

CENTRAL ASIA AFTER 2014

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Editor

The papers collected here were presented at the Fourth annual Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) conference on Russia in May 2012. They focus largely, though not exclusively, on the interactions of the great powers in, about, and around Central Asia. That said, it is imperative that anyone trying to make sense of the complex situation in Central Asia remember that the contemporary or new great game is not played upon a chessboard of inert Central Asian subjects, as was the case in Kipling's time. Today the Central Asian states are all active subjects, as well as objects of international action, and are perfectly capable of attempting, even successfully, to shape the interactions of great powers and foreign institutions upon their politics.¹ As a result, today's version of the new great game is a multidimensional and multi-player game that is played simultaneously on many "chessboards."

Furthermore, that game is about to change dramatically and substantively. The United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have already begun preparations to withdraw from Afghanistan. Beyond that, U.S. funding for Central Asia as a whole, probably in anticipation of long-term constrained budgets, has also begun to fall.² Since U.S. strategy in Central Asia has been officially presented as essentially an adjunct to the war in Afghanistan, these emerging trends oblige the United States to formulate a new, less militarily-oriented strategy for the entire region—one that sees the region simultaneously in both its integrity and diversity. For

many reasons, doing so will present a difficult challenge to U.S. military-political leaders. These difficulties include the actions of external players like Russia and China, among others, and are not confined solely to U.S. interaction with Central Asia. Indeed, as the papers included here show, the complexities of foreign interaction with Central Asia are both intensifying and accelerating, obligating the United States to realign its regional strategy and policy.

That strategy has been primarily focused on the military requirements of defeating the Taliban as a prelude to winning the war in Afghanistan. That outcome would, in turn, serve as the basis for stabilizing Afghanistan internally and then providing for the stabilization of the adjacent states of Central Asia, whose regional cooperation with Afghanistan is vital to its security and theirs after 2014.³ These states possess limited resources with which to help bring Afghanistan to a more secure condition after 2014, though they are making contributions to that end. However, the impending drawdown of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and U.S. forces, plus widespread skepticism as to the staying power of the Karzai regime after that drawdown, repeatedly leads their governments to warn that Afghanistan's and their future is, to some degree, at considerable risk.⁴ While some of these statements are fearmongering to increase pressure upon foreign donors to assist them, their fears are real enough, and they are certainly not groundless.

At present, it is clear that the U.S. military is planning to leave some forces behind, though the precise number and status of those forces is as yet undecided, and it is difficult to imagine the United States simply turning over five large air bases to Afghanistan. The Pentagon and the government are also busy setting up training and advisory facilities with Central Asian governments. There is a widespread assumption that if Kyrgyzstan terminates the U.S. lease upon the Manas Air Base in 2014, the United States has a so-called "Plan B" up its sleeve, namely the establishment of a military base or rapid response center in Uzbekistan that would permit a U.S. presence, though of undisclosed size, in Central Asia and give Uzbekistan added leverage against Russian pressure to subordinate Uzbekistan to Russian preferences.⁵ Indeed, many Central Asian governments have approached the United States for bases for precisely this purpose, as well as for defense against the Taliban since 2001, but to no avail.⁶ Moreover, there is an equally widespread expectation of a future civil war outside of the U.S. military command and a gathering number of critiques of a U.S. strategy that critics feel has been misconceived for a long time.⁷

Yet at the same time, these states' requests for a U.S. presence, military or otherwise, triggers widespread fears among major powers like Russia and China that the United States is seeking to establish some sort of military protectorate or sphere of influence in the region or to balance or even oust them. Since local states, like all other Third World governments, are exceedingly sensitive to anything that even remotely looks like "neo-colonialism," reports of these facilities in their media frequently trigger exactly the same accusations against U.S. policies, not only in Moscow or in Beijing, but also among some Central Asian regimes.⁸ Alternatively, a sizable U.S. presence could attract Taliban attention and make a state like Uzbekistan a target of both military and political action against the current regime and that accompanying U.S. presence.⁹ In that case, indigenous Uzbek anti-regime elements or Uzbek and other Central Asian terrorists affiliated with the Taliban and/or al-Qaeda could then use Afghanistan as a springboard for such at-

tacks. Simultaneously, Russia and China are not only pouring resources of their own into Central Asia, but they are also trying to set up binding arrangements that would, in fact, subordinate those governments to their regional and genuinely neo-colonial aspirations in this part of the world. Geir Flikke's and Richard Weitz's papers clearly show this pattern of increased capability to project influence into Central Asia, a heightened sensitivity and rivalry between them concerning each other's activities here, and simultaneously their joint and united opposition to any sign of an enhanced U.S. presence, especially a military one.

