

# Central Asia's Stability and Russia's Security

Dmitri Trenin

November 2000

PONARS Policy Memo 168

Carnegie Moscow Center

In August 2000, as in 1999, Islamic rebels tested the strength of Central Asian government forces. Kyrgyzstan was badly hit again; what is more, Uzbek soldiers struggled to battle the insurgents just 70 kilometers from Tashkent, the nation's capital. At about the same time, the Taliban (a radical Islamist group) almost succeeded in taking control of Afghanistan, dealing a heavy blow to the Northern Alliance (the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan)--its greatest opponent. Next year, a new invasion is feared. With the situation in Chechnya at an impasse, and the Arab-Israeli peace process in the Middle East in tatters, what does this mean for international security, and in particular for Russia and the United States?

Landlocked and poor despite all the natural riches of the Caspian, Central Asia could be described as an intersection where all of Eurasia's backyards meet. Called the continent's "black hole" by Zbigniew Brzezinski, it presents a major concentration of socio-political combustible material, which could be released in a constellation of rebellions and armed conflicts, as recent outbursts indicate. The problem, however, is that both in Russia and in the West these developments are usually viewed from the perspective of crisis management, calling for predominantly military solutions. This is a major analytical flaw--one that is waiting to turn into a political disaster. This memo attempts to analyze the nature of the conflicts threatening Central Asia, assess Russia's policies in response to them, and explore the potential for cooperation between the United States and Russia.

## **International Terrorism or Internal Conflict?**

Ten years after the dissolution of the USSR, all five of the former Soviet republics of the region--Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan--are weak or even (in the case of the latter two) failing states. The trend is discouraging: all are growing weaker as post-Soviet inertia is wearing off, and more could fail. Most disturbingly, Kyrgyzstan--the showcase of democracy in the region--has come dangerously close to the brink of division, even disintegration. Differences among the five have become more pronounced, but the nation-building process has not produced any tangible results. Inter-ethnic and interstate rivalries are coming to the fore, while internal cohesion is lacking. As a result, the status quo, which has so far been supported by default, is being challenged in a serious way. It is a cardinal mistake to ascribe this to some external aggression by the "forces of international terrorism:" the sources of these problems lie much closer to home--as they do in Chechnya and Dagestan, for that matter.

In Central Asia, the degree of economic contraction and social hardship is staggering. In their first post-independence decade, Tajikistan lost two thirds of its GDP; Turkmenistan, just under one half; Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, two fifths. Uzbekistan, which according to official statistics has managed with only a relatively small dip (around 10%) offers a startling picture of a country where, according to an independent outside observer, the bulk of the working people earn between \$2.5-\$9 per month, with \$15 considered a good salary, and \$25-30 very good indeed. Taking account of the average number of dependents per family, the per capita monthly income amounts to just under \$3. Even taking account of the informal safety net, this is a major drop in comparison to late Soviet standards.

This abject poverty of the majority of Central Asia's populations is part of a pattern that includes ruthless authoritarian clan rule, the opulent wealth of the "first families," pervasive official corruption, and government incompetence. With Tajikistan's 1990-97 civil war serving as a demonstration case, the ruling elites (particularly in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan), have concluded that political freedom is destabilizing, and that political Islam represents mortal danger. Thus, they have made sure that their political opponents are either in jail or in exile. Even the purportedly democratic Kyrgyzstan has resorted to political hardball in an effort to eliminate all credible opposition to President Askar Akayev in the run-up to his 2000 re-election. Moreover, there have been attempts, as in Uzbekistan in 1998, to clamp down on religion by closing mosques and medressahs. All this makes one draw uneasy--and not too far-fetched--parallels with the Shah's Iran.

Ethnic strife, heretofore dormant with the exception of the 1990 riots, is again rearing its head in the countries where state borders follow the inter-republican lines arbitrarily drawn by Stalin in 1924-25. Particularly explosive is the triangular relationship among Uzbeks, Tajiks, and the Kyrgyz, who form sizeable minorities in each other's countries, and share the fertile and overpopulated Fergana valley. In addition to the long-fragmented Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan has been afflicted by the regional separatism of its southern provinces, which threatens to split the country.

