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## **CENTRAL ASIA'S FOREIGN POLICY AND SECURITY CHALLENGES: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES**

*Rajan Menon*

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THE NATIONAL BUREAU OF ASIAN RESEARCH

715 SAFECO Plaza  
Seattle, WA 98185  
Tel: (206) 632-7370  
Fax: (206) 632-7487  
E-mail: [nbr@cuix.pscu.com](mailto:nbr@cuix.pscu.com)

## FOREWORD

The relationship between Russia and the five newly independent Central Asian republics is both conditioned by historical ties and challenged by new, post-Cold War realities. The relevance of Russia to the Central Asian republics is based not only on the colonial legacy, but on enduring factors of geography, demographics, military power, and economics. In this essay, Professor Rajan Menon of Lehigh University assesses the potential for Russian influence to manifest itself as a neo-imperial power. Menon argues that the tradition of Russian and Soviet imperial dominance over Central Asia, the overwhelming Russian power relative to the Central Asian states, and Russia's proximity to the former republics do not foreordain the reassertion of Russian imperialism in the newly independent states. While the rise to power of an ultranationalist regime in Russia combined with instability and ethnic nationalism in Central Asia would make Russian imperial dominance in Central Asia virtually inevitable, other outcomes are possible. A stable Central Asia that protects Russian minority rights, for example, would probably ensure that a democratic Russia would act as a benign hegemon.

The United States, Menon argues, cannot and should not provide security guarantees to protect the Central Asian states from any Russian imperial designs. Menon's recommendations for U.S. policy are more modest—to aid the region in its difficult economic transition and work vigorously to foster democratic practices on the part of Central Asian leaders. Menon points out that while his recommendations are modest, the stakes are high. A neo-imperial Russian policy toward Central Asia will threaten the former Soviet bloc and dramatically increase tension between Moscow and Washington.

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Richard J. Ellings  
Executive Director  
The National Bureau of Asian Research



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# CENTRAL ASIA'S FOREIGN POLICY AND SECURITY CHALLENGES: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

*Rajan Menon*

## Central Asia: A Guide for the Perplexed

With the formal collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991, five independent states (Kazakstan,<sup>1</sup> Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan), each a former union republic of the U.S.S.R., arose in Central Asia. Central Asia, which covers just under four million square kilometers, is bounded by the Caspian Sea in the west, China's Xinjiang province in the east, Russia in the north, and Iran and Afghanistan in the south. The region is home to some 50 million people. Its indigenous inhabitants are overwhelmingly Sunni Muslims. Their languages and cultures are of Turkic origin, except for the Tajiks, who are closer to Iranians in both respects. The terrain of Central Asia is diverse as well, and includes the vast, sparsely populated steppe of Kazakstan, the densely-populated Fergana Valley that slices through Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, large deserts (the Karakum in Turkmenistan, the Kyzylkum in Uzbekistan), and the rugged mountains of Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

The Kazaks, Kyrgyz, and Turkmen were nomadic peoples, unlike the sedentary Tajiks and Uzbeks. Kazakstan, with a population of 16.5 million, is a third the size of the lower 48 states of the United States. Uzbekistan's 19.8 million people inhabit an area two-thirds the size of Texas. Turkmenistan is as large as Colorado and Wyoming combined and has a population of 3.6 million. In contrast, Kyrgyzstan (4.3 million people) is the size of South Dakota, and Tajikistan, with 5.1 million people, is the size of Iowa.

Central Asia is an ethnic kaleidoscope, although as Table 1, which lists the major nationalities, shows, the five states vary in their degree of ethnic diversity. Each has a Russian population, which arrived in the region in successive waves of immigration that can be traced back to tsarist times (Russia's colonization of Central Asia began in the late 18th century and was completed in 1881) and extended well into the Soviet era. Russians came to Central Asia as soldiers, colonial administrators, peasant farmers, and Soviet-era technical specialists, bureaucrats, scholars, and administrators. Particularly significant is the Russian population of Kazakstan, which accounts for 38 percent of the country's total population and is almost as large as the Kazak population (39 percent). Many northern regions of Kazakstan, across from its long border with Russia, are overwhelmingly ethnically Russian. Kyrgyzstan also has a

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<sup>1</sup> The government of Kazakstan recently announced a change in the English spelling of its name from *Kazakhstan* to *Kazakstan*. Major media publications, such as *The New York Times*, have begun to use the new spelling.

