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THE ASIAN CONNECTION:

THE NEW GEOPOLITICS OF CENTRAL EURASIA

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Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in late 1991, the geopolitical scene in the center of the Eurasian continent has altered fundamentally. The independence of five Soviet Central Asian republics, and the enduring weakness of these states created a political vacuum that external powers have ever since competed to fill. Soon after this ground-breaking development, a paradigm evolved defining Russia, Turkey and Iran as major players in the entire 'southern tier' of the former Soviet Union, that is the Caucasus and Central Asia. Russia was correctly identified as a retreating hegemonic power, whereas Turkey and Iran were seen as competitors for influence in especially the six Muslim states that gained independence, that is the Central Asian states and Azerbaijan. This paradigm, which accorded little importance to other international or regional actors, has to a large extent survived in media as well as academia.[1] However, almost ten years after the Soviet collapse, viewing Central Asia through the prism of a Turkish-Iranian-Russian triangle offers at best highly limited guidance to understanding the security and geopolitics of that region.

In the analysis of international security, the state has generally been center of analysis, with focus on the defense of territory. The result of this thinking has been an understanding that the state is the ultimate arbiter in international relations, where each state is governed by power politics, seeking to maximize its security, if necessary at the expense of other states. In many cases, this has led to an assumption that the security of one state results in the insecurity for another, and similarly it is presumed that state actors interact with each other on the basis of interests and gains. State power is generally understood as shaped by the extent of territorial control and possession of natural resources. The possession of such assets—be it presently, or formerly as in the case of European states with a colonial past—play a significant role in defining the national power, threat perceptions and security needs of individual state.

[1] An important work in this paradigm is Hooman Peimani, *Regional Security and the Future of Central Asia: The Competition of Iran, Turkey and Russia*, Westport, CN: Praeger, 1998. For a most recent example, see Robert M. Cutler, 'Russia, Turkey and Iran: An Eternal Triangle', *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 5 July 2000.

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During the Cold War, this thinking remained. In this context, the creation of five independent Central Asian states in 1991 resembled the independence from west European empires of former overseas colonies. In the case of Central Asia, the role played by Russia had been of a similar nature as other European colonial powers, playing the role of the ultimate arbiter leaving little or no space for outside interlocutors until the collapse of the Union. But accounting for the remaining Russian factor, through the 1990s the security of Central Asia has increasingly come to be linked with the areas to its southeast rather than to its southwest. Afghanistan, Pakistan and China in particular are countries that form an increasingly crucial part of Central Asian security. Conversely, the emergence of independent and unstable nations in Central Asia has considerably influenced the geopolitics of South Asia and China. Cross-border ethnic and religious links between these states are significant; moreover, ancient economic links and trade routes are being revived, increasing interaction between the regional states. But most importantly, the question of Afghanistan is a major security issue that impacts all regional states and links their security to one another. In sum, strong linkages between South Asian/Chinese and Central Asian security are emerging, the character of which is likely to have significant impact on international politics in both an Asian and a global context.

COLD WAR RELATIONS

In the aftermath of the second world war, the emerging bipolar structure of world politics resulted in what can be termed an 'overlay' of cold war politics over regional matters in most parts of the world. It was increasingly believed that the interplay between state actors and protagonists was leading to a situation where controversies at the global political level was overlapping the regional parameters of regional complexes.[2]

The concept of regional security complexes bases itself on the existence of regional groupings of states whose security are intrinsically linked to each other. Accordingly, security studies traditionally take place at the level of individual states or at the level of global politics. This approach limits the analysis, as the security of a given state is by necessity more dependent on what goes on in certain states rather than others: most often, states in the immediate neighborhood of the state in question. However, regional security complexes may at times be absorbed by politics at a higher level: this is called overlay. In Buzan's words, overlay occurs when 'one or more external powers move directly into the local complex with the effect of suppressing the indigenous security dynamic'.[3] This principle could be easily seen in play during the post-war and cold war settings. Afghanistan by the 1950s was drawn into the Soviet sphere of influence. Pakistan along with Iran and Turkey since the late 1940s had come to play a crucial role in American efforts to contain the Soviet Union, through its membership in the Baghdad pact, later renamed the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO).

