
The Uzbek Expulsion of U.S. Forces and Realignment in Central Asia

Gregory Gleason

Moscow was glad to see U.S. military forces expelled from Uzbekistan but may soon have its own problems with Tashkent.

A SERIES OF EVENTS in 2005 pointed to a major shift in Central Asia's relations with the outside world. Uzbekistan, Central Asia's most populous and influential country, occupies a pivotal position in the Eurasian region. Because of its physical position with respect to regional cooperation, transportation, trade, and humanitarian issues such as migration and human rights, Uzbekistan's foreign policy posture has profound implications for its neighbors. For this reason, political observers were shaken in late July 2005 when the Uzbek government announced that the U.S. troops stationed in the country had 180 days to pack and leave. This declaration represented a sharp and significant reversal of Uzbek foreign policy. What explains the reversal, and what are its implications for Uzbek foreign policy and for regional stability?

Georgia's Rose Revolution in November 2003, Ukraine's Orange Revolution in January 2004, and Kyrgyzstan's revolt in March 2005 all demonstrated that public dissatisfaction needs only the catalyst of political activism to topple even a well-armed and well-fortified authoritarian post-communist regime. Uzbekistan's heavy-handed leader, Islam Karimov, has headed an increasingly embattled government for more than a decade and a half. Throughout this period, threats both imagined and real have invariably been countered by governmental repression. As the first generation of post-communist leaders began to leave the political scene in other countries throughout the former Soviet Union, Karimov realized that he was facing two starkly different choices. He could out-compete the democratic "color revolutions" by introducing serious governance reforms, or he could try to enlist the help of outside al-

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lies to strengthen his regime. The adoption of genuine political and economic reforms would certainly have meant that Karimov, his entourage, and his regime's elite supporters would be swept aside. Inquiries would have followed, and in turn the inquiries would have been followed by investigations. On the other hand, enlisting new allies to prop up the regime would entail a complete reversal of Uzbekistan's foreign policy. Karimov chose the latter course.¹

Uzbekistan and the Khanabad Airbase

The Soviet Union had a major airbase at Khanabad near the southern border of Uzbekistan, close to the city of Karshi, that was used to support military operations in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989. When the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991, the base came under Uzbek control and was mothballed. Karimov, the first secretary of the Uzbek Communist Party, was elected president in 1990. He was determined to make Uzbekistan a powerful and stable state, returning the Uzbeks to their traditions of the past. However, insecurity dogged the new Uzbek state, particularly after the growth of religious extremism in Afghanistan began to fuel an anti-Karimov insurgency.

Karimov chided the international community for its inability to see the dangers looming in the region and called for coordinated action. At the same time, he was not willing to compromise Uzbek sovereignty and specifically ruled out the idea of permitting Russian forces to use bases on Uzbek territory to launch strikes against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.² The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, changed the situation, transforming U.S. foreign policy. These events and the demonstration of U.S. resolve changed the way Uzbekistan looked at the United States.

When Washington began seeking allies in Central Asia, it met with surprisingly rapid success. All of the countries in the region agreed to allow the United States to use their air space for military overflights. Karimov volunteered the use of the Khanabad facility. The United States quickly swung into action. A mere three weeks after the events of 9/11, U.S. transport planes were landing at Khanabad and delivering materiel for Operation Enduring Freedom, the campaign to destroy al-Qaeda's terrorist operations and remove the Taliban government.

The Khanabad base near Karshi, dubbed "K2," quickly built up to around 1,500 American personnel, mainly from the Air Force and Army. The Khanabad base was ideal because of its proximity to Afghanistan

and its access to road transport. It was a jumping-off point for contact with the tribes of northern Afghanistan that would join the United States against the Pushtun-dominated Taliban government. Khanabad played a key role in the alliance between the United States and Uzbekistan, formalized in the Strategic Partnership agreement signed in March 2002 in Washington by President Karimov and President George W. Bush.³

The U.S.-Uzbek alliance steadily gained momentum at first, for it appeared to be based on common interests, common objectives, and potentially valuable opportunities for further development. The partnership between the two countries—at least as imagined in these idealistic terms—came to an abrupt end on July 29, 2005, when the Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed the U.S. embassy in Tashkent that the U.S. troops had 180 days to withdraw from Khanabad.

Uzbekistan's about-face was not caused by any single incident, but was the result of a cumulative series of events that culminated in the spring of 2005. Uzbekistan has not repudiated the Strategic Partnership, nor has it announced in any substantive way that its partnership with Washington has ended. It has, however, made a formal and significant commitment to closer relations for security and economic development with Russia.

The decision to withdraw from the partnership with the United States occurred through a set of incremental steps that gradually distanced Uzbekistan from American influence, reaching a crescendo in the spring of 2005. In April the Uzbek government announced that it would not issue new visas for Peace Corps volunteers.⁴ In May it announced its intention to withdraw from GUUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Moldova), a regional military cooperation organization whose name is an acronym for the member states but is routinely identified in Russia-language sources as the "anti-Russian alliance."⁵ When armed opposition erupted in May in Andijan, a city in the densely populated Fergana Valley, the Uzbek government declared it was a terrorist outbreak and responded with force. Non-governmental organizations and Western governments called for an independent inquiry, but the Uzbek government conducted its own investigation and refused outside help, making an exception only for a Russian inquiry.⁶ Uzbek officials refused to meet with visiting U.S. officials who urged them to address concerns about human rights and government policies.

