

Touting Reform in Central Asia

Fear of regional instability sparks cooperation

Samarkand, Bukhara, Merv, Tashkent and Osh are ancient cities of the Silk Road with histories dating back thousands of years. Residents of these cities have seen numerous empires come and go throughout history and now belong to nation-states carved out of the former Soviet Union: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. Since the collapse of the U.S.S.R. in 1991, these nations have worked to establish national identities as part of the larger international community. Now, Central Asia scholars are increasingly concerned that this resource-rich and geopolitically sensitive region could become a hotbed of failed states that never sufficiently evolved following independence.

The European Union and NATO have expressed an interest in aiding Central Asian states to establish stable, secure, free and prosperous societies. Former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice wrote in *The Washington Post*: “Weak and failing states serve as global pathways that facilitate the spread of pandemics, the movement of criminals and terrorists, and the proliferation of the world’s most dangerous weapons.” This statement is still true today.

Local problems, international impact

An unstable and failing Central Asia threatens Europe and the world. The region, which borders on Afghanistan to the south, has seen violent Islamist groups, most notably the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, or IMU, and the Islamic Jihad Union, or IJU. The IMU and IJU have been affiliated with al-Qaida and the Taliban. As recently as November 2010, Tajik security forces were engaged in operations against alleged IMU extremists in the Rasht Valley following the escape of several high-profile militants from a prison in the capital of Dushanbe.

Cooperation among the region’s governments, and support from the EU and neighboring powers such as Russia and China, could help stabilize the region and promote economic growth. The issue provides territory whereby Russia and the West can cooperate after decades of Cold War rivalry. While the objective is significant, the road is strewn with obstacles.

Border conflict

As in Kyrgyzstan, regional ethnic tensions have inhibited cooperation among Central Asian governments. These tensions can be traced to the creation of Central Asian Soviet republics in 1924 when, in the words of *The Economist*, “Stalin divided it into a patchwork of states whose borders were designed to fracture races and smash nationalism. He succeeded in preventing ethnic groups from uniting against him, and also in ensuring that each state is a hotbed of ethnic rivalry.”

Natural resources are a primary source of friction among governments, and allocation of water rights has been the most divisive. Agriculture in this semi-arid region requires irrigation and water management. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan possess Soviet era reservoirs that farmers downstream in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan depend on. “The Soviet command

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Workers from Russian energy company LUKOIL inspect pipes at the Khauzak gas field, 350 km northwest of Bukhara, Uzbekistan. The field is part of a project that is expected to contribute one fifth of Uzbekistan’s gas output.

economy would order the upstream countries to collect water in their dams to be released downstream in spring and summer during irrigation periods. In return, the downstream countries rich in fossil fuels (especially gas, oil and coal) were ordered to provide the upstream countries with these natural resources and electricity, which they did not possess,” explains Umida Hashimova in the *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*.

The Soviet successor states have struggled to come to terms over use of these resources, and the situation became

more complex when Uzbekistan left the regional electricity network in December 2009. According to Erica Marat of the Jamestown Foundation, Uzbekistan uses gas exports to pressure the upstream countries, charging market prices unaffordable to their poorer neighbors. To offset higher costs, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan want to build more hydroelectric dams. Uzbekistan strongly opposes new dams, worried about water shortages during the summer. Kazakhstan has taken the lead in supporting regional energy cooperation and has supported increasing Tajik and Kyrgyz energy independence

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— Yevgeny Bendersky
Eurasian affairs analyst



Ethnic Uzbek refugees wait at the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border outside Suratash in June 2010. Uzbekistan closed its border to prevent a mass exodus of refugees fleeing clashes between rival groups in Kyrgyzstan.

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and measures to build an electricity grid that bypasses Uzbekistan, if necessary. And if a new gas field in Tajikistan meets expectations, the country could become energy independent by the end of 2011.

