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Instability and Security in Central Asia: Foreign Policy Implications

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I. Overview

The end of the Soviet Union in 1991 gave the nations of Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan – their independence. A decade and a half later, the five nations of Central Asia are still adjusting to their new found (and largely unexpected) status as sovereign states. These years of political transition have been marked by significant turmoil, including the 1992-1997 civil war in Tajikistan; the 2005 violence in Andijon, Uzbekistan; Kyrgyz President Akayev's relatively peaceful overthrow in 2005 (the so-called 'Tulip Revolution'); and the leadership change in Turkmenistan that resulted from President Niyazov's death last December (ostensibly from a heart attack), only to be replaced by another Soviet-style strongman.

Meanwhile virtually all the Central Asia states are struggling with various forms of instability that threaten their immediate and long-term security. In this regard, the July/August edition of *Foreign Policy* magazine provides a useful snapshot of the instabilities at work today in Central Asia.

II. Instability Indicators

To provide a clearer picture of the world's weakest states, *Foreign Policy* presented its third annual Failed States Index. Using 12 social, political, and military indicators, the magazine ranked 177 states in order of their vulnerability to violent internal conflict and societal deterioration. The 60 most vulnerable states are listed in the rankings (*FP* listing attached).

The results of this analysis for Central Asia are not encouraging. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan fell in the "In Danger" category, ranking 22nd and 39th respectively. Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan found themselves at the very top of the "Borderline" category, ranking 41st and 42nd. Only one Central Asian state – Kazakhstan – escaped being listed among the world's 60 most vulnerable.

Moreover, as *Foreign Policy* pointed out, in some of the world's most dangerous regions, like Central Asia, failure doesn't stop at the border's edge. It's contagious. Quoting from the magazine:

> "Fighting by a resurgent Taliban in Afghanistan and in the lawless Northwest Frontier Province of Pakistan has the potential to spread instability across Central Asia...But it is Afghanistan's record poppy yield that has neighboring states most concerned. Drug trafficking routes, fueled by underground heroin factories, cut swaths through the former Soviet republics in the north (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan), bringing crime addiction, and HIV/AIDS in their wake."

Foreign Policy summed up this example of spreading instability with the old refrain: "There goes the neighborhood." That reference to Central Asia's "neighborhood" raises another important point about instability and security in the region.

As Roy Allison and Lena Jonson point out in their edited volume *Central Asian Security: The New International Context* (2001), neighboring geographical regions are clearly relevant for any analysis of Central Asian security. In their view, northern Afghanistan should be considered as lying within a 'wider' Central Asian security complex, especially given the fact that its role in exporting instabilities beyond its borders represents an immediate challenge to the security of all its Central Asian neighbors. In addition, Allison and Jonson say the northern and eastern parts of China's Xinjiang province appear to fit within a wider Central Asian security complex, despite efforts by Chinese leaders to insulate Xinjiang from cross-border instabilities. Finally, they say, there are security-relevant interactions across the Russian-Kazakh border as well as Central Asian-Caucasus regional security links due to new transport networks and pipeline projects.

III. USG Security Assessment -- and Response

The dire assessment provided by *Foreign Policy* of Central Asia's instabilities – and the possibility of one or more of these states falling into a failed state category – is shared by the U.S. Government (USG). In January of this year, then-Director of National Intelligence John Negroponte provided the Congress this somber assessment of prospects in Central Asia:

> "Repression, leadership statis, and corruption that tend to characterize [Central Asian] regimes provide fertile soil for the development of radical Islamic sentiment and movements, and raise questions about the Central Asia states' reliability as energy and counter-terrorism partners....In the worst, but not implausible case, central authority in one or more of these states could evaporate....opening the door to a dramatic expansion of terrorist and criminal activity along the lines of a failed state."

When the Central Asian states became independent 16 years ago, the region represented a new frontier for American foreign and national security policy. Initially that policy focused on the promotion of security, domestic political and economic reforms, and energy development. Security risks of particular concern included domestic insurgencies, cross-border incursions, fears of militant Islam, and such serious transnational threats as the illicit trade in narcotics and arms.