When the United States joined the call for an independent inquiry to alleviate the Fergana Valley refugee crisis, Karimov bluntly denounced this as foreign interference in the country's domestic affairs. At the



General view of a rally on the square outside the administration building during the uprising in the city of Andijan, Uzbekistan, May 13, 2005. Uzbekistan's courts sentenced more than forty people to between twelve and twenty years in prison, December 21, 2005, in connection with the May uprising, which was brutally suppressed by government troops. (AP Photo/ Efrem Lukatsky, File)

July 2005 meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO),⁷ the leaders of the neighboring Central Asian states called for a timeframe for withdrawal of military bases from Central Asia on the ground that the objectives of Operation Enduring Freedom had been achieved.⁸ The Uzbek government made it clear that it intended to expel U.S. troops, explaining that this was a Central Asian policy. Bristling at any sign of foreign interference, the Uzbek government turned down an appeal from the European Union to allow an independent inquiry of the Andijan events. The rebuffed EU foreign ministers, in October 2005, expressed their disapproval by suspending assistance cooperation, imposing an arms embargo, and banning travel by Uzbek officials responsible for “the indiscriminate and disproportionate use of force.”⁹

The whole pattern of events associated with the reversal of Uzbek foreign policy is replete with fig-leaf justifications and illogical consequences. The SCO leaders broadly criticized Operation Enduring Freedom, but used its success as a justification for the withdrawal

of U.S. troops. The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Central Asia was given as the grounds for expulsion of the troops in Uzbekistan but the same argument was not applied to the U.S. troops remaining in Kyrgyzstan. The EU arms embargo was hardly logical, given that there was no arms trade between Uzbekistan and the EU countries and the embargo would only encourage greater arms trade with Russia, a goal long sought by the Russians.

The military importance of the K2 base in Uzbekistan to American policy in the region is debatable. In one sense the United States never really had a base in Uzbekistan. When the U.S.-Uzbek alliance began, American diplomatic officials emphasized that the United States intended to use the facilities only on a temporary basis and had no intention to stay permanently in the region. Washington was not “buying” or even “renting” the facilities but was only “borrowing” them, they said. Uzbekistan was providing the facilities as its contribution to the campaign, and the United States was simply paying for services associated with

them.¹⁰ In January 2002, Elizabeth Jones, the highest U.S. State Department official dealing with the region, explained that “There are no American bases in Central Asia. However, U.S. military forces have been granted access to any number of military bases by various Central Asian governments. The United States does not intend to have permanent bases in Central Asia, but we are grateful to have access to these bases.”¹¹ Jones put it even more directly at a press conference in Washington in February 2002, “The fact is, we are not looking for, we don’t want, U.S. bases in Central Asia.”¹²

In another sense, however, the Khanabad base, or at least the “use of the base facilities,” was quite valuable, particularly in the early stages of Operation Enduring Freedom. A close military and diplomatic relationship on security issues soon developed between the United States and Uzbekistan. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld repeatedly lauded Uzbekistan as a “stalwart” partner in the struggle against terrorism.¹³ The United States greatly benefited from the use of the Khanabad facility, starting in October 2001 during the initial stages of the military operation to displace the Taliban government in Afghanistan. As an indication of its importance, U.S. officials, even before the expulsion was made public, began seeking to reposition American military forces in Uzbekistan’s neighboring countries. The newly elected president of Kyrgyzstan, Kurmanbek Bakiev, following a meeting with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in October 2005, reaffirmed the continuation of a U.S. military presence in Central Asia, announcing that American troops could stay in Kyrgyzstan “as long as the situation in Afghanistan warranted it.”¹⁴ Even after the loss of the Khanabad facility, U.S. officials continued to emphasize Uzbekistan’s cooperation in the broader international anti-terrorist campaign. But, in fact, Uzbekistan’s withdrawal from close cooperation with the United States eliminated one of the most valuable channels of information and leverage for U.S. security interests in the region. The breakdown of the relationship with Uzbekistan deprived Washington of a great deal of insight into the terrorists in Afghanistan, many of whom were originally Uzbeks or were of Uzbek ethnic origin.

The most apparent consequence of the failure of the alliance is not that the United States has lost an important outpost in Central Asia, but that it has relinquished its position to Russia. As many observers pointed out, U.S. influence in the region was, to a certain extent, a counterweight to Russia and China, both of which would “remain eager to fill any new security voids that may develop in Central Asia.”¹⁵

Immediately after the emergence of the U.S.-Uzbek alliance, President Vladimir Putin saw the American presence in the region as a challenge to use Russia’s comparative advantages to gain greater advantages rather than directly confront the United States. In 2001 Putin raised no objections to U.S. overflights in the Central Asian countries or the basing of troops at Khanabad and the Ganci base in Kyrgyzstan. In addition, Putin softened his position with respect to NATO enlargement and U.S. national missile-defense systems. Putin announced his intention to close Russian facilities in Cuba and Vietnam. But while following this track, he also set out to develop a more “proactive, hard-headed, and effective Russian policy” in the Central Asian region.¹⁶

In the past three years in particular, Russia has expanded its trade, energy, and investment ties with the Central Asian countries, signing major contracts for new deals in hydroelectric generation, gas, oil, and agriculture.¹⁷ Meanwhile, Russia continued to lobby for the removal of U.S. forces, particularly through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which met in a special session on September 5, 2003, in the Uzbek capital, Tashkent. Soon after the SCO meeting, Defense Minister Sergei B. Ivanov made it clear that Russia expected the United States to withdraw from its bases in the two former Soviet republics in Central Asia once the mission in Afghanistan was completed.¹⁸ The Russian military continued to lobby for its own facilities, obtaining the right to use the Kant airbase near Bishkek and, more recently, military facilities in Tajikistan.