Difficult ethnic relations in the region are exacerbated by interstate rivalries. Uzbekistan, with roughly half the region's 50-million population, has been trying to assert its preponderance, if not domination, which is provoking resistance from the smaller states. Since 1998, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have almost openly supported and protected each other's rebel formations. The Tajik government's tacit support for the Uzbek Islamic rebels in 2000 was a far more important factor than any involvement by the Taliban. Kyrgyzstan, which owns most of the water resources of the region, has been threatening to cut off water supplies to its neighbors if they do not take into account Bishkek's interests.

Last but not least, the collapse of the Soviet-era economy has greatly stimulated the production and trafficking of drugs from Afghanistan via Central Asia to Russia and Europe. The Russian border guards in Tajikistan can barely cope with the situation. Production of drugs inside Tajikistan, i.e., behind Russian lines, is growing: from 1992-

2000, Russian border guards in Tajikistan seized about 10 tons of drugs, including 1 ton of heroin.

It would be wrong to suggest that Russia and the West are not aware of these facts, but they tend to look at Central Asia through their global or quasi-global prism, virtually ignoring the facts on the ground. Thus, Moscow willingly accepts the Central Asian states' perception of threats as largely externally driven, because it wants to remain the principal arbiter in the region, does not have a recipe to resolve the domestic problems, and would abhor taking sides in interstate disputes. In addition, Moscow has fallen victim to its own (false) explanation of the developments in Chechnya and the North Caucasus in general as being the work of a secretive international network of Islamic extremists.

For the Russian national security professionals now in charge of the nation's policy--President Vladimir Putin and his Security Council secretary Sergei Ivanov--Chechnya stands for something much bigger. To paraphrase a major work of political writing, a specter is haunting the minds of Russian decision-makers, the specter of Islamic extremism. They see a plot aimed at rolling back secularism along a wide arc (or front) stretching from Kosovo across the Caucasus and Central Asia all the way to the Philippines. This phrase, first used by General Vladislav Sherstyuk, a deputy secretary of the Russian Security Council, was subsequently adopted by President Putin and is now being repeated by lower officials. In the words of Defense Minister Igor Sergeev, "the center of international terrorism is more and more moving to Central Asia."

The main goal of "international terrorists and religious extremists," according to Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), is the creation of several quasi-state units (in Chechnya, Dagestan, and Kokand, for example) and their subsequent inclusion in a Great Islamic caliphate. This caliphate would not only include the North Caucasus and Central Asia: Astrakhan, Ufa and Kazan are believed to be likely candidates for subversion and eventual takeover. Thus, Russia will not only suffer at the edges: the territorial unity of the federation will be irrevocably compromised.

Osama bin Laden and his Al-Kaida organization are credited with being the masterminds and financiers of this plot, with the Taliban forces in Afghanistan as its supply base, training area and geographic abode. The "informal Islamic council" coordinating all subversive activities is headquartered in Kandahar. Russia regards the Taliban as a threat to regional and international security. Russian officials would now apply equally to Afghanistan General Aleksei Yermolov's famous characterization of Chechnya in the first half of the nineteenth century as "the nest of all rogues." And--one must not forget--just a little bit further afield, there is nuclear-capable and missile-armed, and somewhat politically unstable Pakistan with its first "Islamic bomb."

In this line of thinking, elimination of the buffer zone between the Taliban-controlled territory and Tajikistan would destabilize the latter and pose a direct threat to Uzbekistan. In turn, the fall of Uzbekistan would initiate a domino reaction across the region, eventually precipitating the collapse of Kazakhstan with its 6 million ethnic Slavs--

roughly one-third of the population--and a 7,500-kilometer-long undefended and virtually indefensible border with Russia.

The fact that Russia does not have a natural barrier--or even properly functioning borders--anywhere along its southern flank is especially troubling, enhancing the perception of vulnerability vis-à-vis "Muslim terrorists." Augmenting this perception is the revival of Islam inside Russia itself, where some 13% of the population is Muslim, and where the so-called Islamic enclaves (such as Tatarstan and Bashkortostan) almost form a contiguous territory with the broader Islamic world via Kazakhstan. The acuteness of this perception makes it harder for Russian leaders to figure out their post-imperial relationship with the Muslim world both inside and outside of Russia's borders.

