

Strategic Insight: Russia and Eurasia

Enduring Freedom for Central Asia?

by [Elizabeth Skinner](#)

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Introduction

The five states of Central Asia^[1] suddenly have taken on a new importance in U.S. strategic thinking since the war against the Taliban and al-Qaeda began in October 2001. In late September of 2001, the United States began shipping men and matériel to Uzbekistan's Khanabad airbase near the Afghan border, to set up a staging area and command post for operations into Afghanistan. Uzbekistan was chosen over its neighbors for its proximity to Afghanistan, its relative political stability in a region that has struggled with insurgencies and civil war since gaining independence in 1991, and the pro-Western leanings of President Islam Karimov.

But there is a danger that the military and other aid the United States is likely to give the Karimov regime in exchange for its cooperation could upset a delicate regional balance of power and shake Russia's tacit support for the U.S. presence in Central Asia. Uzbekistan's neighbors fear that Karimov will use his new-found power to fulfill his ambition to dominate the region, by force if necessary. Within Uzbekistan, critics warn that U.S. backing helps prop up a repressive, personality-centered regime that, in the absence of sorely needed economic and political reforms, might not survive the eventual U.S. withdrawal. Without other forms of political expression or economic opportunities, more and more youth and dissatisfied elites in Uzbekistan are gravitating away from non-violent, indigenous forms of Islam toward the radical groups that openly advocate overthrowing the current regime. The United States may inadvertently exacerbate this trend if military and other kinds of aid flow to the Karimov regime without parallel diplomatic efforts to encourage reform.

It remains to be seen what impact the U.S. presence will have on U.S.-Russian relations. Russian president Vladimir Putin was one of the first world leaders to offer his condolences and support to President Bush and the American people on September 11. Moscow is making efforts to improve diplomatic ties with the five capitals and strengthen the cooperative framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States. At the same time, some Russian officials are voicing concern about America's long-term intentions in the region.

Analysis

The United States has been seeking to strengthen relations with the governments of Central Asia over the past decade. These endeavors have been tied in part to the vast oil reserves of the Caspian Sea region, but under the umbrella of NATO's Partnership for Peace, the Pentagon has built strong military to military relationships with oil-poor Uzbekistan as well as with its better endowed neighbors.^[2] Uzbekistan's border with Afghanistan is now one of the chief staging areas for U.S. operations as part of Enduring Freedom, and Tashkent is basking in the glow of intensified American attention. U.S. aid to Uzbekistan has tripled from \$50 million to \$160 million, and on March 13 Uzbek President Islam Karimov paid a visit to the White House to talk with President Bush about a long-term military partnership.^[3]

Uzbekistan is not the only Central Asian state to offer assistance to the United States. Kyrgyzstan has opened its international airport for use by NATO forces operating into South Asia, for a period of at least one year. Along with the revenue this arrangement brings in, Bishkek and Washington have pledged to develop cultural and trade ties. Tajikistan also has offered a dilapidated military airfield located near the capital Dushanbe, which is estimated will cost NATO some \$50 million to restore completely. The leader of a congressional delegation that visited Dushanbe in early January said, however, that Tajik airfields would not have a long-term U.S. military presence, but that the Pentagon would be moving its forces from place to place as needed.^[4] Turkmenistan's president, Saparmurat Niyazov, supports the transportation of humanitarian aid into Afghanistan through his country, but so far has stood by his government's pledge of "positive neutrality," refusing any military cooperation.

Kazakhstan, largest and overall most stable of the Central Asian nations, until recently was thought to be winning the struggle with Uzbekistan to become regional hegemon with strong support from Moscow. Kazakh leader Nursultan Nazarbayev, like the majority of his peers a former Soviet apparatchik who has been president of his country since it gained independence more than ten years ago, has maintained close ties with both Moscow and Washington (or Dallas, depending on the kinds of ties in question). One of the four Soviet successor states to inherit a nuclear arsenal, Kazakhstan drew intense international attention and considerable foreign aid for a couple of years in the early 1990s while its leaders made up their minds whether to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty and give up the weapons. Once Kazakhstan signed the treaty, U.S. and European oil companies fell over themselves trying to win access to vast Kazakh oil fields, including a large part of the Caspian Sea reserves.

Kazakhstan, however, shares no common border with Afghanistan, and so is less directly useful for military operations into South Asia. Air operations from Kazakh territory would entail crossing the airspace of at least two neighbors. Due to the whims of political geography and the needs of U.S. war-planning, Uzbekistan thus has found itself boosted to a position of regional importance that Karimov has tried to claim since independence.

Karimov is second only to Turkmenistan's Niyazov as being the most authoritarian leader in a region noted for its human rights abuses, appalling poverty, and lack of democratic institutions. A spokesperson for the group Human Rights Watch warned that Karimov's latest grab for increased political power, in the form of a referendum granting him the possibility of remaining president for ten more years, demonstrates that he has no intention of loosening his oppressive grip on the country.^[5] U.S. officials downplayed the importance of the referendum, insisting that human rights were a regular part of their talks with Tashkent.