Another development of the 1950s was the deterioration of previously amicable Sino-Soviet relations to the freezing point. During this time when Afghanistan and Russia had growing and ever developing relations, Iran, Turkey and China came to play lesser roles in the Central Asian sphere. None of these states enjoyed either direct or indirect relations with the republics of Central Asia during the cold war. This meant the interruption of ancient trade routes, the most famous of which being the 'Silk Road'. In fact, Central Asia's main access to the sea was historically through present-day Pakistan, but after its incorporation in the USSR and the final delimitation of Central Asia's internal borders in 1936, the region became economically linked to the Soviet planned economy, governed from Moscow. Cold war politics in this manner locked into place the security of the USSR's southern border for a considerable amount of time. Afghanistan was increasingly falling into the Soviet orbit and in conflict with Pakistan; Pakistan and Iran were on the other hand crucial US allies. But this situation changed in the I970s. The 1979 Iranian revolution deprived Washington of a crucial ally, weakening its position in Asia and the Middle East, although the new Iranian regime's relations with Moscow remained cool. Meanwhile Afghanistan slipped into instability by the mid-1970s, precipitating a Soviet military intervention in 1979 and an ensuing

[2] See Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991 for a theory of regional security complexes.

[3] Buzan, pp. 219-20.

war in which Washington and Islamabad actively supported the anti-Soviet Mujahideen forces. In effect, one could say the 'overlay' of Cold War politics over southwest Asia was curbed. Events that unfolded no longer exclusively followed global bipolarity.

By the 1980s, Pakistan had replaced Iran as the core US ally checking Soviet expansion in Asia, receiving several billion dollars in primarily military aid. Meanwhile, in large part due to their common enmity with India, close cooperation developed between Beijing and Islamabad, in particular after the 1962 Indo-Chinese war and the growing Indo-Soviet convergence of interests that effectively translated into Indo-Soviet military cooperation. The widening Sino-Soviet gap and the fear of containment by Beijing, in addition to Indo-Pakistani enmity and Sino-Indian estrangement, led to a very close relations between the two countries. In economic terms, the building of the Karakoram highway linking the two countries consolidated their cooperation. During the Afghan war Pakistan and Chinese cooperation consolidated. In the 1980s, Pakistan's close links with the Afghan Mujahideen during the war resulted in communication and transport links between the two countries. Given Afghanistan's infrastructure links with former Soviet Republics built up during the Soviet presence in Afghanistan, Pakistan was by 1991 in fact best positioned among Central Asia's possible outlets to world markets—conditional nevertheless on stability in Afghanistan, which proved elusive due to the role of external actors and stake holders in the region.

TURKEY AND IRAN: A RIVALRY THAT NEVER HAPPENED

At the Central Asian states' independence, the thesis of a Turkish-Iranian rivalry over influence in the region gained salience in press and academia. This influence among other took the shape of conflicting models for state building and development. Where Iran provided an Islamic model, Turkey exemplified a westward-looking and democratic secular nation-state with a liberal market economy. The US ardently promoted the 'Turkish model', fearing Iranian inroads into Central Asia. Tehran's influence was feared also by Israel, which moved to establish strong ties with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to counter Iran.[4] In retrospect, it seems clear that either Turkey or Iran's capacity to acquire a dominant position in Central Asia were exaggerated. Turkey's geographic distance from the region, its internal problems including the PKK rebellion and serious political instability in the mid-1990s, as well as its high inflation and economic difficulties were considerable liabilities eventually dashing Turkish hopes of acquiring a position of political leadership. Instead, in the late 1990s, while remaining engaged in Central Asia especially in the cultural and economic fields, Turkey has adopted a policy of focusing its efforts on a region much more intimately linked with its own national security: the Caucasus.[5]

As for Iran, its possibilities to influence the Central Asian republics were grossly overestimated in the early 1990s. The sectarian difference between Shi'a Iran and overwhelmingly Sunni Central Asia meant that the Iranian brand of an Islamic state could muster little appeal in Central Asian society. Moreover, the legacy of over seventy years of Soviet atheism had left a deep mark on Central Asia. Although a religious revival has, naturally, taken place, the role of Islam in the mainstream of Central Asian society is moderate. The revival of political or radical Islam has been largely a result of the economic mismanagement of the Central Asian States and the curtailment of basic fundamental rights, such as freedom to practice the respective religious rights and an intrinsic fear of political Islam.The fact that the ruling establishment in all Central Asian states hails from the communist period—and that rulers like Karimov in Uzbekistan or Niyazov in Turkmenistan had spearheaded anti-Islamic campaigns during their soviet-time tenure—implied they were for natural reasons wary of political Islam, which they saw as a direct threat to their power. In terms of their own security, both Turkey and Iran have been compelled to focus their attention to the unruly Caucasus. For Iran, the existence of an approximately 20-million strong Azerbaijani minority on its territory forces Tehran to align with Moscow in Caucasian matters. This is the case specifically due to the precedent of a 1992-93 nationalist and vaguely pan-Azerbaijani government in

[4] See Bulent Aras, 'Israel's strategy in Azerbaijan and Central Asia', *Middle East Policy*, vol. 5 no .4, 1998, pp. 68-81.