Of major interest to the USG was preventing so-called 'rogue regimes' or terrorist groups from acquiring Soviet-era technology, materials or expertise for making weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The U.S. assisted in the elimination or removal of Russian nuclear weapons from Kazakhstan. Besides these leftovers from the Cold War, there are active research reactors, uranium mines, and dozens of radioactive dumps in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Through the so-called Nunn-Lugar

Cooperative Threat Reduction program, the U.S. continues to assist in efforts to strengthen export and physical controls over nuclear technology and materials in the region. Further, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan hosted major chemical and biological warfare (CBW) facilities during the Soviet era. Hence the U.S. is providing assistance for border and customs controls and other safeguards to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Since the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, the US has viewed the security situation in Central Asia largely through the prism of the 'war on terror.' The five Central Asian states became among the most important 'front-line states' in that war, especially due to their proximity to the first major battle of that conflict, in Afghanistan.

The transformation of U.S. security policy toward Central Asia was dramatic, as Eugene Rumer spelled out in his volume (with Dmitri Trenin and Huasheng Zhao) *Central Asia: Views from Washington, Moscow, and Beijing* (2007):

> "The United States became the principal actor in the regional security affairs of Central Asia. With the presence of American military forces in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, with the defeat of the Taliban government in Afghanistan, and with the explicit commitment for a long-term military presence the region, Washington in effect became Central Asia's security manager....The most significant elements of the U.S. presence in Central Asia after 9/11 were two air bases – one in Uzbekistan [Note: Now closed at Uzbek direction] and the other in Kyrgyzstan."

From the U.S. perspective, the fighting and instabilities in Afghanistan pose a serious spill over threat to all of Central Asia. The porousness of borders allows Islamic insurgents, arms, and drugs to cross into the region. The transit of drugs is increasingly of concern as Afghanistan is now the source of 93% of the world's opium production. The cash this trade generates has added to the atmosphere of corruption in Central Asia.

For all these reasons, as then DNI Director Negroponte's testimony to Congress suggested, the USG believes the risk that Central Asia will turn into a highly unstable region is a real one. And, according to Eugene Rumer, the security fate of the region is currently in US hands:

> "The United States continues to hold the keys to regional security by virtue of its presence in Afghanistan. Success in Afghanistan would remove a dark cloud hanging over Central Asian security; failure in Afghanistan would cast a long shadow over it. The United States is the key actor in Afghanistan and by extension in Central Asia. None of the Central Asia states, Russia, nor China has an interest in seeing the United States fail in its mission in Afghanistan....[all these parties] have one shared interest – the region's stability and security."

IV. Longer Term Stability and Security

But securing Afghanistan and containing its spill over effects, while critical, is not seen as the panacea for Central Asia's longer term stability and security. As Rumer states: "From the standpoint of US policy makers, only political and economic reforms leading to liberalization would ensure long-term stability and security in Central Asia, in turn guaranteeing that the region would never encounter the prospect of state failure and the threat of ungoverned spaces that could be exploited by radical movements and regimes."

It is for this reason that U.S. officials have devoted considerate time and attention to promoting Central Asia's potential to become a "new silk road" of trade and commerce. According to Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Richard Boucher: "We firmly believe that new connections and new opportunities in Central Asia can transform the region from a neglected space into a vital link and give its nations and its peoples new options and independence."

Two major programs in this regard – the U.S. Trade and Development Agency's Central Asian Infrastructure Integration Initiative and the U.S. Agency for International Development's Regional Energy Market Assistance Program – focus on energy, transportation and communications projects, including the development of electrical power infrastructure and power sharing between Central Asia states and their regional neighbors.

The focus on electric power generation – thermal power in Uzbekistan and hydropower in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan – underscores the vast and rapidly growing energy resources of Central Asia, including oil and gas in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Kazakhstan is rapidly becoming one of the top energy producing nations in the world.

Recently an event took place along the Panj River separating Tajikistan and Afghanistan that underscored both the promise and the peril intrinsic in the current effort to promote regional economic integration, including cross-border trade and investment linkages and the physical infrastructure that facilitate them.

In late August the two countries opened an impressive bridge spanning the river, creating the first major thoroughfare between their territories. The $37 million structure, financed primarily by the U.S., is seen as a symbol of the promise of a new era of cross-border trade and expanding economic interactions. But Tajikistan's president also warned of the peril posed by this new link – that it must not become a route for drug smugglers.