Rajan Menon is Monroe J. Rathbone Professor of International Relations at Lehigh University. This essay is part of a larger project funded by the National Council for Soviet and East European Research, whose support is gratefully acknowledged.

sizable Russian community, which accounts for 22 percent of its population. It is hardly coincidental that the governments of Kazakstan and Kyrgyzstan are the two Central Asian countries that have been the most avid proponents of close economic and military ties to Russia, the most reluctant to embrace anti-Russian linguistic and cultural nationalism, and the most willing to consider arrangements such as dual citizenship.<sup>2</sup>

The Central Asian states have a number of common characteristics. First, in contrast to the Baltic republics, the Ukraine, Moldova, and the trans-Caucasus republics, where nationalist mass movements were in full swing well before the actual implosion of the U.S.S.R. in 1991, Central Asia—with the partial exception of Tajikistan, where opposition groups were already contesting the power of the local communist party—remained remarkably passive. Independence occurred, therefore, not as a result of grass-roots nationalism, but simply because the Soviet Union imploded into 15 separate states. The inheritors of power were—with the exception of Kyrgyzstan, where a former physicist, Askar Akaev, became president—the men who headed the local communist parties.<sup>3</sup> None of these communist party chieftains was enthusiastic about the possible collapse of the Soviet Union, whose creaks and groans were apparent well before its final demise. These officials took power and declared independence only because the Soviet collapse became an unstoppable reality once the hardline coup against Mikhail Gorbachev—the last, desperate attempt of the communist old guard to save the system—failed in August 1991.

A second similarity is that Central Asia has many traits associated with the world's developing countries. Relative to other parts of the U.S.S.R., its level of industrial development was low; it was principally a provider of raw materials for the rest of the Soviet economy, from which it imported consumer and industrial goods; it has a young population; and the rate of population growth is high, unlike in the former European republics of the U.S.S.R.

Third, the region features strong leaders who, as presidents, are relatively unrestrained by parliaments and civil society (a free press and civic organizations capable of holding the state accountable). True, Kazakstan and Kyrgyzstan are relatively democratic, having elected parliaments and presidents. Yet even in these two countries the parliaments were disbanded in March 1995 and September 1994 respectively, although new elections have been held since. But Uzbekistan (despite the existence of what the authorities like to portray as an opposition party), Turkmenistan (whose president has created a cult of personality), and Tajikistan are one-party systems. In these three countries, the former communist party has been renamed and stripped of its ideological baggage, and a robust parliament and civil society do not exist and would not be tolerated by the present regimes. The presidents of Kazakstan (Nursultan Nazarbaev), Turkmenistan (Saparmurad Niazov), and Uzbekistan (Islam Karimov) have used the popular referendum as a device to extend their terms until the year 2000, thereby further increasing their power over national parliaments. Kyrgyzstan's president, Askar Akaev, has not resorted to this tactic. Nor has Tajikistan's president, Emomali Rakhmonov. But the latter owes his power to Russian troops who have in effect protected the Tajik government, composed of communist-era holdovers, from a motley opposition of democrats, nationalists, Islamists, ethnic minorities, and nonestablishment regional elites in a bloody civil war that has claimed well over 25,000 lives since 1990.

Fourth, the Central Asian states face many common challenges: transforming economies where the state largely usurped the roles of the private entrepreneur and the market; coping with the post-Soviet reality of drastic reductions in subsidies from Moscow; trying to build

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted, however, that Turkmenistan, while it has steered clear of multilateral economic and military integration with Russia and the other former Soviet republics, is the only Central Asian state so far formally to enact provisions of dual citizenship for its Russian population.

<sup>3</sup> Akaev did, however, serve for a time within the bureaucracy of the Kyrgyz communist party's Central Committee.

economic ties with the outside world to reduce the overwhelming dependence on Russia; and battling falling production and high levels of unemployment and inflation.