[5] Svante E. Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 200, pp. 285-318.

Baku as well as Azerbaijan' s coherently pro-American stance.[6] As far as Turkey is concerned, the Russian military presence in Armenia and the imperative of access to Azerbaijan has forced Ankara to focus its efforts on strengthening Georgian and Azerbaijani independence from Russia. Furthermore, both Turkey and Iran have other foreign policy priorities that have prevented from assigning priority to Central Asia. For Iran, the Persian Gulf remains the primary security consideration, while Turkey's attention is diverted by its relationship with Europe, as well as regional issues in the Middle East and the Balkans.

CROSS-BORDER ETHNIC LINKAGES

A major characteristic of Central Asian states is their ethnic heterogeneity; a characteristic also common to all its southern neighboring states, including Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. All Central Asian states are to varying degrees multi-ethnic, with the share of the majority population ranging from less than 50% in Kazakhstan to ca. 80% in Uzbekistan. Central Asian states have ethnic linkages to each other: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are all Turkic-speaking nations; only Tajikistan differs by its Persian ethnic and cultural roots. In addition, the political borders between these states correspond poorly to ethnic settlement patterns. Most blatant is the case of southern Uzbekistan and northern Tajikistan, which are both highly multi-ethnic and populated in comparable numbers by both ethnic groups. Such cross-border ethnic ties also, significantly, exist with Central Asia's southern neighbors. Afghanistan's role as a bridge between Central and South Asia is illustrated most clearly in its ethnic divisions. Roughly half its population consists of Pashtuns; nevertheless, more Pashtuns reside in Pakistan than in Afghanistan; likewise, Baluchs live on the territory of Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan. On the other hand, over a quarter of Afghanistan's population is composed of Tajiks, Uzbeks and Turkmens, residing in the North of the country on its border with Central Asia. As for China, its northwestern Xinjiang autonomous province is the home of the Uighurs, a Turkic people of close to 10 million people speaking a language almost identical to Uzbek. Moreover, Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities also exist in Xinjiang.

These ethnic links have a considerable impact on the security of the concerned states. Especially in an age of increased global ethnic awareness, ethnicity has become perhaps the main challenge to the security of multi-ethnic states to an extent that requires no illustration. In the last few decades, China has seen the rise of an Uighur separatist movement encouraged by the achievement of independence on the part of their close kin in Soviet Central Asia. Pakistan's erstwhile relations with Afghanistan were deeply colored by its fear of Kabul fanning the flames of separatist movements among Pashtuns and Baluchs.[7] In the last few years, the civil war in Afghanistan has taken on an increasingly ethnic character. Hence the presently dominating Taliban are, despite their religious garb, widely understood as a Pashtun movement; the Uzbeks were rallied around the warlord Abdurrahim Dostum before his defeat at the hands of the Taliban; and Northern Alliance leader Ahmed Shah Masoud's main constituency is the Tajik community. Ethnicity is unlikely to lose its political relevance in the near future, and will hence continue to shape the security considerations of all concerned states. The ethnic milieu of Afghanistan as well as those in the central Asian matrix is effected increasingly by the cross-border ethnic linkages. These linkages are at times further strengthened by geopolitical and economic interests of stakeholders and actors in the region.

CENTRAL ASIAN SECURITY AND AFGHANISTAN

The short- and medium-term security issues facing the states of Central Asia are manifold. Most center around the building of functioning nation-states integrated in the global political and economic order. This includes issues of governance and democratization, economic reforms and liberalization, and the creation of effective state apparatuses able to exercise control over the territory nominally under the government's control—for at present

[6] Svante Cornell, 'Iran and the Caucasus', *Middle East Policy*, vol. 5 no. 4, January 1998.