To be sure, there is an external factor--financial and logistical support for Islamic rebels. The Russian government estimates the scale of outside funding of Islamist extremist activities in the first 9 months of 2000 at \$1.3 billion. The sources of the present trouble, however, are largely domestic. Whereas the revival of Islam is an inevitable product of the "retraditionalization" of Central Asian societies, the rise of political-religious extremism is being helped by the failure of the region's governments to offer a positive alternative.

There is no question that Russia is facing a "present danger;" its nature, however, is unclear. The official view of the nature of the threat and of the trends at work in Central Asia is distorted. Russian elites' self-image as the last barrier between civilization and barbarity, and a would-be savior of Europe is not merely wrong; it is openly provocative and highly dangerous. For the past 20 years, Russian soldiers have been fighting only one sort of enemy, the Muslim resistance fighter/rebel/terrorist. At least two of the fateful decisions to intervene, in Afghanistan in 1979 and in Chechnya in 1994, were subsequently conceded to be major blunders. As a result, over 20,000 Russian servicemen have died: according to official statistics, 13,500 in Afghanistan (1979-89); about 4,000 in the first Chechen war (1994-96); about 3,000 in the first 15 months of the second Chechen war (1999- ); and about 200 in Tajikistan (1992-). They continue to die in Chechnya even after the official end of the "war phase" of the operation. In this context, "getting Central Asia wrong" may lead to very heavy losses and large-scale instability.

### **Stability-Building or Neo-Imperialist Designs?**

Throughout the 1990s, Russia's policy in Central Asia has been rather incoherent: virtual abandonment, phony integration, and geopolitical competition. Under Vladimir Putin, it has become more consolidated, and runs roughly along two tracks. The first track is the pursuit of economic opportunities, first of all in the fuel and energy sector. Here, Kazakhstan is by far the principal factor. The second track of Russian policy is shoring up regional stability by means of buffer-building. There, Tajikistan represents Russia's forward position and Kyrgyzstan the flank, with Kazakhstan again being of vital importance. However, it is independent-minded Uzbekistan that is the strategic linchpin

and the pivot of the region. Common to both tracks is the desire to keep the Central Asian states within Moscow's orbit, and to minimize, to the extent possible, outside influence in the region.

Thus, Russia has been trying, with fanfare if without much success, to tie Central Asia to itself through economic cooperation projects. The Customs Union of Russia, Belarus, and three Central Asian allies (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) was upgraded in October 2000 to a Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC). Moscow seeks to reaffirm Turkmenistan's reliance on the Russian pipeline network for its gas exports. Even though the post-Soviet economies find it hard to cooperate in a meaningful way, hope rests on directing oil and gas pipeline routes through Russia and building a network of Trans-Eurasian transport connections.

Russia has been far more active in the field of security and defense. It keeps forces in Tajikistan in a state of high combat readiness, holds regular joint exercises with Central Asian armies (e.g., 10,000 troops participated in the Southern Shield exercise in April 2000), and supplies arms and equipment to its three nominal allies. Russia has been seeking to reinvigorate the 1992 Collective Security Treaty through frequent consultations at the level of defense chiefs and security council secretaries. In addition, bilateral security and defense relations are being solidified with each of the allies, and with Uzbekistan.

In Moscow's policies, geopolitical logic is overriding. Similar to the pragmatic states of the West, but with fewer compunctions, it puts stability before democracy and human rights. The minimal goal is to preserve Central Asia as a buffer zone between Russia and the forces of militant Islam. Proactive officials would add to it the strengthening of Russian political influence, which has suffered at the hands of the West and China. Now Moscow wants to capitalize on the area in which the West has been found wanting--large-scale security assistance. Typically, Russian geopoliticians continue to see the Central Asian states as objects rather than subjects of international relations.

### **Russia's Policies**

Russia's preoccupation with international terrorism is deforming Moscow's policies toward Central Asia, which are marked by excessive militarization. To be sure, in 2000 there is an element of urgency about the whole situation, but all too often military force is being considered where the issues at stake are predominantly socio-economic and political. Too little thought is being given to non-military means, such as influencing the policies of the friendly (if autocratic) regimes in place, coming to grips with the trafficking of drugs, and engaging the constructive opposition, as well as moderate Islamic circles. Instead, the Defense Ministry is usually in the lead on policymaking.