Moreover, as budget constraints take hold and will do so for years to come, it will be increasingly difficult for the U.S. Government and any of the U.S. forces, but especially the Army, to maintain a credible and enduring strategic presence in Central Asia since military bases clearly provide a major entrée for the United States into Central Asia.¹⁰ The absence of a coherent U.S. strategy or resources or truly sustainable presence in Central Asia greatly impedes the possibility of deploying the kinds of forces that the Army wants to build, i.e., an Army that is "globally engaged and capable of rapidly employing scalable force packages from the smallest to the largest depending on the demands of the situation."¹¹ Under such circumstances, at least as far as potential future crises in Central Asia are concerned, it will also become progressively more difficult, if not beyond American capabilities, to adhere to the injunctions of key U.S. strategy documents insofar as they pertain to this region. Under conditions of withering financial stringency that have only just begun and given the foreseeable strategic realities in Central Asia, including Afghanistan, in 2014, and the wisdom embodied in Frederick the Great's timeless admonition that he who seeks to defend against everything ends by defending nothing, it is hard to see exactly how the United States thinks it can project and sustain military force into Central Asia for any length of time after 2014 if necessary and to what kind of coherent strategic purpose it can do so.

Under these circumstances, and assuming that we still think Central Asia is of sufficient strategic importance to pursue strategic interests there by

direct force, the endlessly reiterated Army argument that the Army must be ready for operations that span the entire range of military operations is a recipe for deploying a force capable only of tactical proficiency at the expense of strategic insight and capability.¹² In fact, all we may be capable of sustaining in Central Asia is a robust security assistance program. While that concept is moving to the fore under combined fiscal and strategic realities, it also implies that should there be another major crisis there, we might have to walk away because we lack the capability to project and sustain credible forces in that theater or for lack of a definable vital interest.¹³ Arguably, statements or policies implying that not only will the United States remain in Central Asia but that it can also prepare for and sustain forces capable of spanning the whole range of military operations there are, in the current fiscal and political climate, the antithesis of strategic thinking and literally inconceivable. This is another way of saying that, absent the investment and/or sponsorship of other parties' investments in Central Asia and Afghanistan after 2014, commensurate with the region's real challenges that are largely economic and political in character, neither the U.S. military nor the government has a viable strategy for the area.¹⁴ Neither private U.S. organizations nor the U.S. Government are investing nearly enough to reckon with those economic political challenges, and talk of the Silk Road remains just that—talk, since the funding for it is not being allocated.¹⁵

While U.S. Army programs probably should concentrate after 2014 on enhancing security cooperation in all its multifarious forms, as described in the literature on the subject, with Central Asian militaries that are willing to do so, the real issue is whether the administration and Congress will make a formal policy decision, as embodied not in rhetoric but in actual allocations and policies, that a robust and multidimensional private and public U.S. presence in Central Asia is in America's vital interest. Central Asian governments value the U.S. presence highly and want it to continue. They certainly want more investment or use of Washington's power to convene and leverage other institutions, be they private, public, or multilateral, to invest in key sectors like

infrastructure, transportation, water, and communications. Those are among the real deeply rooted challenges to security in Central Asia and are sectors where U.S. and other foreign investments could make a real difference.