V. Regional Security Cooperation (and Conflict Avoidance)

According to Jim Nichols in a recent Congressional Reference Service (CRS) report ("Central Asia: Regional Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests," July 5, 2007):

"The legacies of co-mingled ethnic groups, convoluted borders, and emerging national identifies pose challenges to stability in all the Central Asian states... [these] borders fail to accurately reflect ethnic distributions and are hard to police, hence contributing to regional tensions."

Regional security cooperation remains stymied by these tensions, despite the membership of the states in various cooperation groups, the most prominent of which is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

In 1996 Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan joined Russia and China to form the "Shanghai Five." Initially a border management organization (members share a border with China), states pledged to respect and substantially demilitarization their mutual frontiers. In 2001 Uzbekistan joined the group, renamed the SCO. In 2003, reflecting growing regional and international concern about the spread of radical Islamic elements and terrorism, the SCO established a Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (with the acronym, at least in the English translation, of RATS).

SCO does not include the US as either a member or an observer. Indeed, when SCO met in Astana in 2005, the leaders attending urged the United States to clarify its intentions with regard to its continuing military presence in Central Asia. This still rankles U.S. officials. In a recent speech on "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Future of Asia," Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Evan Feigenbaum asked several pointed questions, among them: "What does the SCO actually do, not just say, to promote cooperation? Is it a security bloc, a trade bloc, or something else? What exactly is the relationship between two huge continental powers – Russia and China – and the SCO's smaller Central Asian members?" And, "is the SCO directed against the United States?"

This tension is not reflected, however, in other organizations that are attempting to promote greater security cooperation in the region. All the Central Asian states have joined NATO's "Partnership for Peace" (PfP) program and take part in periodic PfP exercises (although Uzbekistan sharply reduced its participation after NATO criticisms following Andijon). A June 2004 NATO Istanbul summit communiqué pledged enhanced alliance attention to the countries of Central Asia.

In addition, the European Union (EU) approved in June a new "Central Asian strategy" for enhanced aid and relations for 2007-2013. It calls for establishing offices in each regional state and a "substantial increase" in assistance to $1 billion over the next five years. European security concerns continue to rise about Central Asia as an originator and transit zone for drugs, weapons of mass destruction, refugees, and human trafficking for prostitution or labor.

Wider engagement by the international community should enhance the possibilities for the Central Asian states to address their many sources of instability and provide for greater security. Indeed the growing involvement in the region by other major powers – the United States and other Western states plus Russia and China – and regional powers and institutions – Iran, Turkey, the European Union, OSCE and NATO – suggests it may be time to reconsider a proposal made several years ago by former U.S. National Security

Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski to create a new "cooperative trans-Eurasian security system" for the future.

VI. Forecast -- Virtuous or Vicious Circles?

In 1997, then Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott was in charge of the department's policy toward the newly independent Central Asia states. As Stephen Blank pointed out in his article "The United States and Central Asia" (in Allison and Jonson), Talbott depicted the situation confronting the five Central Asian states as a race between virtuous circles of peace and economic and political reform, on the one hand, and vicious circles of war, strife within and between states, ethnic conflict, authoritarian regimes, poverty and closed or semi-closed economies, on the other.

Ten years later that race in Central Asia between "virtuous circles" and "vicious circles" is still being run. And the stakes for the region and the broader international community on the outcome of that race continues to grow.