Russia's assets in this field, however, are very limited. The Russian military presence in the area is relatively small. The 201st division in Tajikistan, some 8,000 men strong and once charged with a "peacekeeping" mission, has been upgraded to a permanent military

base. However, it stands very isolated, alongside the 15,000 Russian-led, but overwhelmingly Tajik-manned border guards. The Russians are completely dependent on Tajik food, fuel and electricity supplies, none of which are assured despite Dushanbe's utter reliance on Russian aid. Russian border guards had to leave Kyrgyzstan in 1999, and at the same time Turkmenistan decided it would control its borders with Iran and Afghanistan independently. Even at the height of the Taliban scare, Moscow failed to receive Tashkent's permission for establishing a military presence in Uzbekistan. In Kazakhstan, this presence is confined to non-combat personnel servicing the Baikonur space launch center and the remaining test ranges, plus a border guards liaison team.

The capability for Russian force projection is virtually nonexistent at this time. In mid-2000, the Russian General Staff decided to place a 50,000-strong rapid deployment corps near the Russo-Kazakhstani border to be used to intervene in an emergency anywhere in Central Asia, but this will take considerable amounts of time and money. With Russian airlift capabilities remaining severely limited for the foreseeable future, sending troops in by rail will be the only realistic option. Russia's power projection capabilities include its fleet of medium-range bombers and operational-tactical missiles that can be used to make good Moscow's threats to wipe out the Taliban camps in Afghanistan used for training Chechen and Central Asian insurgents. The verbal threats to that effect, first made in the spring of 2000, were intended as a deterrent, but could in fact contribute to the widening of the conflict.

Russia's nominal allies in Central Asia have small, ill-equipped and poorly trained armies and air forces, which can engage assorted gangs of terrorists, but which are no match for the battle-hardened forces of the Taliban. More seriously, the Central Asian states themselves have widely diverging views on the strategic situation in the region, which presents Russia with a major problem.

These differences were already quite evident at the beginning of the so-called peacekeeping (which was really peace-enforcement) operation in Tajikistan in 1993. Despite the officially multilateral nature of the intervention, Moscow had to act single-handedly, with Kazakhstan passive and Uzbekistan suspicious. In 1995, the Uzbek battalion withdrew from the Collective Force, followed in 1998-99 by the Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan contingents. Uzbekistan also stopped financing the operation in 1996, and the other two states are running debts. Eventually, Russia was successful in helping to bring the civil war in Tajikistan to a close in 1997, and managing national reconciliation. Nation- and state-building in that country, however, continues to be a daunting task. Tajikistan is being run by regionally-based clans who, since peace was proclaimed, have profited enormously from the drug trade. For its part, Russia chooses to close its eyes to the true scale of the drug problem in the allied country, which was admitted in 1998 to the Customs Union (now renamed EAEC), and whose citizens are likely to continue enjoying visa-free travel to Russia.

Now Tajikistan, Moscow's main military ally and the host country for its forces in the area, is regarded by Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan as the base of insurgents operating in their own countries, with at least part of the Tajik government in cahoots with them. (The

Southern Shield-2000 exercise scenario had the rebels attacking from Afghanistan, whereas in fact they attacked from Tajikistan four months later.) So far, Russia has been unable to reconcile its allies and partners. Moscow's relations with Tashkent are ambivalent: Uzbekistan is considered to be the principal target of the terrorist international, yet its regional ambitions are worrying Russia and are impinging on the interests of its allies. In extremis, Uzbekistan would be in dire need of outside military assistance, which can only come from Moscow; at the same time, it will not accept Russia's tutelage. Faced with a difficult choice, President Karimov in the fall of 2000 began talking with the Taliban, while Russia continues to threaten them with preventive strikes and demonstrates its support for the Northern Alliance. Kazakhstan generally takes a more relaxed attitude. Turkmenistan, being formally neutral, does not participate in CIS political and military activities, and maintains regular contacts with the Taliban. A common Central Asia political front led by Russia, endowed with a powerful military wing, is thus an illusion.