A less apparent but much more significant implication of the status of the U.S.-Uzbek alliance is the possible loss of what could have been a major asset for the United States. The southern tier countries of the former Soviet Union—the Caucasus states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, and the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—all have large Muslim populations that are predominantly moderate. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan in particular could be characterized as the world’s most moderate modern Muslim states. These countries represent a critically important model for cultural development, in comparison to the extremist Muslim ideologies that have played so important a role in the Middle East. Washington has good relations with all these countries, but does not see them as having much more than military and commercial potential. They have a much broader ideational importance, however. The turnabout in Uzbekistan’s relations with Russia is a product of Putin’s foreign policy goals in

the region, goals that have military, commercial, and ideational aspects.

Russia's Restoration

Russian interests in Central Asia have deep roots, and Russia had long played a leading role in southern Eurasia. When the Soviet Union disintegrated, Moscow policymakers assumed that Russia would continue to play a leading role in southern Eurasia. Russia's claim to the lands of the North Caucasus dates back to Ivan the Terrible's capture of Astrakhan in 1556. Russia expanded into Kazakhstan and western Siberia in the mid-1850s, captured key Chechen warlords in 1865, and pushed into Central Asia and Afghanistan in the 1870s. The modern contours of Central Asia were defined by the competition between the Russians and the British over the lands south of the Oxus River.¹⁹ After the collapse of the Russian monarchy in 1917, the Bolsheviks quickly announced their intention to retain tsarist Russia's hegemony over the Caucasus and Central Asian regions.

The seven decades of Soviet control of south Eurasia witnessed the transformation of many aspects of life, from commerce, science, and industry to culture itself. While efforts to "Sovietize" the countries of the region did not succeed in creating *homo Sovieticus*, the Russian stamp of the Soviet period was unmistakable.²⁰ By the late 1980s, virtually all of the region's important commercial ties had been oriented northward for more than a century. The professional and managerial classes of the various countries had been russified, and many of them had been trained in the universities and technical institutes of Moscow and the other cities of the Eurasian north. The Russian language was the *lingua franca* for anyone who aspired to succeed. Although the Soviet Union claimed to be an internationalist state, the southern Eurasian region was, in fact, largely under Russian control.

The indigenous peoples had many objections to the Russian presence in the Caucasus and Central Asia during the Soviet period. Russia's policies toward the Caucasus and Central Asia were also viewed unfavorably by some members of the Russian political elite. Influential political economists argued that the Central Asian countries and the Caucasus were economic liabilities, supported at the expense of the north Eurasian regions.²¹ By the time the Soviet Union began disintegrating in 1991, many Russian officials greeted the withdrawal from the Caucasus and Central Asia with relief and even enthusiasm. But the Moscow policymakers who were happy

to shed the burden of the southern Soviet republics also assumed that Russia would retain its historical hegemony in the region. The hastily crafted Alma-Ata Declaration and the other agreements that established the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in December 1991 reflected an assumption that maintaining a level playing field in commerce and policy would leave relatively advanced Russia in a privileged position.²²

Subsequent events proved this assumption unwarranted. As the post-communist transition proceeded, Russia's ability to exert decisive influence over Central Eurasia receded. Independent-minded states like Georgia and Uzbekistan challenged Russia's claim to a dominant voice in the region's security and economic arrangements. Russia's own internal political disputes, shrinking government revenues, the financial markets crisis in 1998, weak world-market commodity prices, and the rising European and U.S. influence throughout the Eurasian region made it difficult to maintain the former sphere of influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Russia soon found itself unable to influence infrastructure development as international organizations and large multi-lateral lending institutions moved into the region, establishing new mechanisms and new priorities for economic development.

Thus, as the first decade of post-Soviet independence proceeded, the choices for Russian foreign policy were cramped. Russia occasionally attempted to control south Eurasian regional politics and oil development through intimidation, coercion, and surreptitious support for opposition groups. One might mention, for instance, the coups and armed conflicts in Azerbaijan and Georgia, the invasion of Chechnya in 1994, the securing of basing rights in Armenia, Georgia, and Turkmenistan, the blocking of the transport of oil and gas exports from Kazakhstan, and the retaliation against independent-minded Uzbekistan by establishing a Russian military outpost in neighboring Tajikistan. These heavy-handed attempts to regain control were usually unproductive and often counter-productive, inclining the south Eurasian states to pursue stratagems of self-help and greater independence.

The assumption of a grand policy toward Central Asia and the Caucasus gradually devolved into a situation in which Russia was conducting numerous parallel but not always complementary bilateral foreign policies. Sometimes this put Russia in a position to divide the countries to its benefit, but more often it simply meant that none of the countries succeeded in even the most basic forms of infrastructure and commercial cooperation. The list of failed cooperation attempts speaks volumes: the CIS itself, the CIS Collective Security Treaty, the Central

Asian Union, the Black Sea Forum, the Belarus-Russia Union, the Minsk Group, the Caucasus Four, the Caspian Five, the Central Asian Cooperation Organization, and the Shanghai Five. Eventually, dwindling intra-regional trade, the failure of international policy harmonization, and growing concern about terrorism, insurgency, and organized crime gradually persuaded Moscow to acknowledge that its approach to the countries of the “near abroad” was fragmented, ad hoc, and unsuccessful. The southern tier countries began pursuing separate paths.

Separate Paths in Central Asia

The conventional wisdom of the international financial institutions held that economic and political development are closely related, and that the adoption of democratic practices would stabilize countries and boost their trade and development potential. The anticipation in the former Soviet states that independence would naturally lead to prosperity turned out to be overly optimistic. The collapse of the Soviet Union plunged the Central Asian countries into a deep recession.²³ The effects varied from country to country.