The energy riches of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan provide economic opportunities not readily available to their poorer neighbors. Their energy resources also underline the importance of establishing a stable and secure political and economic environment. According to *World Politics Review*, the region is “estimated to contain as much as 250 billion barrels of recover-

able oil, boosted by more than 200 billion barrels of potential reserves. That’s aside from up to 328 trillion cubic feet of recoverable natural gas.” Western Europe hopes to ship plentiful Central Asian gas through the Nabucco pipeline, which bypasses Russia and reduces European dependence on Russian gas supplier Gazprom.

While Central Asian governments view one another with suspicion, the IMU and other pan-Islamic extremists view the entire region as their territory and exploit the lack of interstate cooperation to operate across borders. The IMU has conducted attacks in Uzbekistan,

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Drug smugglers also take advantage of porous borders. A report from the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime says that lack of cooperation between Central Asian law enforcement agencies also hurts the fight against narcotics trafficking: “Combating illicit drug trafficking requires well-organized systems of information collection, processing and analysis, as well as the exchange of the final information product among agencies involved at national and regional levels. Unfortunately, major deficiencies in intelligence collection and sharing continue to hamper effective policing of Central Asia’s borders with Afghanistan.”

Engaging the region

For Western nations, the importance of stability and security in Central Asia can create policy conflict. How should governments that strongly espouse democracy, freedom and openness relate to the authoritarian regimes of the region? Some proponents of democracy think the West compromises itself by supporting repressive, authoritarian regimes, even if stability created by those regimes increases trade and investment, curtails drug trafficking and forestalls the spread of Islamic extremism. A second school of thought prefers a strategy of engagement: The West provides training and resources to Central Asian governments while encouraging democratic reforms.

Some argue that liberal democracy is alien to the culture of Central Asia. On Eurasianet.org, Eurasian affairs analyst Yevgeny Bendersky wrote: “Historically, autocratic rulers have governed the lands of Central Asia. Tribal and clan connections still play a significant role in the political, social and economic interactions amongst the populations, but are now effectively utilized to maintain the ruling elite in power, not to successfully mobilize any significant opposition.” Kazakh political scientist Marat Shibutov sees President Nursultan



A Kyrgyz man votes at a polling station in the city of Osh during a referendum on a new constitution in June 2010. The constitution approved by voters makes Kyrgyzstan the first parliamentary democracy in Central Asia.



Soldiers from a Kazakh air-assault brigade deploy after landing in the final round of the Interaction-2010 military drills held by the Collective Security Treaty Organization at the Chebarkul training ground in Russia.

Uzbekistan, according to Eurasianet.org. Officials are touting improved relations and “continue to encourage the Uzbek authorities to address significant human rights concerns.” The U.S. Department of Defense estimates that the NDN will stimulate economic growth and “has the potential to one day reconnect Central Asia to India, Pakistan, and other formerly closed markets, in a direct land route from the heart of Asia to the heart of Europe.”

The Central Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone, or CANWFZ, is an example of the benefits of regional cooperation and engagement by the international community. Signed in September 2006, the CANWFZ “is the first nuclear-weapon-free zone located entirely in the northern hemisphere,” the International Atomic Energy Agency said. It “forbids the development, manufacture, stockpiling, acquisition or possession of any nuclear explosive device within the zone,” and commits signatory nations to meet international standards for security at nuclear facilities and to comply with the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty,

Nazerbayev “as the only thing holding Kazakhstan together” and thinks that citizens are far more concerned with economic security than political freedoms, according to *Der Spiegel*. However, others argue that while an authoritarian government may give the impression of stability, these regimes are fragile and can crumble under extreme stress.

Recognizing the importance of NATO operations in Afghanistan and the continued development of Central Asian states into modern democracies, NATO announced in November 2010 that it plans to expand security cooperation. The quantity of equipment and supplies shipped through the Northern Distribution Network, or NDN, will increase substantially with 98 percent transiting through

reducing the risk of nuclear smuggling.

Organizations such as the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Institute, which also includes China, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan and Mongolia, are also making progress in promoting a cooperative multinational environment in the region. Most of the Central Asian states are also members of the Chinese-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization. Increasing engagement and cooperation between NATO and the EU and governments and organizations in the region promise to increase security by inhibiting the spread of terrorism and narcotics trafficking while helping Central Asian states stabilize and transition into modern democracies. □