When it comes to the pace of reform in these countries and their economic prospects, however, there are differences. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan lead the pack in moving toward economies based on private property and the market. Kazakhstan has the advantage of having a fair amount of industry and vast oil deposits, although it remains dependent on the Russian pipeline network to export its oil. It has also attracted a significant amount of foreign investment. Kyrgyzstan, by contrast, is primarily mountainous and resource-poor. It has a remote location and a patchy transportation system. In the other countries, economic reform has proceeded at a snail's pace, although Uzbekistan is significantly ahead of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. War-torn Tajikistan is the region's economic basket case. But Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have some noteworthy advantages. The former offers the largest market in Central Asia and has a variety of raw materials. The latter has one of the world's largest reserves of natural gas and has major oil deposits as well, although until alternative export routes (through Afghanistan to Pakistan; across China from Afghanistan and Pakistan; through Iran and Turkey) are transformed from concepts into realities, Turkmenistan, like Kazakhstan, will remain dependent on Russian pipelines and subject to Russia's leverage on matters such as export markets and users' fees.

### **The Imperial Legacy and Its Contemporary Significance**

From the 19th century until 1991 Central Asia was the periphery of an empire whose center of power, whether in the tsarist or Soviet era, lay in Russia. The slow, but in hindsight steady, unraveling of the Soviet empire following the advent of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985, and its ultimate implosion in 1991, led to the rise of five independent Central Asian states. In considering the foreign policy and security challenges that these states will face, the fundamental question to be addressed is the nature of future Russian conduct. The continued salience of the Russian factor should be obvious in light of the historical legacy just noted. But it stems, as well, from the stark imbalance of power between core (Russia) and periphery (Central Asia); the ease with which Russia—by virtue of geographic circumstances—can inject its power into the region; the tendency of Russian elites, whether liberals or ultranationalists, to see the region as one in which Russia has special interests and prerogatives; the existence of a Russian diaspora of 16 million in Central Asia; and the dependence of the region on Russia for an array of needs ranging from arms and military expertise to essential economic imports.

It is now a commonplace to stress the diminution in Russia's power and the wider range of economic and strategic options that Central Asia's leaders therefore have. But the imprint of history, the immutable factors of geography, and the still-robust coils of dependency should not be glossed over. True, history suggests that it is not easy for colonial powers to dominate their peripheries after they gain independence. Britain, which emerged from World War II in a weakened state, understood that its diminished capacity and the realities imposed by distance made continuing control over its vast colonial network impossible. In France's case, the expenditure of blood and treasure in Vietnam and Algeria was required to grasp that lesson. But proximity makes post-imperial dominance less formidable a challenge for Russia—and therefore perhaps more tempting. The notion that Russia's multiple crises rule this out is, as the events in Georgia, Moldova, and Tajikistan show, demonstrably false. In each of these states weak regimes battling armed ethnic minorities (Georgia and Moldova) or opposition groups (Tajikistan) have been forced to make major concessions (basing rights for Russian troops; joining the Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States) to secure Russia's support or its pledge to withhold assistance to antigovernment forces.

The overarching question I have posed (the nature of Russia's future policy in Central Asia) in reality hides four much more specific ones:

(1) Will Russia act as a benign hegemon in Central Asia? That is, while insisting that its basic interests (peripheral stability, the safety of the Russian diaspora, and a degree of influence greater than any other external power) be respected, will it be content to calibrate the balance of power among the Central Asian states while also safeguarding them against external threats?

(2) Or will Russia act as a neo-imperial power? Will it go beyond a preoccupation with the balance of power among the Central Asian states as well as between itself and other states vying for influence (e.g., China, Iran, Turkey, the United States) to try to shape the *internal* order of Central Asian states?

(3) If Russia does pursue such a neo-imperial agenda, what countervailing strategies are available to the Central Asian states? Can they balance Russia by turning to other extra-regional powers?

(4) What are American interests in Central Asia? Should the United States undertake the responsibility of acting as a counterweight to a neo-imperial Russia?

### **The Context: The Post-Soviet Transition**

These four questions arise in the context of a post-Soviet transition, an epochal and uncertain struggle to remake the states that emerged from the wreckage of the Soviet empire—and to do so in all respects. In the economic sphere, this involves discarding the centrally planned economic system based on state control of productive assets and administered prices in favor of an alternative featuring private property and the market. Politically, it entails establishing regimes with organizational characteristics and legitimating principles fundamentally different from those of the Soviet polity. To be sure, the nature of the economic and political transition will vary from state to state; so will the degree to which democracy (civil society, a free press, and competitive elections) and markets take root. These particulars, while important, need not concern us given our goal of sketching a context for analyzing foreign policy and security matters. What is more important is that the magnitude of change—whether anticipated or not—in the post-Soviet states will be accompanied by instability regardless of the pace and direction of change. This is a safe assumption: at issue, after all, is the replacement, under unexpected and difficult circumstances, of a system that set the political and economic ground rules and the parameters of political discourse for 70 years.