[7] Selig S. Harrison, *In Afghanistan's Shadow: Baluch Nationalism and Soviet Temptations*, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1981.

no Central Asian state can claim to fully control its territory. To this is added widespread criminality and rampant corruption, clan, regional, and ethnic tensions, the pervasiveness of the nomenklatura, its continued presence in the economic and political climate of these countries and the crucial issue of the eventual succession to the present authoritarian leaders.[8] These mainly internal questions are supplanted by a set of external factors. Primary among these is the export of the region's main resources—oil and natural gas—to world markets; another factor in both the internal and external realms is the challenge of radical Islamic movements to the present Central Asian regimes. These last two factors are both intimately connected to Afghanistan.

A feature evident in the term 'Central Asia' is its being landlocked. For access to the sea, Central Asia has to rely on communications through either Iran or Afghanistan and Pakistan. And as far as the drawing of oil and gas pipelines is concerned, the Iranian route suffers from several drawbacks. The first is naturally the sanctions imposed on Iran by the United States. Central Asian states are unwilling to disturb their relations with the world's lone superpower; moreover American companies play an important role in the consortia developing Caspian hydrocarbon resources, and as a result Iran is unlikely to emerge as a primary export route given the present state of US-Iran relations. Yet, Turkmenistan has been able to export smaller amounts of gas to Iran. Secondly, the merit of Caspian oil and gas lies in its geographic location above anything else. By not lying too near the Persian Gulf, Caspian oil and gas present an opportunity for importers to diversify their sources of oil, reducing reliance on the unruly Gulf. This dictates that Caspian oil and gas exports to world markets should avoid the Gulf, or risk losing their geopolitical advantage, which impedes the realization of the Iranian route. Yet the largest increase in oil demand is likely to come from emerging markets in Asia. Economic development in South and Southeast Asia is scheduled to radically increase oil and gas demand in the coming decades; hence it is only logical that at least one main export pipeline should go to Asia, in addition to westward-going pipelines from the Caspian to the Black Sea or Mediterranean.

It is in this context that the proposal for a pipeline from Turkmenistan to Pakistan through Afghanistan was conceived. Linked to this proposal are the fact that this pipeline was and is the most cost effective and shortest possible route for Turkmen gas to reach world markets. In the early 1990s, such a pipeline was unthinkable given the utter instability verging on chaos in Afghanistan. However, by the mid-1990s, the Taliban movement's success in conquering large tracts of central Afghanistan provided hope for the stabilization of that state. The possibility of a stable Afghanistan is, it can be argued, all the more feasible in the coming years due to the recent victories of the Taliban against northern alliance in Torkum in the fall of 2000. These events dimmed the prospects of the Northern Alliance posing a serious threat to the Taliban in the near future.[9] The various international movements to revive the 6+2 formula for peace in Afghanistan show greater acceptability in the international arena to re-negotiate peace in Afghanistan on more favorable terms. Plans for the construction of the pipeline developed in the early years of the independence of the Central Asian states may be revisable. However the international isolation of the Taliban regime, coupled with the surge of the rival Trans-Caspian pipeline project after Washington endorsed it over the Afghanistan route forced the project to a standstill. In a parallel development, the project to build a pipeline from Central Asia to China has gained a new impetus after the Chinese president's visit to Turkmenistan in July 2000. It has resulted in subsequent Chinese assistance to Turkmenistan in the Gumdag oil field and the development of the coastal area of the Caspian Sea and the Right Bank of the Amudarya river.[10] Despite recent progress in the oil and gas field in with the Chinese factor, the economic viability of the pipeline from Central Asia to China is

[8] Shirin Akiner, *Central Asia: Conflict or Stability and Development*, London: MRG, 1997.

[9] See Kamal Matinuddin, 'The Fall of Taloqan', *The News International* (Islamabad) 8 September 2000; 'Taliban Score Military Victories', AP, 28 September 2000; Adil Kojikhov, Vladimir Davlatov, 'The Taleban Effect', IWPR Central Asia Report no. 21, 21 September 2000.

[10] See eg. 'Chinese President in Turkmenistan, Signs Agreements', RFE/RL Turkmen Report, 6 July 2000; and 'China, Turkmenistan Expand Oil and Gas Cooperation', RFE/RL Turkmen Report, 7 July 2000.

doubtful.[11] It is believed the region is no closer to having a southern export route than it was several years ago.