			Indicators of Instability											
Rank	Total	Country	Demographic Pressures	Refugees and Displaced Persons	Group Grievance	Human Flight	Uneven Development	Economy	Delegitimization of State	Public Services	Human Rights	Security Apparatus	Factionalized Elites	External Intervention
1	113.7	Sudan	9.2	9.8	10.0	9.0	9.1	7.7	10.0	9.5	10.0	9.9	9.7	9.8
2	111.4	Iraq	9.0	9.0	10.0	9.5	8.5	8.0	9.4	8.5	9.7	10.0	9.8	10.0
3	111.1	Somalia	9.2	9.0	8.5	8.0	7.5	9.2	10.0	10.0	9.7	10.0	10.0	10.0
4	110.1	Zimbabwe	9.7	8.7	8.8	9.1	9.5	10.0	9.5	9.6	9.7	9.5	9.0	7.0
5	108.8	Chad	9.1	8.9	9.5	7.9	9.0	8.3	9.5	9.1	9.2	9.6	9.7	9.0
6	107.3	Ivory Coast	8.6	8.3	9.8	8.4	8.0	8.9	9.5	7.9	9.2	9.6	9.3	9.8
7	105.5	Dem. Rep. of the Congo	9.4	8.9	8.8	7.6	9.1	8.0	8.3	8.7	8.9	9.6	8.6	9.6
8	102.3	Afghanistan	8.5	8.9	9.1	7.0	8.0	8.3	8.8	8.0	8.2	9.0	8.5	10.0
9	101.3	Guinea	7.8	7.4	8.1	8.3	8.5	8.5	9.6	8.9	8.6	8.1	9.0	8.5
10	101.0	Central African Republic	8.9	8.4	8.8	5.5	8.6	8.4	9.0	8.0	8.2	8.9	9.3	9.0
11	100.9	Haiti	8.6	4.2	8.0	8.0	8.2	8.4	9.2	9.0	9.1	9.3	9.3	9.6
12	100.1	Pakistan	8.2	8.5	9.0	8.1	8.5	5.8	8.7	7.1	8.7	9.5	9.5	8.5
13	97.7	North Korea	8.0	6.0	7.2	5.0	8.8	9.6	9.8	9.5	9.7	8.3	7.9	7.9
14	97.0	Burma	8.5	8.5	9.1	6.0	8.9	7.6	9.1	8.3	9.8	9.0	8.2	4.0
15	96.4	Uganda	8.1	9.4	8.5	6.0	8.5	7.5	8.5	8.2	8.2	8.3	7.8	7.4
16	95.9	Bangladesh	8.6	5.8	9.6	8.4	9.0	6.9	9.0	7.4	7.8	8.0	9.5	5.9
17	95.6	Nigeria	8.2	5.6	9.5	8.5	9.1	5.4	9.1	8.7	7.1	9.2	9.5	5.7
18	95.3	Ethiopia	9.0	7.9	7.8	7.5	8.6	8.0	7.9	7.0	8.5	7.5	8.9	6.7
19	95.2	Burundi	9.1	8.9	6.7	6.7	8.8	8.2	7.1	8.9	7.5	6.8	7.5	9.0
20	94.9	Timor-Leste	8.1	8.5	7.1	5.3	6.5	8.5	9.5	7.9	6.9	9.0	8.8	8.8
21	93.6	Nepal	8.1	5.2	8.9	6.1	9.2	8.2	8.5	6.6	8.8	8.3	8.5	7.2
22	93.5	Uzbekistan	7.7	5.4	7.1	7.1	8.6	7.5	9.2	6.8	9.0	8.9	9.2	7.0
23	93.4	Sierra Leone	8.6	7.4	7.1	8.7	8.7	8.7	8.0	8.0	7.0	6.5	7.7	7.0
24	93.2	Yemen	8.0	6.7	7.3	7.2	8.7	8.0	7.8	8.1	7.2	8.0	9.0	7.2
25	93.1	Sri Lanka	7.0	8.6	9.5	6.9	8.2	6.0	8.9	6.5	7.5	8.7	9.2	6.1
26	93.0	Republic of the Congo	8.7	7.3	6.8	6.1	8.1	8.3	8.5	8.8	7.9	7.9	7.2	7.4
27	92.9	Liberia	8.1	8.5	6.5	6.8	8.3	8.4	7.0	8.6	6.7	6.9	8.1	9.0
28	92.4	Lebanon	6.9	8.6	9.0	7.0	7.1	6.3	7.3	6.4	7.0	9.0	8.8	9.0
