

“Central Asia in Russian and American Foreign Policy after September 11, 2001”

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September 11 brought with it a dramatic reconfiguration of the entire international security environment as well as a fundamental shift in the ranking of American foreign and security priorities. Virtually every other foreign policy priority was now subordinated to the effort to create an anti-terrorist coalition. This reorientation has had important consequences for American-Russian relations, as well as for US relations with Central Asia in general and with Uzbekistan in particular.

Both in Russia and in Uzbekistan, the new situation has evoked considerable confusion and contradictory reactions. On the one hand, there is a widespread concern that American military actions in Afghanistan, and the broader campaign against terrorism, will entangle Russia, Uzbekistan, and other countries of the region in a dangerous and potentially destabilizing set of military and political activities, along with the risk that an eventual American withdrawal will leave the states in the region to deal with the consequences alone. On the other hand, there are fears that the United States, once drawn into this region, may stay. And there are those who seem to hold both views simultaneously, unable to decide which of the two alternatives would be worse.

Turning first to the question of Russian relations with Central Asia, and how they are altered by the events of September 11 and their aftermath, let me make a few brief points. The dissolution of the Soviet Union, which created 15 independent states from what were previously merely regions in a larger empire, required all of them to elaborate foreign policies which defined their relations to each other as well as to the great variety of other actors in the international system. Russia, as well as the new states of Central Asia, began with a token

commitment to the goals of democratization and market reform, along with a desire to preserve and strengthen their sovereignty and independence. The Central Asian countries, however, retreated from the pursuit of democratization and economic reform over the next decade in the name of stability. Stability, it was argued, required authoritarian regimes prepared to deal harshly with political dissent and Islamic extremism in a threatening and unstable geopolitical environment.

Notwithstanding this shared set of domestic concerns, the Central Asian states have pursued different and increasingly divergent foreign and security policies. Turkmenistan has sought to preserve its neutrality and has avoided joining a variety of political coalitions and regional organizations. Uzbekistan, by contrast, has actively engaged itself a great variety of associations and organizations, while others fall somewhere in between. All these states have also sought to maintain their continuing and important economic, political, and cultural ties with Russia—a subject to which I will return shortly—while at the same time developing new relationships with the United States and other Western countries.

Russian policy, meanwhile, has been preoccupied with preserving Russian political, cultural, economic, and security influence in the region without placing an excessive burden on the country's constrained economic resources. It has been a difficult balance to strike. For a number of years, Russians referred to the region as part of Russia's "near abroad," an area that occupied a special position in the hierarchy of Russian foreign policy priorities. To this day it is asserted by leading Russian officials—most recently by Sergei Ivanov—that Russia has a distinctive and preeminent, if not exclusive, set of economic and security interests in this region which other foreign powers should be obliged to accept. The tendency to see American engagement in the region in zero-sum terms, whereby any gains for the United States automatically meant a loss for Russia, meant that considerable efforts were devoted to blocking or limiting American political, economic, and military involvement in Central Asia. Russian foreign and security policy elites expressed a continuing fear that American involvement in the region, particularly in the development of energy resources, was simply the opening wedge of what would ultimately become an American military presence. American corporations might lead the process, but the Pentagon would quickly follow.

At the same time, the Russian elite began to appreciate that its own security environment was changing in dramatic ways. In the new Russian security doctrine which began to evolve in

the mid 1990s, Russian analysts and officials increasingly came to realize that the major threats to Russia's security no longer came from NATO, in the form of a conventional or nuclear attack on Russian territory. Rather, the emerging new threats to Russian security were internal as well as external, and they came from the Caucasus and Central Asia. In short, the real dangers threatening Russia were the potential for instability and turmoil along Russia's southern borders.

Not only did the focus of Russian security concern shift southward, but security issues began to be defined in terms far broader than simple military balances. Increasingly, the flows of weapons, of drugs, of refugees, and of Islamist radicalism and terrorism came to be viewed as major new threats to security. The drug trade took on particular importance because of its role in financing civil wars and insurgencies across the entire region, beginning with the civil war in Tajikistan and extending to the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Russian elites have also become increasingly concerned of late about the dangers of nuclear proliferation and of biological and chemical weapons in the hands of terrorists in the region. They welcomed American efforts to remove nuclear warheads from the three other successor states that possessed them—Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan—and acquiesced as well in American efforts to remove stocks of fissile materials from Kazakhstan. More recently the threat of biological terrorism has become an increasing concern. The Soviet government had developed a large-scale secret research program on biological warfare and engaged in the development and testing of biological agents such as anthrax on the territory of Uzbekistan, among other sites. With the shrinking of the Aral Sea, one of those sites—Uzbekistan's Vozrozhdenie Island—poses a serious hazard to the safety of populations in the region, and the United States is working with the government of Uzbekistan to find ways to neutralize this material.