Kyrgyzstan. The most determined pro-reform policies in the region were announced by the small, remote, mountainous country of Kyrgyzstan. Its first president, Askar Akaev, became a champion of the reform posture, and Kyrgyzstan became the *Wunderkind* of the international donor community. It was the first country in Central Asia to withdraw from the ruble zone, adopt a Western-style civil code, embrace a modern legal and regulatory framework, liberalize prices, privatize industry, and adopt an open political system. It was the first member of the CIS to join the World Trade Organization. Limited resources and trade dependence, however, constrained Kyrgyzstan’s progress. Reform took place, but the promised benefits of rising prosperity eluded most of the population. Following the disputed February–March 2005 parliamentary elections, a popular revolt broke out in the capital, Bishkek. Akaev fled and took refuge in Moscow. Kurmanbek Bakiev, the leader of the revolt, was later elected president.

Kazakhstan. The other major reformist country in the region is Kazakhstan. Oil wealth, possession of nuclear weapons, enthusiasm for structural reform, and a mixed Kazakh and Russian population were the defining features of the domestic political context during the first years of independence. Kazakhstan was integrated into the fabric of the international community more swiftly

and more fully than any of its neighbors. During the first years of his presidential tenure, Nursultan Nazarbaev consistently associated his diplomatic efforts with the concept of “Eurasianism,” based on close linkages among the peoples of the Central Eurasian landmass. Kazakhstan was a leader in market reform and pushed for regional cooperation, inventing the idea of Eurasian integration and pushing for regional cooperation as early as 1992. This idea led to the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia in June 2004, which brought together the leaders of sixteen Asian states to engage in a dialogue geared toward eventually establishing a transcontinental Conference on Security and Cooperation in Eurasia. The group stretches from Egypt to China, in a new organization with a focus on anti-terrorism.

Tajikistan. The smallest, poorest, and most challenged country in the region was Tajikistan. It too would probably have moved in the direction of reform if it had not fallen prey to an internal power struggle in the first year of independence. The country was plunged into a civil war that resulted in a blockade by its neighbors, further compressing the already collapsing national economy. The war was resolved, to a large extent, through the intervention of the Russians, who officially played a neutral role but in practice made it possible for the government of President Imomali Rahmonov to remain in power.²⁴

Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan is a small tribal civilization on the southern fringe of Central Asia. The area was largely undeveloped during the Soviet period. With the exception of gas and oil, the country’s minimal economic activity was largely maintained by Soviet central subsidies. Industry unrelated to the gas and oil complex was generally not commercially viable. Turkmenistan’s specialization in cotton production was based upon massive irrigation subsidies. When Soviet subsidies ended, most of the non-subsistence agriculture and industry immediately became insolvent. Yet rich natural gas reserves provided a basis for an intense, highly personalistic nationalism revolving around the country’s Soviet-era Communist Party boss, Saparmurat Niyazov.

Uzbekistan. The most heavily populated of the Central Asian republics, Uzbekistan quickly established itself as defiantly nationalist after independence. In a few short years it jettisoned virtually the entire legacy of seventy years of Soviet—that is, Russian—political



control and cultural influence. Uzbekistan’s authoritarian president, Islam Karimov, only a few years before a dutiful communist, quickly became an enthusiastic champion of an independent political path and an Uzbek cultural renewal.²⁵ In ways reminiscent of Turkey’s Kemal Ataturk, Karimov engineered a determined national consolidation. Government, economics, culture—the entire spectrum of policy arenas—was subsumed into the drive to “recover” Uzbekistan. The Russian language, uniformly prevalent just a few years ago, was quickly replaced by Uzbek. Karimov’s neo-mercantilist government aggressively sought diplomatic and commercial ties with a host of countries, partially in order increase its foreign policy options, but mainly to diminish the leverage of Russian diplomats and traders.

Eurasec

When the Soviet Union fell apart and the Central Asian countries went in their respective directions, many observers noted that the Soviet state was disintegrating just as the rest of the world seemed to be integrating. Globalization was bringing countries closer and closer together. The Eurasian Community was moving toward a Eurasian Union. Those who bemoaned the centrifugal

forces tearing the Soviet Union apart dreamed of an optimal strategy of close relations, full cooperation, all boats lifted, and harmonized policies where slow starters get pulled up rather than successively exploited. This cheery assumption led to a great deal of dissatisfaction when the post-Soviet states were unable to maintain the single unified space. The Russian government had treated the idea of integration with bemused chagrin. Other Central Asian states considered it useless or self-serving. Uzbekistan’s Islam Karimov regarded it as just an attempt to win the laurels of a new organization.

Without encouragement from the other CIS members, Kazakhstan’s Nazarbaev unilaterally began taking steps to create a foundation for interstate policy harmonization. He announced the idea in 1994 and two years later oversaw the formation of an Integration Committee, headquartered in Almaty, Kazakhstan.²⁶ The committee drew up plans for policy harmonization in four key arenas: financial markets, services, commodities, and labor. The goal was to establish a common set of policies and standards for coordinating customs and tariffs, visas, payments and settlements, investments, and labor, educational, and health regulations.

The Integration Committee eventually produced the plan for the Evraziiskoe Ekonomicheskoe Soobshchest-

vo (Eurasian Economic Community, known for short as Eurasec). The idea was to create a Eurasian version of successful integration efforts like the European Union in Europe, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in the Americas, and Mercosur (Southern Cone Common Market) in South America. The mechanisms of Eurasec were fashioned out of the lessons gained from the trial-and-error of nearly a decade of the CIS. The CIS agreements had been intended to coordinate monetary, customs, employment, tax, and investment policies on a regional basis. The CIS arrangements were designed to foster a free trade area, reduce internal tariffs, create common external tariffs, and establish a system for payments and settlements. To the extent that the CIS was unsuccessful in achieving these goals, Eurasec was oriented to finding new approaches.