During a State Department briefing about her January 2002 visit to Central Asia to meet with government officials in all five capitals, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Beth Jones discussed U.S. relations with the governments of the region, and future prospects for bilateral ties. She emphasized discussions she had with officials in each country on ways to increase democratic representation within the governments, improve cooperation with non-governmental aid organizations, and end human rights abuses. At the same time, Jones told her audience, "[I]t makes no sense at all that a consequence of Uzbekistan not cooperating on democracy and human rights is to cut our aid which goes to democracy and human rights groups. No money goes to the Government of Uzbekistan."^[6] Mikhail Ardzinov, head of the indigenous rights group Independent Human Rights Organization of Uzbekistan, expressed doubt that there would be any improvements in democratic or other rights as long as Karimov remains in power.^[7]

Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid, author of the recent book, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, and others who have studied the phenomenon, describe a direct connection between the authoritarian rule of Karimov and his colleagues, and the rapidly increasing popularity of militant Islamic organizations. Some have suggested that Central Asia is almost certain to become the next battleground in the war against terrorism. Asked in an interview why militant Islam was on the rise in the region, Rashid pointed to the abject poverty and lack of political expression that are the direct result of regime policies.^[8]

In Uzbekistan in particular, Karimov has launched a Soviet-style crackdown on political opposition and all religious expression except for a state-sponsored form of Sufism.^[9] At the same time, he has avoided the economic reforms that would allow Uzbek citizens to improve their living conditions. This combination of political and economic hopelessness has driven thousands of disaffected young men into the arms of militant organizations such as the extremely violent Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and the more propagandist Hizbollah Tahir (HT), which promise the creation of an Islamic "khalifate" uniting Central Asia and eventually the entire Muslim world. Even Uzbekistan's economic elites are susceptible to militant calls for action as they grow increasingly frustrated with their political powerlessness.

Despite anger with Karimov's regime and the cult of personality he encourages, however, the danger to Uzbek society and regional security from what locals call the "Wahhabis" is very real, and Karimov's harsh suppression of Islamic fundamentalism has strong support.^[10] The Taliban's successes in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s encouraged the rise of similar movements in neighboring states. The IMU formed originally with the intent to carve a fundamentalist Islamic state out of the Ferghana Valley, the economic heart of Central Asia shared by Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, but has expanded its vision to include all of Central Asia. The IMU inflicted serious damage on regional inter-state relations by mounting guerrilla attacks in all three countries from bases in northern Afghanistan and Tajikistan. It is known to have close connections with the Taliban as well as certain Northern Alliance factions, and allegedly with al-Qaeda. The IMU finances its operations by controlling a large part of the massive opium and heroin trade from Afghanistan into Central Asia, facilitated by complicit Russian military personnel and regional officials.^[11]

Unlike the IMU, the HT claims to be non-violent and acts as the propaganda wing of the movement through the use of electronic communications. It came to Central Asia in the mid-1990s, and according to Rashid has a large base of support in Europe. The Karimov government has driven the HT underground, and its younger members are becoming more militant. Rashid points to Saudi Arabia as the source for much of the group's funding and training.

Since the war in Afghanistan began last fall, thousands of refugees have been pouring over the borders into neighboring states. U.S. military spokesmen have admitted that no one can be sure how many Taliban and even al-Qaeda fighters escaped the fighting by letting themselves be swept along in the desperate flood. It is likely that Central Asia and the bases of the IMU are among their destinations. As a Kyrgyz journalist pointed out, the very presence of U.S. troops at bases in Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere may make those bases and nearby towns targets for terrorist attacks by the displaced extremists.

In their relations with Russia and the United States, the Central Asian states may be doing a balancing act of their own. Russia recently signed a new agreement on the transportation of natural gas with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan that according to some analysts allocates to each partner a more equitable role than was the case with such agreements in the past, but according to others will bring a further tightening of Russia's grip on the regional energy trade.^[12] A Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) summit held in Almaty, Kazakhstan early in March provided a forum for members' leaders to voice their concerns about the rapidity with which the United States built up its presence in the region, and about long-term U.S. intentions. According to one report, Uzbek, Tajik, and Kyrgyz cooperation with NATO is drawing criticism from allies, while nationalist, anti-Western diatribes, particularly from Kyrgyzstan, accusing the United States of using the war in Afghanistan as an excuse to overthrow Central Asia's undemocratic governments, are being published in mainstream newspapers.

The military aid that Karimov's new-found status as friend of the United States has brought his regime is another source of disquiet and suspicion among Uzbekistan's neighbors. Deeply distrustful of Russian intentions, Karimov consistently has looked westward for the recognition and support he needs in his efforts to consolidate his position at the head of the five states. Some fear where his ambition might lead once he is in control, thanks to U.S. largesse, of the best-equipped army in Central Asia.

The Putin administration has given its full support to operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov characterized the opening of Central Asian air bases to the U.S. military as

"absolutely normal," although when asked whether this move by the United States served as a pretext for promoting its geo-strategic and energy interests, Ivanov noted that "the answer must come from the USA."^[13] Russia has been looking for ways to increase its presence in the region through existing alliances such as the CIS and trade agreements. Russia's options at this point, however, are limited. It does not have the economic power to counter the military and humanitarian aid with which the United States is able to soften any possible stigma of cooperation. With its own military badly under-funded, in increasing disarray due to lack of reform, and tied down in the endless Chechen war, Russia may find its importance in the CIS military alliance weakened if some of its allies come to depend on a long-term U.S. presence for their security.

China's leaders also have been forging strong economic ties with the Central Asian states over many years, and have launched a crackdown against what they are calling Islamic extremists in the Chinese regions bordering Central Asia. Although Beijing has given the Bush administration its support in the war on terrorism, Chinese officials have expressed their alarm over the rapidly expanding U.S. military presence in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, and openly question what plans the United States might have for the region's future.

In the end, regional relations and balancing in Central Asia and with Russia will depend on how long U.S. and NATO troops stay on Central Asian soil, and whether the new ties being forged by Washington with the region's governments will include permanent bases and security guarantees. Any effort to bring democratic and economic reforms to the region will require the will to make what could be an indefinite commitment of aid and support to countries few Americans had heard of before September 11. Another factor, over which the United States has even less control, is whether its troops' presence will make its hosts targets of the terrorists. A bomb or airplane strike directed at U.S. installations near Bishkek, for example, could throw any system of alliances the U.S. might forge into chaos. In such a case, it is unlikely that Russia would stand calmly by.

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