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America in Eurasia: One Year After

SVANTE E. CORNELL

American involvement in Central Asia has sometimes been described as if it were a complete novelty—that Washington suddenly discovered Eurasia the day after September 11, 2001. But long before September 11, the United States government and the American business community had established strong links with the Caucasus and Central Asia. American oil companies have invested considerable funds in the Caspian littoral states, especially Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. Throughout the 1990s, the United States government provided 90 percent of the assistance that Afghanistan received, including a \$43-million aid package to the governing Taliban in early 2001 following the regime’s successful ban on opium cultivation. The United States opened embassies in all eight of the region’s former Soviet republics in 1992, and the Defense Department had taken the lead in the mid-1990s in establishing security cooperation with them. The establishment of a United States military base in Uzbekistan only a few weeks after September 11 was possible because of the strong political and military-to-military contacts between the two governments.

Uzbekistan, along with Azerbaijan and Georgia, had already made relations with the United States a primary foreign policy focus before the September 2001 terrorist attacks because it was considered the best way to safeguard sovereignty and security as well as promote economic development through foreign investment. It is clear that American involvement has increased dramatically since fall 2001. What has that involvement meant for the Caucasus and Central Asia?

CENTRAL ASIA RESHUFFLED

With the exception of Afghanistan, post-Soviet Central Asia has been the region most dramatically affected by the changes in international politics since September 11. The regional political balance has been thoroughly reorganized. The late 1990s had seen Central Asia falling into oblivion. Stagnant (and in some cases regressive) democratic and economic development had attracted criticism in the West, which focused on widespread human rights abuses and authoritarian rule. Especially during the Clinton administration, the United States government had hectored Central Asian states about their human rights deficits. This proved counterproductive, alienating governments and inducing little propensity to democratize. The case of Uzbekistan is illustrative. In the mid-1990s, Uzbekistan had aligned its foreign and security policy with the United States; it was the only country besides Israel to support virtually all United States foreign policy moves in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. By following a foreign policy that put it on a collision course with Moscow and Beijing, Tashkent clearly aspired to become a regional strategic partner to the United States. The United States, however, did not reciprocate. This led to a crisis in Uzbek foreign policy in 1999, after a failed attempt to assassinate President Islam Karimov and military incursions by guerrillas from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU, based in Tajikistan and Afghanistan) shattered the fragile stability of Central Asia. Tashkent needed security assistance, but the United States was unwilling to help; Karimov was forced to turn to China and Russia.

This prompted the emergence of a Russian-Chinese “condominium” over Central Asia. As relations between Moscow and Beijing improved under

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Russian President Vladimir Putin, the two countries moved toward shutting out foreign influences in Central Asia, especially American and Turkish involvement. The tool used was the “Shanghai Five,” an informal group that also included Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Initially established to help settle border disputes along the former Sino-Soviet border, the Chinese and Russian leaders transformed the group into a mechanism to coerce the smaller Central Asian states into accepting the predominant influence of the two largest powers. Uzbekistan, faced with repeated Islamic radical incursions and receiving little response from Washington, was left with no alternative but to join the Shanghai group in summer 2001, when it formally incorporated itself as the Shanghai Cooperative Organization (SCO).

Although the United States did put the IMU on its list of terrorist organizations, it did not make Central Asia a foreign policy concern. (The American business community and the Defense Department, however, had by this time established their own networks in the region.) With limited American attention, Central Asia by mid-2001 was com-

ing under the umbrella of the Russian-Chinese condominium, which would have entailed a Russian and Chinese monopoly on the region’s chief exports, oil and gas.

The new states in Central Asia had few options. They were internally weak and some were threatened by armed Islamic radical incursions. At the same time, the conflict in Afghanistan between the Taliban and ethnic guerrillas further isolated Central Asia and tightened the Russian-Chinese stranglehold. The war in Afghanistan made it impossible for the landlocked Central Asian countries to use their traditional trade routes through Afghanistan and Pakistan to South Asia and the Arabian Sea. They were forced to rely on Riga, on the Baltic coast, as their main outlet to the sea—clearly an absurd situation, with the port of Karachi at a fraction of the distance. The Central Asian states, desperate to find another trade link, were seriously investigating on the eve of September 11 the possibility of building a truck route from Kazakhstan to Pakistan by way of China’s Taklamakan Desert and the 14,000-foot Khunjerab Pass.