By the time President Boris Yeltsin left office on New Year's Eve 1999, a consensus had already formed in the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs that a new approach toward Central Asia was necessary. Putin's public statement in late 1999 that Russia was, after all, a "Eurasian power" set the stage for a re-examination of Central Asian policy. The "Russian National Security Strategy" of January 2000 and the "Russian Foreign Policy Strategy" of July 2000 formalized the re-assessment. Important changes were made in the approach to the Central Asian states.²⁷ The Russian government began seeking modes of influence in Central Asia that relied more upon economic leverage than on political pressure.²⁸

By the summer of 2000, Moscow abruptly changed its position on Nazarbaev's Eurasianism proposals. Russia accepted his idea and began energetically negotiating an expansion of his original proposal. In October 2000 the presidents of five states met in Astana to sign the foundation documents that created the Eurasian Economic Community.²⁹ In May 2001, Eurasec was formally brought into being following ratification of the treaty by the five parliaments. Even before the events of 9/11 and the rapprochement between the United States and Russia over their shared security interest in combating terrorism, Russia's southern tier had become a "most sensitive frontier" and a "number one security priority."³⁰

While Moscow's ability to exert influence in Central Eurasia has declined, its strategic objectives in the region have not changed. The gap between capabilities and intentions has motivated the Russians to adopt a new strategic posture toward the countries lying to their south. Russia has turned to policy instruments such as the use of carefully orchestrated economic and policy integration strategies.

The Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) was founded in 1994 in an effort to cooperate on a regional basis without Russia. The Central Asian heads of state meeting in Astana, Kazakhstan, in late May 2004 surprised observers by announcing that Russia had been admitted to CACO. The surprise came not only from the fact that journalists and diplomatic observers had not been prepped for the announcement. It also came from the fact that CACO was originally established primarily to reduce the influence of Russia in Central Asian affairs. The admission of Russia as a member constitutes a complete about-face for Russia's role in Central Asian affairs. Simplifying things in 2005, Putin announced that an agreement had been reached to streamline the organizations by merging CACO and Eurasec. Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan agreed to merge within Eurasec as a single group.³¹ Uzbekistan's willingness to join Eurasec was based upon its withdrawal from the U.S.-Uzbek alliance. The transformation between 2001 and 2005 can be seen as the erosion of the strategic partnership.

Uzbekistan and the Erosion of the Strategic Partnership

Uzbekistan was never well situated in a partnership with Western governments because of its inability to modernize its administration and adhere to international standards of governance and civil rights. Tashkent sought to justify its human rights practices as counter-terrorism, but critics viewed some of its anti-terrorist measures as counter-productive, adding to the potential for greater militancy and instability.³² Excessive force in the struggle against terrorism, critics argue, is likely to increase the "potential for civil unrest as driven by the twin prongs of severe political repression and economic despair."³³ Other critics assert that Uzbekistan's campaigns against extremists may be a self-fulfilling prophecy as the Uzbek government makes "its own nightmares come true by identifying Islam with political dissidence, thereby channeling antigovernment feeling into politicized Islam."³⁴

International human rights groups had long been critical of Uzbekistan's government and law-enforcement agencies for their violations of human rights and of Uzbek law. In November 2000 the U.S. House of Representatives expressed concern over Uzbekistan's human rights violations and use of terrorism as a pretext for political repression, and urged the Karimov government, which "engaged in military campaigns against violent

insurgents, to observe international law regulating such actions, to keep civilians and other noncombatants from harm, and not to use such campaigns to justify further crackdowns on political opposition or violations of human rights commitments under OSCE [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe].”³⁵ A report released in April 2003 by the UN special rapporteur on torture, Theo van Boven, claimed that the use of torture in Uzbekistan’s prisons was “institutionalized, systematic, and rampant.” The Uzbek government initially reacted hostilely to the allegations but eventually agreed to develop a plan for addressing abuse in its prisons. It also allowed the International Committee of the Red Cross to visit prisons and other detention facilities.

Human rights groups, dissatisfied with this response, urged international organizations to demand improved human rights practices as a condition of international development assistance to Uzbekistan. The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, one of the major international financial institutions providing assistance to the former communist countries, initiated a review of Uzbekistan’s progress toward democratization and concluded, “There has been very limited progress and the Bank is no longer able to conduct business as usual. The Bank will stay engaged in Uzbekistan. However, it can only focus its activities on the private sector and those public sector projects that finance cross-border activities or clearly benefit the Uzbek people.”³⁶

The U.S. Department of State, which annually conducts a congressionally mandated review of human rights, also initiated a review of Uzbekistan’s compliance with commitments articulated in the 2002 Strategic Partnership agreement between Uzbekistan and the United States. According to the enabling legislation for various U.S. assistance programs, the secretary of state is required to certify compliance before certain assistance funds can be made available.³⁷

A State Department finding on the progress of the Uzbek government was expected early in the spring of 2004 but was postponed while the secretary of state “studied the situation.”³⁸ In July 2004 the State Department announced that Uzbekistan, based on its overall record of reform, could not be certified as making “substantial and continuing progress in meeting its commitments under the 2002 Strategic Partnership Framework, including respect for human rights, establishing a genuine multi-party system, and ensuring free and fair elections, freedom of expression, and the independence of the media.” The State Department announcement went on to say,