This transformation will be marked by three characteristics which will shape Russian-Central Asian security dynamics:

(1) *The Contest between Political Institutionalization and Social Mobilization.* By political institutionalization, I mean the creation of legitimate and effective state institutions. Such state structures are able to gain acceptance from most citizens; and they are strong enough to keep the peace, collect taxes, and replenish legitimacy by improving popular welfare. Social mobilization denotes the process of citizens, energized by new ideological and cultural influences, making demands upon the state—either peacefully within institutions or violently on the streets. The likelihood of this struggle between political institutionalization and social mobilization results from several conditions. In Russia and Central Asia, existing state structures are embryonic in terms of both capacity and legitimacy. They have not acquired strong foundations or worked out viable legitimating principles. To complicate matters, the era of the docile citizen may be over. In the Soviet years, the U.S.S.R. was closed off from outside influences—or, at the very



least, the regime regulated citizens' exposure to the outside world and its messages. This is no longer possible. The post-Soviet states lack the capacity to do this; more importantly, they are attempting to seek economic progress through linkages with the global economy, and this is inconsistent with a strategy of intellectual and cultural isolation. (This is something that China's leaders have found out. The quest for global economic competitiveness requires coping with CNN and sending students to Berkeley, but these influences can also stir things up at home.) Outside influences (religious, cultural, and economic) permeate both Russia and Central Asia now as never before. This is bound to raise popular expectations, make people think differently, and create a sense of relative deprivation. Simply put, having opened itself up, the struggling post-Soviet state is bound to experience a great deal of social mobilization. To take the case of Central Asia, trade with Iran, China, and Turkey, or visits to the Persian Gulf emirates by Turkmen traders seeking consumer goods to resell at home, will have consequences beyond the economic sphere.

(2) *The Rise of Nationalism.* The danger of radical and exclusionary "ethnic" (as opposed to "civic" and inclusive) variants of nationalism that privilege titular nationalities is considerable in the post-Soviet space. The reason is that existing state boundaries in Central Asia are arbitrary demarcations imposed from above by fiat between 1924 and 1929. Their legacy in Central Asia, as Table 1 shows, is a disjuncture between national and ethnic boundaries. Consider, for example, the borders between Russia and Kazakstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. In each case, borders create irredentist temptations for the stronger powers, Russia and Uzbekistan, to make ethnic and state borders coincide. The high-capacity Soviet state deterred irredentist conflict; when deterrence failed repression was used. But the situation may prove more unstable with the advent of low-capacity, post-Soviet states. To divert attention from the hardships imposed by the post-Soviet economic transition, their ruling elites may play the nationalist card, shoring up faltering legitimacy by seeking to initiate border changes aimed at harmonizing state and nation, and by posing as the protector of ethnic kin abroad.

	Russian	Kaz.	Kyrg.	Taj.	Turk.	Uzb.	Total
<b>Kazakstan</b>	6,227,549 (38%)	6,534,616 (39%)	14,112 (negl.)	25,514 (negl.)	3,846 (negl.)	332,017 (2%)	16,464,464
<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	916,558 (22%)	37,318 (negl.)	2,229,663 (52%)	33,518 (negl.)	—	550,096 (13%)	4,257,755
<b>Tajikistan</b>	338,481 (7%)	11,376 (negl.)	63,832 (1%)	3,172,420 (62%)	20,487 (negl.)	1,197,841 (24%)	5,092,603
<b>Turkmenistan</b>	333,892 (9%)	87,802 (2%)	—	3,149 (negl.)	2,536,606 (71%)	317,333 (9%)	3,552,117
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	1,653,478 (8%)	808,227 (4%)	174,907 (negl.)	933,560 (5%)	121,578 (negl.)	14,142,475 (71%)	19,810,077

Source: *Central Asia Monitor*, No. 3 (1992), pp. 39–40.

Notes: a) negl. = under 1%; — = none reported; b) figures are for 1991–92; c) percentages denote given nationality as a share of the total population; d) I do not include all the minor ethnic groups found in a given republic, therefore the percentages do not add up to 100.