Yet a third set of Russian interests, of course, has been economic. Not only is the Central Asian region a major source of gas and oil, but it also competes with Russian energy resources in attracting Western investment. In the past Russian policy has sought to minimize energy development in this region, both by directing foreign investment toward Siberia and other parts of Russia and by blocking alternative new pipeline routes that would carry energy from Central Asia and Azerbaijan directly to western markets without transiting Russia, as all of the existing pipelines routes do currently. Russian discussions have adopted the imagery of the "new Great Game" to describe the competition for control over energy resources and their export.

In view of these Russian interests and concerns, there is understandably a good deal of disquiet about the prospects of a major American presence, not only economic but now also a military presence, in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. But there is also clearly a trade-off between costs and benefits. It has been argued—and this argument has clearly persuaded President Putin—that American reinforcement of the stability of the Central Asian countries and of Russia’s southern borders could be of considerable benefit at a time when Russia alone is incapable of managing the new threats in the region.

The development of American relations with these countries began under the Clinton administration—virtually from a clean slate—after the Soviet dissolution in 1991. The Clinton administration moved rapidly to create diplomatic, political, and economic ties with countries about which the American government was relatively ignorant in those early years. One story describes a newly-arrived ambassador charged with creating the first embassy in the region using his suspenders to run an American flag up a makeshift flagpole. But an effort was made to establish an American presence in all of these new states and, as part of the Clinton administration’s pursuit of a “New World Order,” to view the Central Asian countries, like Russia, as potential members of a new community of democratic and market-oriented states. In retrospect, some of these expectations appear naive and utopian. But there was a good deal of excitement at the time about the prospect that democracy and market economies might extend not only to Central and Eastern Europe, and not only to the Baltic states and Russia, but southward across the Caucasus and into Central Asia, and that Western investment would help bring prosperity and stability to the entire region.

The United States also committed itself to promoting and protecting the security and the sovereignty of these new states. As a consequence of the sharp cutbacks in funding for the State Department and for other political instruments of American foreign policy in previous administrations, some of the initiative fell almost by default to the Pentagon. Under the imaginative leadership of Defense Secretary William Perry, the Partnership for Peace program was inaugurated as both a way of handling the delicate issue of NATO enlargement but also as a way to develop broader ties with the Central Asian countries and to promote the democratization of their Soviet-style military institutions and behaviors. This program would lay the foundation for a growing network of cooperative political and military ties—to Uzbekistan in particular—

which would play an unexpected but significant role in facilitating the joint efforts after September 11.

Many of the hopes for democratic development in Uzbekistan and the other Central Asian states were dimmed over time as these countries turned to increasing authoritarianism and repression. In the West, criticism mounted over their human rights records and their harsh treatment of domestic opposition, while the governments in the region were in turn increasingly disappointed by an apparent loss of American interest and support for their internal development and by what they viewed as insufficient appreciation for the serious challenges and threats they faced.

The case of Uzbekistan is of particular interest. Its leadership sought to maneuver in very complex ways between the United States and Russia in trying to promote its domestic and foreign policy interests. On the one hand, it went further than any other Central Asian country in resisting Russian efforts to preserve its hegemony over the region, not only playing an active role in the Partnership for Peace program but also pursuing regional cooperation with like-minded states by joining the GUUAM group (GUUAM stands for Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Moldova), which was created as a counterpoise to the Russian-dominated Commonwealth of Independent States and has sought to develop closer links to the US and to European countries.