“This decision does not mean that either our interests in the region or our desire for continued cooperation with Uzbekistan has changed.”³⁹ By June 2005 relations had so deteriorated that Senator John McCain (R-AZ), writing in the *Financial Times*, warned: “If this trend continues, the U.S. has no choice but to re-evaluate all aspects of its relationship with Uzbekistan, and this includes our military relations. While we review our policy, we should suspend any talk of a long-term basing arrangement and look very critically at our continued presence at the Karshi-Khanabad air base.”⁴⁰

Tactics and Strategy in Realignment

Islam Karimov’s enthusiasm for restoring close relations with Russia has all the earmarks of a tactical maneuver. In the period after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Karimov was an outspoken critic of Soviet practice and an opponent of Russian political influence in Central Asia. Under Karimov’s leadership, the elimination of Russian influence was broadly based, including the gradual elimination of cultural, military, economic, and political influence. For more than a decade Karimov turned away from efforts to restore anything resembling Soviet-era political and economic relationships. When Nazarbaev announced that the Integration Committee was considering the establishment of a new Eurasian organization, Karimov ridiculed the idea of integration as nostalgia for the past. In 2001, according to the Russian and Kazakh press, Karimov declared that the Eurasec idea “was nothing more than an attempt to get public attention, an effort by the leaders of the CIS states to don the laurels of success.”⁴¹ However, time and circumstances worked a 180-degree transformation of Karimov’s views on integration. After reaching agreements with the leaders at the Eurasec meeting in St. Petersburg in October 2005, Karimov opined to news reporters that relations between Russia and Uzbekistan were so close that the idea of integration did not go far enough, and their relationship should be thought of as “union-like.”⁴²

Reversals may be part of the complex fabric of great power politics in Eurasia. Perceptions, interests, and capabilities change quickly in a globalized world. In these circumstances, calculations of diplomatic and military advantage cannot rely upon present circumstances but must think in terms of changes that may be over the horizon. Position is important not so much for what it means now, but for what it portends for the future. The leadership in Moscow may be pleased that Russia’s tacti-

cal losses in Central Asia appear to have yielded strategic advantages. Putin was quick to express condolences to Bush immediately after the September 11 tragedy and indicated that Russia was prepared to engage in joint anti-terrorism activities.⁴³ But at the same time, Putin may have seen a rapprochement with the United States as offering an opportunity to extend Russian influence in Central Asia. Putin simultaneously approached both the United States and the Central Asian states with proposals of Russian assistance.⁴⁴ But he was disabused of the expectation that Washington would welcome the prospect of relying on Moscow's good offices or that the Central Asian leaders would welcome his blandishments. Once it became clear that the United States was prepared to conduct its own operations with the support of the Central Asian states, notably by using the Khanabad-Karshi airbase, Russian nationalists immediately and bitterly opposed the deployment of U.S. forces into any of the territory of the former Soviet Union. Putin resigned himself to the American initiatives, countering his domestic critics by simply claiming that the U.S. military presence in the region was "not a tragedy," a formula that could hardly be read as an expression of support for the American presence.

At the beginning of the U.S.-Uzbek alliance, the Uzbek government and people gave the United States a warm welcome. Military and diplomatic officials of the two countries forged a close relationship, but the alliance created great expectations that were neither symmetrical nor realistic. The Uzbek side anticipated unconditional acceptance, technical aid, help in modernization, and a counterweight to Russian attempts to dominate the region. The U.S. side anticipated a good faith effort to reform and modernize. The Strategic Partnership agreement signed in March 2002, drafted by the United States, stated without reservations that the benefits for Uzbekistan were wholly contingent upon its progress in conforming to international standards of human rights and good governance. The United States did not understand that Central Asia was not ready for such interference, for the way Washington looked at things was oriented toward U.S. goals rather than what the Uzbeks understood.

A much more serious criticism is that the United States failed not only to understand Uzbekistan but to see the extent to which it did not understand Uzbekistan. Americans are commonly criticized for their inability to overcome the language and cultural barriers that prevent them from fully understanding their partners. Nevertheless, the United States did not even take the first steps

to develop the institutional sophistication necessary to support a partnership that bridged such a large chasm. For instance, policy toward Uzbekistan continued to be managed in the State Department by the European and Eurasian Bureau, an administrative unit that also had policy responsibility for Iceland. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) had already taken steps to situate Central Asian states in a bureaucratic context more responsive to important differences.⁴⁵ The United States has also indicated that changes will be made to overcome institutional bias.⁴⁶

By the time the Strategic Partnership agreement was only a few years old, it became clear that the two sides interpreted the arrangement much differently. The Uzbeks expected greater support for Tashkent's narrow definition of reform as little more than the further refinement of their excessively administrative authoritarian bureaucracy. Instead, what they received was unrelenting criticism of human rights and democratic backwardness and continuous prodding to transform their administrative system.

The U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom was remarkably successful in its political and military objectives, but has been unsatisfactory from the Uzbek perspective in its broader social and economic aspects. Afghanistan's terrorist training camps, which threatened America, have been destroyed. The danger of terrorism has not ended. Osama bin Laden has not been brought to justice. Uzbekistan continues to conduct a broad counter-insurgency campaign against Islamic extremists. The opium trade, briefly stalled by the Taliban warlords, has surged forward in recent years. The Central Asian countries are now facing a frightening specter, threatened by what they fear is a tsunami of heroin. Uzbekistan's alignment with the West brought neither the benefits nor safety it expected.