Even in the absence of a failed transition, ruling elites in search of legitimacy may gravitate toward a nationalist discourse and agenda that stress the primacy of the titular nationality's language, encourage a nationalist historiography, rename cities, and implement recruitment and resource allocation policies that favor the titular nationality. Because they emphasize the symbols, myths, and superior rights of the titular nationality, such policies could generate fear and resentment among other nationalities, leading them to look for support from the ethnic homeland. Intra-state ethnic tensions could thus prepare the ground for inter-state conflict: disgruntled Russians in Kazakhstan, for example, would turn to Russia, with potentially serious consequences if instability in Russia had by then put in place an authoritarian-nationalist leadership; or the sizable Uzbek communities in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan would turn to Uzbekistan, a state whose population and power already worry the smaller Central Asian states.

(3) *The Short-Run Tradeoff Between the Pursuit of Efficiency and the Maintenance of Stability.* The post-Soviet state faces a Hobson's choice between economic reforms, which are needed to gain efficiency and to satisfy foreign investors and lenders, and stability, which could be eroded by enacting policies that tighten budgets, shut down inefficient enterprises, and force people to seek their way in the pitiless Darwinism of the market. If the market is the way toward technological advancement, rational pricing, the effective use of resources, and improved living standards, it is also the handmaiden of socially explosive inflation, unemployment, and sharp inequality. Things may work out in the long run. But for weak states with tenuous legitimacy, it is precisely the short run that matters. For them the bottom line is whether they can survive the short-term dislocations created by the market and cope with angry citizens mobilized by counter-elites.

### **The Synergism between Domestic and Systemic Factors**

The gist of the preceding section is that the post-Soviet transition could be marked by upheaval. That section therefore focused on *domestic* variables. But to understand the connection between domestic upheaval and foreign and security policy, two further steps are needed: identifying the *systemic* variables (i.e., those governing the power balances among states) affecting foreign policy and security; and explaining how the interplay between systemic and domestic conditions will shape foreign policy and security outcomes.

The craft of defining and measuring power remains a perennial topic of debate among social scientists. But most would agree that population, GNP, land area, and the size of the armed forces are, taken together, useful in comparing the power of states. This is what Table 2 does, and it underscores two traits of the Russian-Central Asian security subsystem. First, that system is unipolar in the broad sense (i.e., Russia and Central Asia taken as a security community) inasmuch as Russia dwarfs the Central Asian states in all measures of power. Second, in the narrow sense (the five Central Asian states), it is bipolar in form, but potentially unipolar as well.

The distinction I have made between form and substance with reference to the Central Asian balance of power needs some explanation. While it is true that Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are the region's most powerful states (thus making the system bipolar in form), if one assumes that Kazakhstan could face irredentist upheaval in its northern, predominantly Russian, regions, and that Russia could become involved as an antagonist, the picture changes. The system then becomes substantively unipolar, given that Kazakhstan's attention and resources would be committed to the north, leaving Uzbekistan as the dominant Central Asian power by default. Uzbekistan would have much greater leeway to use instability in weaker neighboring states to pursue an irredentist agenda, particularly if the coincidence of Russian and Uzbek objectives, or Russian weakness or preoccupation, prevented Russia from acting as a source of restraint.

Country	Population (millions)	GNP Billion(US\$)	Area (1000 sq. kms.)	Armed Forces
Russia	148	400.2	17,075	2,030,000
Kazakstan	16	39.2	2,717	44,000
Kyrgyzstan	4	7.0	199	12,000
Tajikistan	5	5.5	143	3,000
Turkmenistan	3	8.8	488	28,000
Uzbekistan	20	27.5	447	40,000

**Sources:** *The First Book of Demographics for the Republics of the Former Soviet Union* (Shady Side, MD: New World Demographics, 1992), p. A-3 (for population and area); International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance, 1993-1994* (London: IISS, 1993), pp. 98-99, 144-145 (GNP and armed forces).

**Notes:** Population figures are for 1989 and have been rounded; GNP and armed forces data are for 1992.

The connection between the systemic and domestic variables is as follows. The greater the danger that a rocky post-Soviet transition (featuring states beleaguered by mobilized citizens, radical nationalism, and political turmoil caused by economic crises) could create instability, or bring to power ultranationalist regimes within states, the higher the probability that dominant states will prey upon weaker ones. Let us assume that the danger of Uzbekistan's domination of Central Asia can effectively be countered by the residual capacity of Kazakstan and, more importantly, by relying on Russia as a protector. But that begs a fundamental question: what if Russia itself becomes the security threat? To be sure, this is not foreordained. To say that Russia is bound to become a neo-imperial state and cannot act as a benign hegemon is to succumb to historical and geographical determinism.