The Russians, however, have been trying to rally all those who oppose the Taliban. For several years, Moscow has been seeking to rein in the Taliban with the help of the Northern Alliance, led by Burkhannudin Rabbani, Ahmad Shah Massoud and Abdul Rashid Dostum, whose troops secured the buffer zone between Russo-Tajik and Taliban forces. The fear of a Taliban invasion of Central Asia has been a recurrent and often shrill theme with many members of the Russian establishment since 1996, when General Aleksandr Lebed sounded an alarm over their "impending invasion." Later this theme was expanded to include the flow of refugees from the northern buffer zone occupied by the Taliban. So far, Russia's involvement has included sending arms and supplies to the front-line states, and providing technical and diplomatic support for the Northern Alliance. Russia has been attempting to build a common diplomatic front against the Taliban with the help of America, Iran, China, and India. It has also tried to engage Pakistan as a means of indirect pressure on Afghanistan. It is now evident that there is more to come.

The Taliban has virtually been designated as an enemy. In August 2000, Marshal Sergeyev advocated "rendering genuine assistance" (emphasis added) to Central Asian states against a "common enemy" and forging a new Russia-led alliance. In October 2000, Sergeyev made public his meeting with Massoud (from the Northern Alliance). A regional security system, complete with a coalition command structure, is envisaged. At some point, Russian military advisers and technicians may join Central Asian forces. This road leads to escalation of direct Russian involvement: a second front is being created. It may happen that at a certain moment the Russian leadership will suddenly realize it has nothing but tactical nuclear weapons to stop the tide of a radical Islamist offensive. This is a nightmare scenario which must serve as a warning against overinvolvement. Political means are much more practical. Sensing this and fully aware of the weakness of its allies and clients in the region, Moscow is looking for allies beyond Central Asia.

## **Russia and America: From Rivals to Allies?**

For a decade, Russian officials have held a generally suspicious view of US policies in Central Asia and Afghanistan. While Washington has declared that it only sought to make sure Kazakhstan was nuclear-free and that the other "stans" generally followed the path toward a free market and democratization, Moscow believed that--same as in the nearby Caspian region--America's real agenda was displacing Russia as the region's hegemon. In this context, Uzbekistan's accession to GUAM (a relatively pro-Western group of post-Soviet states with common security concerns: Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova) in 1999 was taken as a major development designed to promote "bipolarity" inside the CIS.

However, Moscow's preoccupation with international terrorism in the wake of the second Chechen war and the change in Washington's attitude toward the Taliban as a result of the 1998 embassy bombings have laid the ground for increased US-Russian cooperation on Afghanistan. Following the joint statement on Afghanistan of the 2000 Moscow summit, a working group was established that has been holding regular meetings ever since. Russia took part in US-promoted peacekeeping exercises in Central Asia. These are encouraging developments, which have the potential to quell mutual geopolitically-motivated suspicions and foster genuine cooperation between the two countries.

Still, one should not think that this nascent cooperation is enough to bring stability to Central Asia. First, as has been noted, the sources of conflict are largely internal, not exported from Afghanistan. Second, military assistance and the use of military force against "terrorists" can only achieve limited results. Third, there is no common understanding of who is to be considered a terrorist.

It is even more important to note that any cooperation is likely to be very limited. The US is seeking to reduce, rather than enhance, its involvement in Central Asian affairs. There is a new mood in the United States to step aside and let Russia tackle the difficult issues as it sees fit in an effort to bring a measure of stability to the area. But the Russians shouldn't be overjoyed. Moscow's actions--even directed at achieving goals the US generally shares--can at times evoke protests and condemnation from American public opinion. More to the point, Washington is not Moscow's only partner in the region. Russia's progressively more intimate contacts with China and especially Iran could reawaken latent American suspicions about Russia's ultimate policy goals.

## **In Lieu of a Conclusion**

Bowing out of any involvement in Central Asia is not an option for Russia. However, enthusiastically opening a second front against "international terrorism" would be a major blunder, and one not easily remedied. Russia's truly vital interests in the region are limited to the stability and cohesion of Kazakhstan, which Moscow must help foster by all means available. Elsewhere, Russia needs to find a way to assist the Central Asians in addressing the causes of Islamic extremism, not just the symptoms. Finding a place for



Islam, a role for the political opposition, and integrating both will be crucial in isolating the extremists and restoring stability.

© PONARS 2000