At the same time, however, Uzbek leadership was well aware that Russia remained a key player in the region. However well-disposed any given administration might be, the US was ultimately a distant and uncertain partner, whereas Russia, by geography, by history, and by political, economic, and security interests, was likely to continue to play a considerable role in the region. Both countries also shared similar interests in Afghanistan; Russian political and military support for the Northern Alliance, and hostility to the Taliban, coincided with Uzbekistan's policy. In short, Uzbekistan was in the midst of a very complex set of relationships with Russia and the United States when September 11 suddenly gave a new vitality to the entire Uzbek-American relationship. President Karimov moved very quickly to offer tangible support to the US military campaign, including granting the American government the use of a much-needed military base close to Afghanistan. He managed to win some still-secret security assurances from Washington, as well as promises of political and economic support whose dimensions are not fully clear. (The addition of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan to the US

State Department's list of terrorist organizations was undoubtedly a welcome gesture.) He presumably also tried to extract some longer-term commitments that the US would remain engaged with Uzbekistan over the longer term and not quickly withdraw its support when the military campaign in Afghanistan ended. In short, the events of September 11 prompted a significantly deeper level of engagement of the two countries and promised a longer term relationship in the future, although its concrete outlines remain as yet unclear. It also remains unclear how far the American leadership will go in toning down some of its criticism of human rights and political abuses in the interest of cooperation in the war against terrorism.

Let me conclude by pointing to several difficult new challenges that American foreign policymakers will have to address, and which involve American relations with Russia and Uzbekistan in particular. The first problem is one which besets the entire anti-terrorist coalition: the problem of defining terrorism. It has often been argued that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. The new anti-terrorist coalition embraces partners who have divergent and often conflicting agendas of their own. For Pakistan, to take one example, the issue of Kashmir is a driving force in domestic and foreign policy, and the support of Pakistani military and intelligence services for the Taliban and for al-Qaeda was linked to their role in training Islamist insurgents operating in Kashmir. India, on the other hand, views these insurgents as terrorists, and Pakistan's efforts to win Western support for its position vis-à-vis Kashmir complicate the involvement of India in the coalition, as well as efforts to reduce the level of hostilities between the two nuclear-armed countries.

Then there is the problem of Chechnya, which we have not discussed today at any length. In signing on to the anti-terrorist coalition, Russia's President Putin has extracted a shift in American and Western treatment of the conflict in Chechnya. Putin has long insisted that the Russian military campaign in Chechnya is an anti-terrorist war, while the West tended to view the conflict as an ethno-political struggle disguised as an anti-terrorist campaign. In the short run, the United States government, as well as European leaders, has toned down its criticism and appears to be giving President Putin's views of the situation in Chechnya more credence than in the past. This shift in position may not last indefinitely, however, if there are no serious moves by the Putin government toward a political solution in Chechnya.

The United States faces a similar problem in its relations with Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan has been repeatedly criticized by the US government and by NGOs for its massive abuses of

human rights. For the moment, criticism of those abuses is likely to be muted in the interests of smoothing the relations between the governments, but it may well resurface in the future as a consequence of international and domestic pressures. The cases of Pakistan, Chechnya, and Uzbekistan illustrate a broader problem: the danger that the anti-terrorist campaign will lead to a drastic subordination of concerns with human rights and political repression in countries supporting the coalition and the use of a double standard elsewhere. The argument that domestic stability and the struggle against Islamist radicalism and terrorism require the suspension of civil liberties and the strengthening of authoritarian rule is already finding a more receptive audience in the West.

Differences between the US, Russia, and Uzbekistan are also likely to surface over issues involving the future of Afghanistan itself. In particular, American policy will have to reconcile the interests of Pakistan, which tends to be supportive of the so-called moderate elements of the Taliban and which wants to see the Pushtun groupings of southern Afghanistan play a major role in a post-war coalition government, with the interests of Russia and Uzbekistan (along with Iran), which strongly support the Northern Alliance and the Rabbani government, even though all sides recognize the need for an inclusive coalition government if Afghanistan is to avoid further civil war.

Finally, perhaps the greatest challenge has to do with how the American government will think about its future role in the region. At the moment, we are engaged in a campaign which is largely defined in military terms. Washington has only just begun to think about a political endgame and to focus on the more limited issue of how to construct a coalition government in Afghanistan. But it remains altogether unclear what role the United States is prepared to play in the reconstruction of Afghanistan and in the stabilization of the region more broadly. While the United Nations may offer the most acceptable institutional framework for these efforts, long-term American engagement and leadership will remain essential to their success.

The events of September 11, and the military campaign in Afghanistan which they precipitated, have involved the United States deeply in a region which was previously treated as marginal to core American interests. In the process, new ties have been forged with political and military leaders in Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Russia, and other states in the region, ties which create some measure of responsibility for continued engagement in shaping the future of the region. But this challenge has not yet been confronted.