Afghanistan occupies a priority position in the security thinking of Central Asian regimes not so much because of the oil issue, but because of the widespread picture of Taliban - controlled Afghanistan as a center of aggressive and expansionist radical Islam: Afghanistan has, it is argued, replaced Iran as the center of political Islam on the Eurasian continent.[12] The new nexus seen in the last couple of years under the 'Shanghai five'[13] is representative of the same thinking, and the interim focus after the first meeting in December 1999 on stopping the spread of 'destructive forces' influencing in the region has remained the same. The focus was defined as the curtailment of the influence of international terrorists, drug traffickers, trans-boundary organized crime, illegal migration and militant separatism. In this realm, the fear generated by the Taliban movement in Afghanistan is underscored by the fact that since the emergence of the Taliban movement, the regimes of all Central Asian states save Turkmenistan have lined up with Russia, Iran and India to support the 'northern alliance' led by Masoud against the Taliban. The Taliban brand of radical Sunni Islam was perceived as drastically more threatening than the Shi'a 'Iranian model'; this was the case particularly due to the larger appeal 'Talibanism' could conceivably command in Central Asian society. An Islamic renaissance with ideas similar to 'Talibanism' was already under development, allegedly financed among other by Saudi money, particularly in the Uzbek-dominated Fergana valley. The Taliban movement is seen as sponsoring like-minded subversive movements in Central Asia. In fact, the presence of the over 1000-strong force of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in Kunduz in northern Afghanistan has been ascertained.[14] Moreover, Russia accuses the Taliban of actively supporting the Chechen insurgents. The Taliban regime is the only country to have recognized Chechnya's independence, but claims only to support Chechnya 'morally'. The attempt in the Fall of 1999 by an IMU contingent to fight its way from Tajikistan to Uzbekistan and an ensuing hostage-taking in Kyrgyzstan raised fears in Moscow and the region that separatist movements in the region may take a more Islamic colour. The universality of the Islamic appeal, and dire socio-economic conditions in the central Asian states and in certain Muslim areas of Russia have lead to the fear that the development of political Islam in the region may have the potential to plunge the entire region into unrest. It should be noted that the heavy-handed approach of especially the Uzbek authorities against Islamic opposition contributed to fueling dissatisfaction, and radicalized elements of the Islamic movement in the country. So has been the case in the Russian handling of the Chechen resistance movement. In this regard the IMU declaration to use northern Afghanistan as a base for a massive attack on Uzbekistan or reported political support of Afghanistan to the Chechen resistance fighters has done little to alleviate the fears about the spread of political Islam in the region.

PAKISTAN'S POLICY TOWARDS AFGHANISTAN AND CENTRAL ASIA

Pakistan's heavy involvement in Afghanistan has been widely criticized in the west. Nevertheless, Pakistani concerns for developments in Afghanistan must be related to its vulnerability vis-à-vis India and the long historical connection of central Asia and Afghanistan to Pakistan. During the cold war, the nexus of Pakistan and Afghanistan grew stronger due to Pakistan's role as a front line state against Soviet expansionism and Pakistan's fear to prevent the possibility of a two-front war scenario. The regime in Kabul had primarily good relations with Moscow, but more importantly for Islamabad developed excellent relations with India while pursuing a hostile policy toward Pakistan. The Indo-Soviet relationship had established a stake for Pakistan much stronger than any other geopolitical realities. In the 1970s and

[11] See also Xiaojie Xu, *Oil and Gas Linkages between China and Central Asia: a Geopolitical Perspective*, Baker Institute for Public Policy, Rice University, 1998.

[12] Giandomenico Picco, 'The Caspian Region: Is it really Strategic?', *Marco Polo Magazine*, no. 6, 1998.

[13] The Shanghai five is an informal body including Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, set up in 1996 to resolve border issues along the old Sino-Soviet frontier but now focused on fighting terrorism, separatism and religious extremism.

[14] 'Preventive Strikes against 'Terrorist Bases' Considered', *Jamestown Monitor*, 4 May 2000.