The United States–led war against Al Qaeda and its Taliban protectors showed the fragility of the Sino-Russian condominium when faced with American “competition.” Although designed partly to fight “terrorism and separatism” (synonymous terms in Chinese and Russian parlance, with their Xinjiang, Tibet, and Chechnya problems), the SCO proved useless in addressing terrorism emanating from Afghanistan. China was wary of aiding the war, and aside from sharing intelligence, Moscow’s only accomplishment was sending a detachment of troops to Kabul before the United States did, even though it was American air power that had led to the liberation of the Afghan capital. With America reaching out not only to Uzbekistan but also Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the weakest countries in Central Asia, the governments of these three countries found themselves in the uncommon situation of having foreign policy alternatives that did not require deference to Moscow. Tajikistan for the first time in a decade went against

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Moscow’s wishes and welcomed American troops, while Kyrgyzstan became the location of a large American military base. Uzbekistan immediately grabbed the opportunity to establish the strategic partnership with America it had sought in the mid-1990s, and secured what has been termed substantial security guarantees from Washington; it now occupies a central role in United States strategy in the region.

The changes brought to Central Asia by the war in Afghanistan have not been limited to geopolitical realignments. The conflict removed the major security threat to the Central Asian states—the Taliban regime—and decimated the IMU, which had staged attacks on Uzbek and Kyrgyz territory in 1999 and 2000. This potentially alters not only the security situation in the region, but also its economic prospects. A stable Afghanistan would mean that Central Asia’s trade routes to the south could be reopened, which would allow the import of goods and services, economic interaction with South Asia, and, not least, the export of oil, gas, and

cotton. Of course, trade to the south will also decrease Central Asia’s economic dependence on Russia and thereby bolster the independence of the Central Asian states.

The positive changes brought to Central Asia by the war on terrorism must be placed against the negative. Foremost among these is the resurgence of large-scale opium production in Afghanistan, which had been successfully eradicated by the Taliban regime. Since the late 1990s, the majority of Afghan heroin has been smuggled through Central Asia to markets in Russia and Western Europe.¹ The drug trade has deeply penetrated the region’s governments—especially in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, home to the main smuggling routes. With the fall of the Taliban, Afghan farmers again planted opium on a large scale. The Afghan interim administration is either incapable or unwilling to

address the issue because it is deeply implicated in the trade. The results are already beginning to show in the form of

growing corruption, increased addiction, and a concomitant HIV crisis.

Another concern is the effect of American involvement on democratization and human rights. Many argue that Central Asian states have used the war on terrorism to intensify repression against democratic opposition, and that human rights has been dropped from the United States foreign policy agenda. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan clearly have become more authoritarian than they had been in the days just after independence, while Turkmenistan remains one of the world’s most closed societies. These trends started before September 11, however, and the long-term effects of the American presence are not yet discernible. What is discernible, however, is that progress has been made since September 11 in Uzbekistan, the country most often accused of human rights violations and authoritarianism. American engagement with Tashkent, which has far from ignored the human rights perspective, has pushed Uzbekistan further on the road to political, economic, and judicial reform. The Bush administration’s approach has been less critical and patronizing than that taken by the Clinton administration. Under George W. Bush, the United States has opted for dialogue with the Uzbek government. This has begun to yield political results, such as the establishment of human

¹The IMU’s insurgencies in 1999 and 2000 were apparently destined to spread instability to further the drug trade, in which the IMU remains heavily involved. See Tamara Makarenko, “Crime, Terror, and the Central Asian Drug Trade,” *Harvard Asia Quarterly*, Spring 2002.

rights groups in the country, and economic results, including a move toward the convertibility of the Uzbek currency (the som).

INTO THE CAUCASUS

If Central Asia has been center stage in the war on terrorism, the Caucasus has been the backstage. The immediate attention on Central Asia led to uncertainty in the Caucasus about whether the region's importance would decrease or increase as a result of the war in Afghanistan. Within 48 hours of September 11, Georgia and Azerbaijan announced

their full cooperation with the United States, sharing intelligence and offering blanket overflight rights, refueling facilities, and bases. Armenia, like Russia, also cooperated, although not as extensively and straightforwardly as Azerbaijan and Georgia. Given Iran's recalcitrance and the complications involved in overflights over Russian territory (such as detailed prior information on

all aircraft, their missions, and their cargoes), nearly all United States and allied aircraft transited the airspace of Georgia and Azerbaijan on their way to Afghanistan. This graphically illustrated the importance of the south Caucasus's location and the need to gain access to the Caucasus for any direct role in Central Asia.

The creation of American bases in Central Asia further increased the strategic importance of the south Caucasus to policymakers in Washington. The United States is not in a position to rely on transiting the territory of Russia, China, or Iran to supply its new bases; its options are to use bases in the Persian Gulf by way of Pakistan and Afghani-

stan, or from bases on NATO territory in Turkey through the south Caucasus and over the Caspian Sea. The Pakistan–Afghanistan option is feasible, but not one on which the Defense Department would like to depend. As a result, securing the stability and cooperation of the south Caucasian states became a priority for the United States.