The nature of Russian conduct in Central Asia is by no means predetermined by systemic factors (Russia's overwhelming advantages in power and its proximity). Rather, it will depend on how these systemic factors interact with domestic factors in both Russia and in the Central Asian states. Imagine a Russia characterized by democratic politics, economic prosperity, and territorial integrity. In such a Russia, the ultra-nationalist hard right will be marginalized—the shrillness of their slogans will be more evident than their influence on politics. Add to this scenario a Central Asia in which governments—whether democratic or not—maintain stability, retain close ties to Russia, and practice nondiscriminatory policies toward the ethnic Russian population. In other words, the problems of the post-Soviet transition (social mobilization, nationalism, and economic dislocations) have not led to the breakdown of order in Central Asia; Russia is satisfied that its basic interests are protected, and it does not regard the frontier as turbulent. This is the optimistic scenario. Russian democrats, who govern Russia in this scenario, are determined to have preponderant influence over the former Soviet republics; but relative to other groups they are least likely to try to recreate the empire through neo-imperial policies, particularly while stability prevails along Russia's southern perimeter and its great power interests are respected. They regard the quest for empire as a drain on resources and a recipe for troubled relations with the West.

Now to the pessimistic scenario. In Russia, upheaval created by the shocks of economic transformation and the resulting social mobilization strips democratic ruling elites of their legitimacy. Inflation, unemployment, poverty, and crime take their toll on the body politic. The weakness of the central government emboldens secessionist movements in the non-Russian regions (Chechnya, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan). A political vacuum emerges as the central government loses effectiveness and legitimacy. The road is open for a seizure of power by the ramshackle armed forces or a civilian ultranationalist. Imagine at the same time that economic dislocation in Central Asia—where inflation, unemployment, and population growth rates are very high—sweeps away the current basically pro-Russian governments led by former communist party officials. Their successors are not cut from Soviet cloth; rather, they are inspired by anti-Russian nationalism and a militant variant of Islam. They look for alternatives to the Russian connection, and the influence of Iran and Afghanistan increases in Central Asia, leading Russia to fear that its historic predominance is at risk. Instability in Central Asia increases as the forces of change storm the rickety barricades of anciens régimes. The local Russian population feels more and more vulnerable as radical counter-elites emerge as powerful contenders for state power. In countries where they are a small proportion of the population, they emigrate. But in Kazakstan, greater numbers (six million, over a third of the total population), a sense of belonging to the land created by a longer history of settlement, and proximity to Russia beget bolder actions. Kazakstan's Russians refuse to go quietly; they seek autonomy, even secession, with Russian help, which is readily offered given the nature of the regime in Moscow. The chances of a neo-imperial Russian policy are far greater now for two reasons. First, the post-Soviet transition both in the center (Russia) and at the periphery (Central Asia) has failed: the domestic variables have moved in the wrong direction. Second, the systemic conditions (those accounting for Russia's superior power) now take on a new significance given domestic change in the center and periphery.

In both scenarios, it is the interplay between systemic and domestic conditions that is decisive. The mere fact of Russian preponderance tells us nothing about how that preponderance will be used: for benign hegemony or for neo-imperialism. Figure 1 both depicts and refines the relationship between systemic and domestic conditions. Note that as a heuristic device it could be applied to foreign policy and security dynamics within Central Asia by substituting Russia in the matrix with Uzbekistan, for the overall point is that it is the interface between domestic instability and the preponderant power of states that matters for how things turn out in the realms of security and foreign policy.