29	92.2	Malawi	9.0	6.0	6.0	8.0	8.8	9.2	7.9	9.0	8.0	5.4	7.5	7.4
30	92.0	Solomon Islands	8.5	4.8	8.0	5.1	8.0	8.0	8.5	8.5	7.1	7.7	8.8	9.0
31	91.3	Kenya	8.4	8.0	6.9	8.0	8.1	7.0	8.0	7.4	7.0	7.1	8.2	7.2
32	91.2	Niger	9.2	5.9	8.9	6.0	7.2	9.2	8.2	8.8	7.1	6.7	6.0	8.0
33	89.7	Colombia	6.8	9.5	7.4	8.4	8.4	3.3	8.2	6.0	7.4	8.3	8.5	7.0
33	89.7	Burkina Faso	8.6	5.6	6.4	6.6	8.9	8.2	7.6	8.9	6.5	7.6	7.7	7.0
35	89.4	Cameroon	7.0	6.8	7.0	7.9	8.7	6.1	8.5	7.5	7.2	7.7	8.0	7.0
36	89.2	Egypt	7.7	6.5	7.8	6.2	7.8	7.0	9.0	6.7	8.5	6.1	8.3	7.6
36	89.2	Rwanda	9.1	7.0	8.7	7.6	7.1	7.5	8.5	6.9	7.4	4.6	8.2	6.6
38	88.8	Guinea-Bissau	7.6	6.5	5.4	7.0	8.6	8.0	7.2	8.5	8.0	8.0	6.8	7.2
39	88.7	Tajikistan	7.7	6.1	6.3	6.4	7.3	7.3	9.0	7.3	8.5	7.8	8.8	6.1
40	88.6	Syria	6.5	8.9	8.0	6.8	8.1	6.8	8.5	5.3	8.5	7.4	7.5	6.3
41	88.2	Equatorial Guinea	8.0	2.0	7.0	7.4	9.0	4.0	9.4	8.6	9.4	8.9	8.5	6.0
41	88.2	Kirgizstan	7.5	6.2	6.8	7.4	8.0	7.5	8.2	6.3	7.9	7.9	7.5	7.0
43	87.5	Turkmenistan	7.0	4.5	6.2	5.6	7.3	7.4	9.0	7.7	9.5	8.5	8.2	6.5
44	87.2	Laos	8.0	5.5	6.5	6.6	5.7	7.1	7.9	8.0	8.5	8.2	8.6	6.6
45	86.7	Mauritania	8.7	6.2	8.0	5.0	7.0	7.3	6.8	8.1	7.1	7.4	7.9	6.7
45	86.6	Togo	7.5	5.4	6.0	6.5	7.5	8.2	7.7	8.0	7.3	7.8	7.6	6.6
47	86.4	Bhutan	6.5	7.5	7.0	6.7	8.7	7.9	8.0	6.5	8.5	4.6	8.0	6.5
48	85.7	Cambodia	7.6	5.9	7.3	8.0	7.2	6.4	8.5	7.6	7.1	6.2	7.5	6.4
48	85.7	Moldova	7.0	4.7	7.3	8.4	7.5	7.5	7.9	7.1	6.8	6.3	7.5	7.7
50	85.5	Eritrea	8.1	7.1	5.4	6.0	5.9	8.4	8.3	7.7	7.4	7.5	7.2	6.5
51	85.2	Belarus	8.0	4.6	6.5	5.0	7.5	6.8	9.1	6.9	8.5	6.7	8.5	7.1
52	85.1	Papua New Guinea	7.5	3.5	8.0	7.9	9.0	7.3	7.8	7.8	6.1	7.0	6.7	6.5
53	84.9	Angola	8.5	7.5	5.9	5.0	8.7	4.2	8.6	7.7	7.5	6.2	7.5	7.6
54	84.5	Bosnia	6.1	8.0	8.3	6.0	7.2	6.0	7.6	5.6	5.3	7.3	8.3	8.8
55	84.4	Indonesia	7.0	7.5	6.0	7.5	8.0	6.5	6.5	7.0	7.0	7.3	7.2	6.9
55	83.2	Philippines	7.0	5.7	7.2	6.7	7.6	5.3	8.2	5.9	6.3	7.6	7.8	6.9
57	82.8	Iran	6.2	8.6	7.1	5.0	7.2	3.3	7.8	5.7	8.7	8.3	8.9	6.0
58	82.3	Georgia	6.3	6.8	7.6	5.7	7.0	5.7	7.9	6.1	5.4	7.8	7.8	8.2
59	82.0	Bolivia	7.4	3.7	7.0	7.0	8.5	6.4	7.2	7.4	7.0	6.2	8.3	5.9
60	81.4	Guatemala	7.0	6.0	7.1	6.7	8.0	7.0	7.4	6.6	7.1	7.3	5.9	5.3

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