1980s, the collusion between Kabul and New Delhi presented the risk of being caught in a two-front war with hostile governments in its immediate neighborhood. Moreover, a quick glance at a map shows that Pakistan's capital is located roughly 200 km from the Afghan border and 100 km from the Line of Control (LoC) separating Indian and Pakistani forces in the disputed region of Jammu and Kashmir. It is this situation that is referred to in Pakistan as a lack of 'strategic depth'. In this context, it is imperative for Islamabad to have a stable Afghanistan with a friendly government in power in Kabul. This need became all the more pronounced with the end of the Cold War and the subsequent reduction of U.S. aid to Pakistan—witness the situation in the early 1990s with chaos in southern Afghanistan threatening to cause serious instability across the border in Pakistan.[15] An unstable Afghanistan would have left a space or gap for outside actors to play a more explicit role in the Central Asian matrix than would have been desired from a Pakistani security perspective, and could indeed have been highly detrimental to Pakistani domestic security. Moreover, Pakistan's hopes in the early 1990s of achieving a presence in Central Asia and develop political and economic relations with states there were hindered by the unrest in Afghanistan. Hence the urge to have a stable Afghanistan has been crucial to Pakistan's foreign policy objectives. The possibility of constructing a pipeline from Turkmenistan to Pakistan was only the most obvious example. As a result, Pakistan by the mid-1990s had compelling internal as well as external reasons to support any force that could provide stability in Afghanistan while remaining friendly to Islamabad. In the early 1990s, Pakistan had attempted to achieve this through various Mujahideen groups; however their internal squabbles made such a prospect impossible.[16] The emergence of the Taliban movement, and the initial enthusiasm it received in southern and central Afghanistan as a force restoring law and order, presented Pakistan with a long-sought opportunity, and supporting it was logical given Pakistan's internal and external policy imperatives.

This said, later developments in Afghanistan have caused worry in Islamabad as well. Far from being pliable, the Taliban regime has proven to be unruly and difficult to deal with.[17] Although Islamabad undoubtedly remains the only power that could exert any influence over the Taliban, the image of it being a Pakistani stooge must be dismissed due to the independent attitude it has displayed. Furthermore, the failure of the Taliban to exercise moderation in its handling of minority populations under its rule, its treatment of women and its ensuing international isolation could prove detrimental to Pakistan's abilities to establish influence in Central Asia. Yet, from a geopolitical perspective, the present situation with respect to Afghanistan remains by far preferable to the alternative, the further instability of Afghanistan.

Pakistan nevertheless faces certain challenges. It must restore the loss of confidence by Central Asian states that it suffered due to its support for the Taliban; moreover, it needs to exercise a moderating influence on the Taliban, for at least three reasons: first, in order to ease the international ostracism of Afghanistan necessary to actively use that country as a conduit to Central Asia; second, in order to prevent the Taliban regime from losing its popular support and thereby risking a renewed plunge to instability in Afghanistan, third to help Afghanistan to establish itself in the international arena as a as a responsible state. In this regard the current developments for calling in 'Loya Jirga' (Grand Assembly) in Afghanistan are reflective of having broad base support of the majority of Afghans.[18] Pakistan's support to such efforts based on the concept on inclusiveness of all Afghan factions reflect the fact the restoration of peace and security in Afghanistan is recognized as essential for the security of the entire region. Central Asia holds great significance for Pakistan primarily due to its economic potential, and it is essential for Islamabad to have increased economic interaction with central Asia. In this regard the

[15] See Safdar Mahmood, *Pakistan: Political Roots and Development*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 305-306; Tahir Amin, 'Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Central Asian States', in Ali Banuazizi and Myron Weiner, *The New Geopolitics of Central Asia and its Borderlands*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994, 225-228

[16] See eg. Chistina Lamb, *Waiting for Allah*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 1991, pp. 206-258.

[17] 'Pakistan Getting Tougher with Afghanistan: Moin', *The News International* (Islamabad), 7 July 2000.

[18] 'Afghanistan: Ex-King Moots "Grand Assembly" for Talks', IRIN, 9 November 2000

expansion of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) is but one example. If Islamabad succeeds in this endeavor, its possibilities of becoming a major actor in Central Asia are significant.

CHINA AND THE CENTRAL ASIAN HORIZON.

China has had a deep historical attachment with the Central Asian region. The specificity of the Central Asian linkage depends partly on there due to the Muslim population in China's northwest and the cross-border ethnic linkages of the population of Xinjiang. During the cold war the Sino-Soviet split had forced China to play a less wielding influence in the Eurasian heartland. In the post-cold war setting, the Chinese emergence in the world political and economic arena as a major power is a shift that has had a significant effect on Asian security perceptions as well as global politics. The independence of the central Asian states has lead to a more pronounced Chinese strategy in the region. The increased Chinese interest in Central Eurasia is part and parcel of an overall strategic perception of an as yet undefined Chinese great power role in world affairs, and closely linked with a relation of enmity with the U.S. It is believed that the new 'great game' will be played in Central Asia, due to the centrality of the region to world energy resources and the power vacuum left behind by the declining Russian power in the region. In addition, the forward presence of the U.S. in the region and the geographical vulnerability of China from Central Asia is a factor. In fact, given that the future of international politics is closely linked to the problems and prospects of these two states, it is possible that the over all character of Sino-American relations in the coming decades will determine the centrality of the Central Eurasian region to world politics. If Washington pursues a policy of constructive engagement translating into a concept of containment, such a development would force China to move in to establish new liaisons to counter this policy; a U.S. attempt to have its own strategic equation in the region would be closely linked by Beijing to its own fear of increased dissatisfaction in its northern provinces.