Figure 1 depicts four scenarios, each of which turns on a specific combination of systemic and domestic conditions. In the first scenario, Russia is democratic and Central Asia is stable. Both are coping well with the post-Soviet transition, and the prospects for Russian neo-imperialism are virtually nonexistent. In the second, a failed post-Soviet transition has brought an authoritarian-nationalist regime to power in Russia, but Central Asia remains stable. Here, the mere advent of ultranationalists to state power in Russia does raise the danger of Russian

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**FIGURE 1**

**Prospects for Russian Neo-imperialism/Intervention in Central Asia**

	<i>Democratic Russia</i>	<i>Authoritarian Russia</i>
Stable Central Asia	Virtually Nil	Moderately Low
Unstable Central Asia	Significant	Exceptionally High

intervention; such ruling elites could manufacture pretexts for intervention, particularly to wage an irredentist campaign in northern Kazakhstan. But as long as Central Asian leaders maintain order and respect Russia's interests (stability, the absence of nonregional challengers to predominant Russian influence, the safety of the Russian diaspora) the risks are still low. In the third scenario, democracy prevails in Russia, but upheaval created by the post-Soviet transition emerges in Central Asia. In this situation, particularly if the legitimacy of the democratic government in Russia is low (due to economic problems, ethnic conflict, etc.), its leaders will be under pressure from ultranationalist critics to act forcefully to defend Russian interests in the southern periphery. Consequently, the danger of intervention increases significantly. The last scenario (the post-Soviet transition fails in Russia and Central Asia) is the most dangerous. Preponderant Russian power (the systemic condition) is now wielded by authoritarian nationalists at a time when chaos prevails in the periphery. The danger of Russian-Central Asian conflict is now exceptionally high.

It would be reckless to predict which of these scenarios is the most likely or to rank them. But I am prepared to make some assessments about what I see as the general shape of things to come. The failure of Russia's experiment with democracy is, in my opinion, a distinct possibility, although by no means foreordained. If a nationalist, authoritarian regime—the most likely eventuality if democracy fails—does come to power in Russia, the outbreak of instability in Central Asia, especially in Kazakhstan, would create the context for conflict between Russia and the Central Asian states. The most likely sources of instability in Central Asia are those rooted in economic hardship and militant nationalism. The former is inherent in the exceedingly difficult nature of Central Asia's post-Soviet economics, which I have already discussed. The latter could arise as existing rulers are tempted to shore up their legitimacy by rhetoric and by policies that privilege the titular nationalities in the economic, political, and cultural spheres. This could set off inter-ethnic conflicts, particularly in those states where there are significant numbers of people who do not belong to the titular nationality (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan). Rabid nationalism could, of course, create a context for conflicts among the Central Asian states themselves. American reporters and political pundits have given much attention to the threat posed to the region by "Islamic fundamentalism" (the post-Cold War era's new bogeyman). But I do not believe that organized movements dedicated to building polities based on the *shari'a* (Islamic law) and Koran, which is what Islamic fundamentalism, strictly defined, seeks to accomplish, will be strong contenders for power. There are several reasons for this conclusion: the existing regimes have shown little tolerance for Islamic parties; seventy years of Soviet rule have created a substantial secular intelligentsia in Central Asia; and in the states whose cultures have a nomadic origin (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan), the penetration of Islam has not been very deep. This is not to say that the religious and cultural manifestations of Islam (suppressed or driven underground under Soviet rule) will not be much more visible; they will. But to confuse the appearances of mosques and *madrasahs* (Islamic schools) with the rise of fundamentalist political movements would be as misguided as using the prevalence of, say, churches and religious weddings in the United States as harbingers of Christian fundamentalism as a political movement.

### **Implications for American Policy**

The preceding analysis has several implications for U.S. policy. My point of departure is that relative to other areas (Europe, the Middle East, and Northeast Asia), there are no vital U.S. interests at stake in Central Asia. One can always point to the existence of oil and natural gas, or the involvement of American companies in the Central Asian marketplace. But this does not change the picture: the presence of natural riches or American economic activity in a given region cannot be conflated with the existence of important U.S. interests there. More-

over, events in Central Asia are not likely to imperil the security of states that do matter significantly for U.S. security.

It follows that the United States should not become the guarantor of Central Asian security—either against Russia or any other state. Indeed, we must assume that the region (in a purely strategic sense) will be within the Russian sphere of interest for the foreseeable future. No state other than the United States has the capacity to alter that reality. China's center of power is on its eastern seaboard, and Central Asia is too remote a region for the effective projection of Chinese power as a counterweight to Russia. Indeed, Beijing, which is fearful of the implications of Central Asian Turkic nationalism for the Uighurs of Chinese Xinjiang, may well have come to regard Russia as a much-needed enforcer of stability and an antidote to radical nationalism in Central Asia. Chinese officials have in effect said so. As for Iran and Turkey, both are now far more extensively involved in Central Asia than they were during the Soviet era. But both are too dependent on Russia (Turkey for trade and construction contracts; Iran for arms and nuclear technology and as a counter to the United States) and too exposed to its power to take on the grandiose task of becoming Central Asia's protector. Without question, all of these states now have a much greater presence in Central Asia than they did prior to 1991; but their increased economic and cultural presence does not translate into a corresponding increase in strategic efficacy—for the foreseeable future, Russia is unrivaled in this sphere. This observation also applies to extra-regional organizations such as the UN, the Partnership for Peace, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). For different reasons (ranging from a lack of enforcement power to Russia's ability to veto or thwart their operations), none of them is in a position to offset Russia's preponderant power.