The problem, of course, is that Georgia and Azerbaijan are weak countries, plagued by deadlocked ethnic conflicts that leave them in a state of no war, no peace. They are also experiencing economic downturns and suffer from widespread poverty;

perhaps most worrying, their fragile stability depends on the personalistic rule of their aging presidents, 76-year-old Eduard Shevardnadze in Georgia and 80-year-old Heydar Aliyev in Azerbaijan. While Azerbaijan is relatively stable and economically progressing thanks to investments in and revenues from Caspian oil and gas, Georgia is in a more precarious position.

Large tracts of



Georgia's territory are not under government control, including the breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which secured de facto independence, with Russian support, in the early 1990s. But the central government's reach is also limited in the semi-independent republic of Ajaria in the southwest of the country and the Armenian-inhabited Javakheti province (both areas host Russian military bases that lack a legal basis and that Georgia wants to see removed). More poignantly, Tbilisi has watched anarchy spread in the rugged northern Pankisi Gorge bordering Chechnya, an area to which several thousand Chechen refugees—and a few hundred partisans—escaped from the war in

Chechnya. Pankisi has long been a center of transnational crime in the Caucasus, benefiting from its location between the north and south Caucasus to become a hub of drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and kidnappings. Arab missionaries preaching orthodox Islamic beliefs have been noted in the area, and the suspicion that Al Qaeda-linked groups were in the gorge led the United States in February 2002 to deploy a train-and-equip mission of American soldiers to bolster the abysmally weak Georgian military in the hopes of reasserting government control over Pankisi.

Azerbaijan's strong support for the war on terrorism also enabled the United States administration to waive sanctions on government-to-government assistance to Azerbaijan that had been imposed in 1992 (the sanctions were issued after intense lobbying by the Armenian lobby in Congress). The waiver enabled the United States military to expand economic and military assistance to Azerbaijan. The aid was designed to bolster Azerbaijan's maritime defenses against Iranian encroachments in the Caspian—an issue that gained salience after Iranian gunboat diplomacy in summer 2002 forced out Azerbaijani research vessels from parts of Azerbaijan's sector of the Caspian, which Iran claims as its own.

American involvement has thus aided the short-term security of Azerbaijan and Georgia. Long-term prospects for these states are not entirely rosy, however. Azerbaijan's 14-year conflict with Armenia over the mainly Armenian-populated Nagorno-Karabakh enclave in Azerbaijan still remains far

from settled, and negotiations between the two countries are nearly exhausted. The disintegration of Georgia's ruling party this winter created widespread concern about what will happen when President Shevardnadze's term expires in 2005. The opposition in both countries is divided and weak, making the risk of a power vacuum all the more likely when the current leaders retire or otherwise disappear from the political scene.

GINGERLY IN RUSSIA'S BACKYARD

The war on terrorism has brought Washington and Moscow closer and has seen the development of a personal relationship between Presidents Bush and Putin. Before the 2001 terror attacks on the United States, few would have thought that Russia would sit by while America established a military presence in four of the Soviet Union's successor states, given

Moscow's earlier reactions to United States criticism of Russian conduct in Chechnya. Yet Russia seemed to acquiesce to Amer-

ica's movement into Central Asia, and even remained quiet when American troops landed on Russia's very border in the Caucasus.

This depiction of events, however, is slightly erroneous. When the United States began contacting Central Asian states in early October 2001 about basing rights, officials in the Russian military and Putin's government privately exerted strong pressure on the Central Asian governments to decline the American requests. Uzbekistan nevertheless took the lead, with Karimov publicly declaring that "only Uzbekistan will decide on Uzbekistan's foreign policy" and agreeing to host an American air base on Uzbekistan's border with Afghanistan. When the leaders of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan showed signs that they would also honor the American requests, Putin publicly stated that Russia had no objections to what was by now a *fait accompli*. Realizing that the United States was determined to intervene regardless of Russia's wishes, Putin decided to accommodate the United States and seek the best possible deal in return.