As a result, the entire Central Eurasian security perception is intrinsically linked to threats emanating from non-traditional concepts of security, such as migration and the issue of cross-border terrorism or the fear of political Islam. Hence China's objective in Central Asia has largely remained to counter such threats and to cooperate in benefiting from the economic potential of the region to its growing economic needs. The emphasis in the 'Shanghai five' initiative on the issue of terrorism, the 'destructive force element', shows that in the Chinese calculation an unruly Central Asia is more of a threat than Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. This is reflected by the fact that the Chinese government has been and remains in the process of a dialogue with the Taliban regime. The main reason for this ironic Chinese shift away from Afghanistan is due to the economic stakes and cross-border ethnic linkages with the region and the interactive play of other actors such as India, Russia and the US. For China, Xinjiang has a major significance beyond issues of territorial integrity; one of the biggest oil-bearing basins in Asia, the Tarim basin lies in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Province;[19] moreover, the long-term economic aim of China to develop its northwestern regions plays in, as does the need to find new markets for its consumer goods in nearby markets such as Central Asia. The implications of western interests in exploiting the oil and gas resources is but an added factor in this overall central Eurasian matrix for China. Attempts are being made by Beijing to develop a broader conceptual framework for regional cooperation on the bases of cooperative security and the shared principles of interaction in the bilateral and regional powers framework in Central Asia. In spite of all this, it should be noted that Central Asia will remain an area of secondary importance to the Chinese foreign policy establishment as long as the Asia-pacific region carries the brunt of the Sino-American estrangement

UNITED STATES POLICY: THE LACK OF STRATEGIC VISION

The instability of Central Asia and its southern neighbors is a factor of priority in U.S. foreign relations for several reasons. First, the region's instability permits the operation and growth of terrorist movements that often have a global and specifically anti-American scope. Second, the surge of illicit narcotics trade throughout the

19 Keun-Wook Paik, 'Tarim Basin Energy Development: Implications for Russian and Central Asian Oil and Gas Exports to China', Central Asian and Caucasian Prospects Briefing Paper, No. 14 November 1997.

region targets western societies and provides a major source of funding for these groupings. Third, the Caspian is an emerging oil producing region vital to unimpeded energy access. Finally, regional conflicts in this volatile area have the potential of developing into major power confrontations that necessarily affect the security of the U.S. and its allies. Obviously, Washington needs to be involved in the region to maintain a security balance, ensure the safe flow of oil, and undermine activities such as terrorism and drug trade that threaten its declared vital interests. However, the record of U.S. policy towards the region in the 1990s shows a mixed picture. Washington has avoided major setbacks, but has not scored any major achievements either. By virtue of its global standing as the sole remaining superpower, and by declaring the region an area of vital interests, the U.S. is a crucial component of the Caspian-Asian security calculus. However, Washington's policy displays no coherent strategy towards the region, and policy seems to be mostly based on short-term, ad hoc decisions, being tactical rather than strategic in nature. Washington has certainly helped prevent a return of Russian hegemony especially in the Caucasus by strengthening local states; but uncertainty regarding America's commitment to and policies in the region has allowed an extensive array of interpretations on the part of regional powers. Washington remains principally undecided on how far it wishes to confront Russia in the region. The U.S. has remained on the sidelines of the Afghanistan conflict during the entire 1990s. In particular, the U.S. policy toward the Taliban rise to power was vague: allegations of initial U.S. support for the Taliban contain strong circumstantial evidence. Washington's recent anti-Taliban shift is defined by a single issue: Osama Bin Laden, whereas a larger regional picture is absent. With regard to Pakistan, a long-time ally of the U.S., Washington's stance is ambiguous. There has been a tendency toward a rapprochement with India at Pakistan's expense; indeed, despite the fact that the Indian nuclear explosions of 1998 preceded and actually caused the Pakistani ones, U.S. sanctions on South Asia have affected Pakistan disproportionately. The lack of a clearly formulated U.S. policy grounded in a long-term strategy towards the region has contributed to rather than lessened instability. Whereas the U.S. claims to engage this crucial region of the world, it does so in a less than predictable and coherent manner. The lack of clear American engagement, and U.S. deference to Moscow, compelled the primary regional power in Central Asia, Uzbekistan, to forge new security relations with Beijing and Moscow.