While U.S. policy-makers must be aware of the imbalance between American and Russian stakes in Central Asia, they must also realize that whether Russia is a benign hegemon or neo-imperial power is not a trivial matter. A neo-imperial Russian policy in Central Asia will alarm the other former Soviet republics and the states of Eastern Europe. They will either seek U.S. protection or come to terms with Russia—on Moscow's terms. More importantly, the nature of Russian policy (benign hegemony or neo-imperialism) will affect the atmosphere of U.S.-Russian relations and the nature of the Russian state itself. Just because there are no critical U.S. strategic interests in Central Asia, it does not follow that business will proceed as usual between Washington and Moscow if Russia adopts a neo-imperial policy on its periphery. At the very least, attitudes toward Russia will harden within the American public and certainly within Congress, with adverse implications for the entire range of issues on which the United States deals with Russia, most importantly economic aid, arms control, nuclear safety, and cooperation in global hot spots such as the Balkans. A Russia that adopts neo-imperialism as its credo in Central Asia (or, for that matter, elsewhere in the former Soviet Union) will be a country in which the ultranationalists and military hardliners become significant political players. The implications for Russia's democratic experiment, another issue of vital importance to the United States, should be obvious.

This raises the question of what kind of policy the United States *should* conduct in Central Asia. The systemic conditions (Russia's preponderance and ease of geographic access) are either unchangeable, or should be altered only if there are proportionate U.S. interests at stake. There are no such interests, and given our austere budget, and a public and Congress wary of new far-flung security commitments, the United States cannot play such a major role in Central Asian security. But the domestic conditions (crucial to the security environment in Central Asia) can be influenced—although not determined—at a lower level of engagement. A sustained program of U.S. assistance to Russia and Central Asia will help states cope with the upheavals accompanying the post-Soviet transition, thus reducing the likelihood of domestic conditions

that promote inter-state war. U.S. assistance can help Central Asian governments address a number of difficult issues. Lest such advice seem like a bromide, consider three specific examples:

First, thwarting the rising trade in narcotics. Kyrgyzstan, for example, has now become a major conduit for drugs originating in Pakistan and Afghanistan destined for Russia and the Baltics, and from these areas to the West. The Kyrgyz government lacks the resources and expertise to cope with this problem. The “narcomafia” has a vested interest in instability because it realizes that strong states will reduce its freedom of maneuver.

Second, restructuring industries in which ethnic Russians are statistically over-represented (this is true of heavy and defense industries in the northern regions of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan). If economic restructuring generates ethnic tensions, the security environment in Central Asia will become more volatile.

Third, providing aid that gives states the wherewithal to establish social welfare and worker retraining programs that mitigate the pain caused by economic reforms. An economic transition that has initiatives in place to cushion the shocks of change will reduce the likelihood that extremist movements will tap public despair and anomie.

Economic and technical assistance should be supplemented by vigorous U.S. diplomacy. Its aim should be to foster—through declared policy preferences, straight talk behind-the-scenes, and aid policies that reinforce desired behavior—democratic practices and tolerant variants of nationalism. The reason, as I have argued in this paper, is that the combination of authoritarianism in Russia and ethnic nationalism in Central Asia is dangerous. Such diplomacy should be complemented by a foreign aid policy that does not make the state—in post-Soviet societies, often the bastion of old thinking and corruption—the sole recipient of economic assistance, but which, instead, promotes private enterprise through educational and training programs and loans.

I have proposed a policy of sustained, affordable gradualism. It is undramatic (I do not advocate a latter-day Marshall Plan, Truman Doctrine, or containment strategy), but it is also realistic, affordable, proportionate to our interests, and attentive to economic and political realities in the United States. <sup>n</sup>