Timing is sometimes the essence of politics. A decade ago the Central Asian states were unwilling to cooperate with Russia on many issues. However, the past decade has changed the situation. What Putin could not have accomplished with entreaties in late 1999, he now finds Central Asian leaders themselves proposing. Under the present circumstances, Russia has begun to return to Central Asia on terms it finds much more comfortable. Russia's expansion into Central Asia is driven by political rather than economic considerations, and it is using its newfound economic leverage to achieve its political goals. At the base of its new strategy, the Kremlin seeks to counter American and European influence in the Central Asian region and to present obstacles to Chinese

encroachment. The Kremlin is not directly opposing American and Chinese political influence but is trying to supplant it by gaining economic leverage. Russia's comparative advantage in the energy and power sectors appears to be a way to achieve strategic purpose while also making good business deals. Without question, the fusion of the Russian government, the large Russian oil and gas companies, the Russian electric power utilities, and the newly emergent Russian banking sector has created a powerful new dynamic in the Central Asian region.

Russia's gain does not necessarily imply a loss for other countries. If the diplomatic actors in the region are able to avoid exaggerated forms of "Great Game" romanticism, pragmatic interaction involving mutual benefit will be possible. As the Russian Americanist Alexei Bogaturov has argued, "The potential for conflict among the Great Powers in the Central Asian region is not greater than the potential for the pragmatic cooperation, no matter how much they may not seek it. This form of cooperation does not exclude competition."⁴⁷ Moreover, Russia's gains in the region involve their own risk. Russia is seeking to set its political strategy back on track by capturing control of the physical infrastructure and financial sectors of the region. Russia's new position in Central Asia is the chief reason why America has been displaced. However, using political criteria for business calculations invariably involves risk.

There are reasons why the Central Asia and Caucasus power enterprises have not attracted commercial investment from the outside world. Taking over Central Asian assets passed over by commercial investors means taking on the responsibility for low-producing or even loss-generating enterprises. Russia's political benefits from this gambit may exceed the economic costs. Once the enterprises have been restructured, they may return to profitability, and if so the overall strategy may work. Russian enterprises would be well placed for future expansion and able to respond as demand for energy and power increases in the decades ahead in western China, Afghanistan, India, and the Middle East. However, if unanticipated shifts in demand or technological developments should change the situation, so that the Central Asian enterprises continue to operate at a loss, demand subsidies, and provide only minimal strategic political advantage, the Russian government could find itself shouldering new burdens. Exposure to the risks of Central Asian engagement may someday force Russian policymakers to recall some of the reasons why the Soviet Union collapsed.

Notes

1. Dismissing the idea of an Orange Revolution in Uzbekistan, President Islam Karimov said in a rare interview printed in the Russian news daily *Nezavisimaya gazeta* that foreign influence would play no role in political developments in Uzbekistan because "foreign interference is effective only when the country has allowed conditions to be created for it" (Viktoria Panfilova, "Islam Karimov: 'Pri imperii nas schitali liudmi vtorogo sorta'" [Islam Karimov: "We Were Second-Class People in the Empire"], *Nezavisimaya gazeta* [January 14, 2005] [www.ng.ru/ideas/2005-01-14/1_karimov.html]).

2. *RFE/RL Newline* (May 29, 2000).

3. A copy of the Strategic Partnership agreement has long been available on the U.S. embassy Web site in Uzbekistan (www.usembassy.uz/home/index.aspx?&mid=400).

4. The U.S. Peace Corps program in Uzbekistan, which began operating in 1992, was officially suspended in June 2005.

5. On April 24, 1999, GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova) was enlarged by one more member, Uzbekistan, which joined the group at the GUAM summit, held during the NATO/EAPC summit in Washington, DC, April 23–25, 1999.

6. There is considerable disagreement about what happened on May 12–13, 2005, in Andijan, a city in the Fergana Valley. It is clear that a violent outbreak suppressed by Uzbekistan's police and army culminated in a large number of deaths. The official investigation reported a death toll of 187, but the Uzbek government refused to allow independent investigations. Foreign organizations, including human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch, claimed that the number of deaths was many times larger. Shirin Akiner, who conducted an individual investigation, concluded, "The death toll was probably closer to the government estimate (i.e., under 200 deaths) than to the high estimates (1,000 and above) given in media reports and the action was initiated by armed, trained insurgents, some of whom came from outside Uzbekistan" (Shirin Akiner, "Violence in Andijan, 13 May 2005: An Independent Assessment," *Central Asia—Caucasus Analyst* [October 5, 2005] [www.silkroadstudies.org/new/inside/publications/0507Akiner.pdf]).

7. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Russia, and China.

8. Antoine Blua, "Central Asia: Russia Could Double Troops at Kyrgyz Base: Future of U.S. Base in Doubt," *RFE/RL Feature Article* (July 14, 2005).

9. EU Press Release, 2679th Council Meeting, External Relations, October 3, 2005 (http://ue.eu.int/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/gena/86441.pdf).

10. The United States paid Uzbekistan \$15.7 million for services provided from October 2001 through the end of 2002. The United States intends to reimburse Uzbekistan a further \$23 million for services provided from January 2003 to March 2005. The services include security, infrastructure improvements, and logistical help (Jim Garamone, "Uzbeks Ask U.S. to Leave Karshi-Khanabad," American Forces Press Service [August 1, 2005] [www.defenselink.mil/news/Aug2005/20050801_2309.html]).

11. Press Conference of Elizabeth Jones, Tashkent, Uzbekistan (January 24, 2002) (www.usembassy.uz/home/index.aspx?&=&mid=219&overview=362).

12. Beth (Elizabeth) Jones, "U.S. Relations with Central Asia," Briefing to the Press, Washington, DC (February 11, 2002) (www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2002/7946.htm).

13. John D. Banusiewicz, "Defense Secretary Thanks 'Stalwart' Uzbekistan for Support in War on Terror," American Forces Press Service (www.defenselink.mil/news/Feb2004/n02242004_200402244.html).