Meanwhile, as concerns Afghanistan, Washington is unable to look beyond the Bin Laden issue and tackle Afghanistan in a broader perspective. The same is true in the case of Pakistan. With a looming economic crisis deepening existing ethnic and sectarian cleavages, the stability of the nuclear weapon-state Pakistan must be considered a clear priority issue. Yet Washington seems unable to formulate a clear policy, and is perceived in Pakistan as increasingly tilting toward India, thereby fueling anti-American sentiments and strengthening the position of Islamic extremists. Moreover, Pakistan remains the only actor with influence over the unruly Taliban. With its sway in Islamabad declining, Washington also decreases its ability to influence developments in Afghanistan. A loss of influence over Pakistan would be heavily detrimental to America's larger geostrategic interests. Given the gravity of the security threats in the Caspian-Asian region, it is imperative for the U.S. to formulate a coherent, long-term strategic agenda defining its interests and ways of promoting them. Washington must recapture the initiative by re-engaging the region, formulating priorities, and acting on them.

CONCLUSION

Central Asia has for a number of years been in the process of becoming a region of major strategic importance. Given the increased competition in the region involving Eurasian, western as well as Asian powers, the importance of Central Asia is set to grow. Perhaps more than any other region of the world, Central Asia has become an avenue of the much-mentioned condition of multipolarity in world affairs. The power vacuum left by the fall of the Soviet Union, and the unsuccessful attempts by Russia of regaining lost ground, have accentuated this situation. A territorially vast area with large natural resources, Central Asia is surrounded by a number of powerful states that are nevertheless all internally vulnerable—something which increases their

perceived need for influence in Central Asia.

One of the scenes for the battle of influence between Eurasian regional powers is being set in the Central Asian milieu. Central to this struggle is the rising specter of ethnic and religious radicalism, coupled with international narcotics trade and terrorism. Such developments are paradoxically rendering legitimacy to the very authoritarian regimes that were and remain a partial cause of the emergence of the problem. Central Asian regimes are discovering that their ever rising authoritarian tendencies are only met with vocal protests from the West; these authoritarian practices are in turn to a large extent responsible for the alienation of a large portion of the political opposition, with an intensifying trend toward defections to radical Islamic movements. These developments testify to the fact that the excessive exploitation of the specter of radicalism and terrorism to seek influence in the region by regional actors and stakeholders can result in a self-fulfilling prophecy. Where this region may become the energy and transport hub of a revitalized Eurasian economy, the risk is salient that the region may succumb to unrest fueled by authoritarian regimes and radical movements.

What is clear is that Central Asia is becoming increasingly deeply linked to the security issues of its southern and eastern neighbors. The nexus defining Central Asian security, what could be called the 'Central Eurasian insecurity complex', is composed of a slightly different array of actors as compared to the traditional view of post-Soviet Central Asian security. Rather than Turkey, Iran, Russia and the West, the region is coming to be dominated by a more Asian constellation of power where China, Russia, Pakistan and India play important roles. In the middle of this lies Afghanistan, which due to its geopolitical importance is set to remain prey to foreign actors just as it has in the last century and a half. Undoubtedly, the United States have a potential to play an important role in this puzzle, and the importance of the region to Eurasian geopolitics makes it hard for the U.S. not to be involved there. However, in the absence of a clear strategy towards the region, Washington may see itself sidelined by more resolute and determined actors.

Central Eurasia remains an area of shifting alignments, where there are no permanent friends or enemies; national interests are only marginally more stable and enduring. Certain states have clear views of their ambitions and capacities in the area, but the incompatibility of the ambitions of major actors ensure that miscalculations will occur. Moreover, all players in the region are also involved in other areas of the world, implying that sudden shifts or major upheavals in the Caucasus, South Asia, Asia-Pacific or the Persian Gulf have a potential to distract certain players, something that perpetually increases the instability of Central Eurasia. Whereas other regions may be approaching a stable geopolitical framework—only the mere discussion of a stability pact for the unruly Caucasus testifies to this—Central Eurasia still has a long road to travel to stability. Regional mechanisms intended to regulate the security of the region are absent; attempts to construct such bodies have failed, largely due to the diverging orientations and threat perceptions of regional states. The formation of a clearly discernible and lasting geopolitical environment in Central Eurasia is hence remote, and the persistent instability of the region is unlikely to abate in the near future.

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