalition and its mission in Afghanistan. On the other hand, there are rapidly growing concerns about these plans among an influential part of the Russian establishment, which includes top military and security officers, officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and a large number of deputies of the Russian parliament representing various political parties.

In the opinion of the latter group, if the U.S. military presence in post-Soviet Central Asia becomes long-term or permanent, it may create many negative consequences for Russian regional and global security interests. Firstly, they argue, it will almost certainly result in cooling and even straining of relations with China, who may regard Russia's continuing acquiescence to U.S. military deployments in Central Asian states (among them formal members of the CIS Collective Security Treaty) as a policy that undermines if not the letter, then at least the spirit of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership. Secondly, Russia's own influence over political and security developments in Central Asia may continue to be progressively reduced to the point of its complete and irrevocable loss, at least in some countries (Uzbekistan being one of them, but not the only one). Thirdly, Russia will inevitably lose its preeminent position as a player in the security of the larger Caspian region as well, especially since the strengthening of the U.S. positions in Central Asia is accompanied by a similar process in the South Caucasus, in Azerbaijan and particularly in Georgia.

These arguments recently have been made increasingly forcefully by their proponents, who target their criticisms not only against the U.S. activities in Central Asia (and, for that matter, in the South Caucasus as well) but also, however indirectly, against a pro-Western shift in Russian foreign and security policy initiated by President Vladimir Putin himself in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001. As these views have also been gaining ground among wider sectors of Russian society, President Putin has had to appease the hardliners. As a result, in the middle of May 2002, the CIS Collective Security Treaty was formally transformed into a better-structured military-political alliance, a move made to upgrade

the level of military cooperation among its members.⁹ A little earlier, with the aim of increasing the role of the CST in Central Asian security affairs, it was decided to step up military-technical cooperation with the regional states and to increase deliveries of Russian armaments to them at reduced prices.¹⁰ In addition, the CIS rapid deployment force, which was created as long ago as in October 2000, was given the rights to use a military air base in Kant, Kyrgyzstan.¹¹ For all practical purposes, this decision may allow Russia to staff the Kant air base mainly with its own troops, even though Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are among the rapid deployment force participants. It is also expected to balance the presences of the military base in Manas being used by the U.S./NATO forces. Commenting on this peculiar situation, Esen Topoyev, Minister of Defense of Kyrgyzstan, tried to justify it by saying that, while the facilities in Manas are to be used exclusively for supporting military operations in Afghanistan, the Kant airbase will be used “for special operations against other enemy forces which may threaten security of Central Asian states.”¹²

An even stronger reminder to the outside world of Russia’s intention to maintain its role in the region’s security environment was represented by the largest ever Russian naval exercises held in the northern Caspian Sea at the beginning of August 2002.¹³ Over ten thousand Russian servicemen, sixty warships, and over thirty combat aircraft and helicopters took part in these maneuvers, demonstrating Russia’s readiness to defend its national interests in this part of the world. Despite the fact that, along with the Russian armed forces there were also troops from Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, it was, of course, a clear show of Russia’s military power and its determination to use it in a crisis situation. This show of force was also addressed to Russia’s neighbors in the region, reassuring them of Russia’s capability to act firmly and decisively as a guarantor of regional stability.

The New Central Asian Security Model

Summing up the above analysis, it may be concluded that a new model of regional security is emerging in post-Soviet Central Asia. This model may be described as follows:

1. Its main element is the Western military presence in the region, which was established with the beginning of the U.S.-led anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan. Although the deployment of the U.S./NATO armed forces in the region was initially expected to be a short-term arrangement, it is likely to become a permanent factor of the region’s security environment.

⁹ *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, May 16, 2002.

¹⁰ *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, February 28, 2002.

¹¹ *Kommersant*, July 2, 2002.

¹² *Kommersant*, July 2, 2002,

¹³ *Nezavisimoye voennoye obozrenie*, 27 (August 16, 2002).

2. This new security model meets the strategic interests not only of the U.S. and its Western allies but also of the ruling elites in most of the regional countries, who regard the U.S./NATO military deployments in Central Asia as an effective guarantee of their survival in their uncompromising struggle with radical Islamist and extremist forces.
3. These developments are regarded with a growing apprehension in Russia and China. Trying to mitigate and neutralize the negative consequences to their positions in regional political and security affairs, both states want to enhance the role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Russia intends also to actively use the CIS Collective Security Treaty as an effective instrument of maintaining its traditional—though recently substantially reduced—influence in the region.