The deal, many thought, could be Georgia. The United States has firmly supported Georgia's sovereignty and supplies large quantities of aid to the country—indeed, Georgia is one of the highest per capita recipients of United States aid. In the last several years, Russian pressure on Georgia has

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brought the country to near collapse more than once. Besides blatant Russian support for armed separatists within Georgia, Moscow has used its control over natural gas pipelines that supply most of Georgia's heating capacity to bully Tbilisi into submission. In particular, Russian state-linked gas firms have shown a tendency to cut gas supplies (for "nonpayment of debts") on the eve of negotiations regarding Russia's military bases in Georgia. Russia has also imposed a discriminatory visa regime on Georgia that exempts inhabitants of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from the visa requirement, and in summer 2002 it extended Russian citizenship to residents of the two breakaway regions, carrying out a de facto annexation of two Georgian provinces. During fall 2001 and winter 2002, Russia again increased pressure on Georgia, specifically for "sheltering terrorists" in the Pankisi Gorge. It bombed Georgian territory, cut gas supplies, and demanded the right to intervene militarily in Pankisi. Georgia has consistently rejected these demands, looking back on a history of Russian military intervention that led to the loss of large swathes of Georgian territory. But since late 2001, Moscow has continued to hint that if America could intervene in Afghanistan, it had the right to do the same in Georgia.

The dispatch of American military advisers to Georgia should thus be seen not only in the light of a possible Al Qaeda presence in the Pankisi Gorge, but also as a step to preempt a Russian intervention in Pankisi, which would be disastrous for Georgia's integrity. It would also lead to the spreading of the contained problem of anarchy and criminality in Pankisi into the rest of Georgia.

Russia has not given up, and is pursuing another strategy: using the possible American invasion of Iraq as leverage. Aware that Washington lacks international support for an intervention to topple Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, Moscow has echoed this opposition to an invasion while hinting that it could change its mind if the United States accepted its intervention in Georgia. In other words, Moscow is constantly seeking a great-power understanding that would allow it to reassert control over Georgia and its independent foreign policy.

Why Georgia? Because Georgia is the linchpin of the Caucasus. It does not have the oil resources of Azerbaijan, but it is the geographic link between Azerbaijan and Central Asia and between the Eurasian east and west. If Moscow controls Georgia or sustains unrest in the country, it can also assert control over the export of Caspian oil

and gas, thereby keeping an economic stranglehold on countries like Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan and enhancing its clout with Western Europe, which is increasingly dependent on Russian energy supplies. Since Russian foreign policy is focusing more on controlling Eurasian energy resources, there is an inherent conflict of interest with American policy, which seeks to prevent any single country's dominance over energy resources, and therefore aims at bolstering the independence of regional states.

Perhaps more acutely, a sustained American military presence in Central Asia concerns China especially. To Beijing, the establishment of American bases in Kyrgyzstan—which does not border Afghanistan but does border China—recalls the American military's presence in Asia during the Korea and Vietnam wars, and contributes to a perception of American encirclement of China. China is the regional power whose influence has increased most markedly in Central Asia since the former Soviet republics became independent. Confronted with unrest in Xinjiang, which borders the region, China is gradually realizing it is a part of, and not only a neighbor to, Central Asia. China and America, however, do not necessarily have conflicting interests in Central Asia, since they share a concern for Central Asian stability and a desire to neutralize radical Islamic movements in the region.

AMERICA IN EURASIA: WHAT NOW?

With basing and transit rights in place, the United States must decide to what degree it should be involved in Eurasia. It faces three choices. A first option is to end the war on terrorism in Afghanistan and to withdraw from the region, closing the bases in Central Asia. This option is irresponsible, given the effects United States involvement have



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already had on the region and the possible backlash regional states might suffer should America withdraw. But it could also be directly harmful to future American interests and homeland security—America's departure from Afghanistan and Pakistan after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 contributed greatly to the chaos and instability that paved the way for the Taliban and then Al Qaeda's role in the country.

A second option is to establish a long-term and large-scale military and political presence in the region—that is, taking over Russia's role as the dominant power controlling the politics of Central Asia and the Caucasus. While the United States surely could do this if it decided to, large-scale military bases and political domination are not necessarily the best ways to exert influence and achieve strategic goals in the present age. Moreover, while some Central Asian and Caucasian countries may welcome American domination, it is likely to antagonize Russia, China, and Iran—so much so that they could play a destabilizing role, undermining both America's role in the region and regional security.

A third option is for America to steer a middle path. It could maintain a flexible military presence while remaining engaged in the crucial social, economic, and political developments in the region. The United States could work for the long-term stability and development of Eurasia by inviting all the region's neighboring powers—including Russia, China, Pakistan, India, Iran, and Turkey—to participate in that development and in a security infrastructure based on mutual self-restraint. Since regional powers mainly fear each other, a concert of these powers would allow them to interact and defuse hostilities. Only the United States has the power and prestige to launch this type of cooperative mechanism for the region.

Most important, American engagement with the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia needs to be clear and predictable. The United States has the potential to play an important stabilizing role in the region, but as long as uncertainty surrounds its commitment, America's role may instead be destabilizing if other powers try to test its determination to remain engaged. ■