But for that kind of outcome to ensue, Washington must make it clear to both domestic and foreign interlocutors that it considers Central Asia a critical zone and vigorously intends to sustain its presence there. And that is not happening.¹⁶ The failure to do so will only stimulate local governments to continue to be anti-liberal and repressive, if not incapable of contending with their massive governance challenges. This failure will also leave a vacuum behind that Moscow and Beijing will try to fill. Others like India, Pakistan, Iran, and even possibly Turkey will also try to do so, but they will be handicapped relative to the governments of Russia and China because of their own relative weakness and/or absence of a viable U.S. presence. Therefore, the issue confronting the U.S. Government as a whole, and its armed forces in particular, is not the relevance of Landpower. As far as Central Asia is concerned, we neither have the resources nor the manpower to engage in a sustained long-term ground campaign there. Thus, we do not have sufficiently credible Landpower as far as Central Asian strategic outcomes are concerned. Rather, the issue is determining the extent to which Washington regards Central Asia as a critical or vital strategic region and the extent of its willingness to commit resources to implement its strategic vision or persuade others to do so in tandem with it. This should not be fundamentally a question of defense policy, though the space of enhanced security cooperation will be a key military component of that policy in peacetime, if not during local wars, unless Central Asia falls apart. Rather, the challenge is to see Central Asia as vital in its own right, not as an adjunct to Afghanistan or some other strategic design.

Since the administration has not yet accepted that Central Asia may be vital to U.S. interests and is already diminishing the resources necessary to sustain any such vision, its resources with which to execute such a strategically oriented program of action will necessarily be limited. Moreover, it is also clear that the real challenges here are not

military, and it is highly unlikely that we will send combat forces into this area again, barring a major threat to the United States and its acknowledged vital interests. It therefore becomes critical for agencies who must conduct policies here to leverage those scarce resources that are or will be available by enhancing their understanding of regional socioeconomic-political dynamics and recognizing that the fundamental challenges to regional security originate in those dynamics and not in military responses that are maladapted for responding to those problems. Hopefully, the essays collected here will contribute to that understanding.

ENDNOTES

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5. Jacob Zenn, "What Options for U.S. Influence in Central Asia After Manas?" *Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, March 6, 2013.
6. Joshua Kucera, "Tajikistan Wanted U.S. Air Base At Kulyab; Rumsfeld Gave Them Bridge Instead," *Eurasia Insight*, March 15, 2013; Ahmed Rashid, "Security vs. Reconciliation: The Afghan Conundrum," *New York Review of Books Blog*, February 13, 2012, available from www.nybooks.com/blogs/; Erica Marat, "After Winning Elections Atambayev Focuses on the US Transit Center," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, November 3, 2011; Bishkek, *Kyrgyz Television 1*, in Kyrgyz, May 2, 2012, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service-Soviet (FBIS-SOV)*, May 2, 2012.
7. Dexter Filkins, "After America," *The New Yorker*, July 9 and 16, 2002, pp. 54-67; Lewis G. Irwin, *Disjointed Ways, Disunified Means: Learning From America's Struggle to Build an Afghan Nation*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2012.
8. See, for example, Parviz Mullojonov, "USA's Strategy: A New Silk Road—Road to Nowhere," Dushanbe, *Avesta*, in Russian, February 21, 2013, *Open Source Center, FBIS SOV*, February 21, 2013.
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10. *Ibid.*
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13. John A. Nagl, "In an Era of Small Wars, U.S. Army Must Embrace Training Mission," *World Politics Review*, February 5, 2013; Daniel Wasserbly, "Panetta Seeks Investments in Regional Engagement, Partner Capacity," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, December 20, 2012, available from www.ihs.com/products/janes/defence-business/news/defence-weekly.aspx.
14. Blank, *Central Asia Perspectives*; S. Frederick Starr et al., *Finish the Job: Jump-Start Afghanistan's Economy: A Handbook of Projects*, Washington, DC, and Stockholm, Sweden: Central Asia Caucasus Institute, Silk Road Studies Program, Johns Hopkins University and the Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2012; Stephen Blank, "How Durable and Sustainable is Indo-American Cooperation in South and Central Asia?" paper presented to the SSI-Dickinson College Conference Cross-Sector Collaboration to Promote Sustainable Development, Carlisle PA, March 13, 2013.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*

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