14. Gulnoza Saidazimova, "Kyrgyzstan: U.S. Secretary of State Calls for Closer Ties," *RFE/RL Feature Article* (October 11, 2005) (www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2005/10/3E5FF2E2-EDD3-4B8D-AC62-B22B568643AD.html).

15. Martha Brill Olcott, "Central Asia," in *Strategic Asia 2002–2003: Asian Aftershocks*, ed. Richard J. Ellings, Aaron L. Friedberg, and Michael Willis (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2002), p. 255.

16. Roy Allison, "Strategic Reassertion in Russia's Central Asia Policy," *International Affairs* 80, no. 2 (2004): 277.

17. A Russian Presidential Decree of 4 August 2004 (No. 1009) specified a list of enterprises and organizations regarded as having strategic importance to the government. The list includes key infrastructure firms such as Spets-

setstroi, Vodtranspribor, Gazprom, Gazstroi, Hidroavtomatika, Zarubezhneft, Vostoksibeletkrosetstroi, Postopprom, Rossiskii ZhD, EES Rossii, and Rosneft (prior to its being acquired by Rosneftegaz in preparation for the merger with Gazprom). The list also includes virtually all of Russia's leading infrastructure research enterprises and design bureaus. A new law is currently under consideration that will extend the list of strategic enterprises, including many mining and energy-related enterprises. For a copy of the decree, see www.kremlin.ru/text/docs/2004/08/75174.shtml.

18. Thom Shanker, "Russian Official Cautions U.S. on Use of Central Asian Bases," *New York Times* (October 10, 2003): A9.

19. Jennifer Siegel, *Endgame: Britain, Russia, and the Final Struggle for Central Asia* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002).

20. See William Fierman, *Soviet Central Asia: The Failed Transformation* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991); Boris Rumer, *Soviet Central Asia: "A Tragic Experiment"* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989); and Gregory Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

21. This is a major theme in Soviet economic literature of the 1970s and 1980s. See Rumer, *Soviet Central Asia*.

22. Gregory Gleason, "The Federal Formula and the Collapse of the USSR," *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 22, no. 3 (summer 1992): 41–63.

23. Richard Pomfret, *The Economies of Central Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

24. Gregory Gleason, "Why Russia Is in Tajikistan," *Comparative Strategy* 20, no. 1 (2001): 77–89.

25. Islam Karimov's justification of authoritarianism is presented in his *Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the Twenty-first Century* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998). Some scholars have seen intimations of democratization in the Karimov government's policies. S. Frederick Starr argued in the pages of *Foreign Affairs* in early 1996 that while Kazakhstan won accolades for its democratic rhetoric and for relinquishing its Soviet-era nuclear weapons, it was Uzbekistan that showed greater promise of promoting enduring reform and stability in the region. Starr viewed Kazakhstan's prospects for reform as dimmed by its ethnic and territorial divisions, the absence of a strong scientific intelligentsia, the weakness of local administrative institutions, and an underdeveloped industrial base. He saw Uzbekistan as the most likely candidate to fend off Russian and Iranian great power stratagems in the region. And he also saw in Uzbekistan the first tentative indications of a model that could be adapted to move the other newly emergent societies of Central Asia toward international standards of governance and economic functioning. Starr asserted that despite its "flirtations with Middle Eastern and Asian models of authoritarianism," Uzbekistan was developing the groundwork for a civil society (S. Frederick Starr, "Making Eurasia Stable," *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 1 [January/February 1996]: 80–92).

26. Interview with Nigmatzhan Issingar, acting secretary general of the Eurasian Economic Community, Almaty, Kazakhstan, June 3, 2001.

27. The Russian National Security Strategy was approved on January 10, 2000. The Russian Foreign Policy Strategy was approved on July 2, 2000. These are guidance documents for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other foreign affairs agencies, articulating the goals and objectives of Russian foreign policy. The previous doctrinal statement, often referred to as the "Kozyrev doctrine," was adopted in April 1993 during Andrei Kozyrev's tenure as minister of foreign affairs.

28. Some analysts have argued that it is a competition over resources and control of the high ground. Stephen Blank, for instance, says, "Today, Russia's only effective instruments are economic pressure, especially in energy policy, organized crime's activities abroad, and intelligence agencies' penetration and subversion of foreign governments to the point of fomenting internal conflicts and coups in targeted states" ("Vladimir Putin's 12-Step Program," *Washington Quarterly* 25, no. 1 [winter 2002]: 154).

29. By autumn 2001, the Eurasec headquarters was functioning in Moscow under the direction of Grigoriy Rapota, former director of Rossvooruzhenie, the state-controlled arms-trading enterprise. Before that he was a section chief in the KGB First Main Directorate.

30. Fiona Hill, "The Caucasus and Central Asia," *Brookings Institution Policy Briefing*, no. 8 (May 2001): 5.

31. Olga Tropkina, "Zavtrak s Geroem" (Breakfast with a Hero), *Rossiiskaia gazeta* (October 8, 2005): 1.

32. International Crisis Group, "Central Asia: Islamist Mobilisation and Regional Security," *Central Asia Report*, no. 14 (March 1, 2001): iii.

33. International Crisis Group, "Central Asia: Uzbekistan at 10—Repression and Instability," *Central Asia Report*, no. 21 (August 21, 2001): ii.

34. Charles H. Fairbanks, Jr., "Disillusionment in the Caucasus and Central Asia," *Journal of Democracy* 12, no. 4 (2001): 53.

35. U.S. House of Representatives, Congressional Resolution 397 (106th Congress, November 1, 2000).

36. European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, "EBRD updates strategy for Uzbekistan," EBRD Press Release (April 6, 2004) (www.ebrd.org/new/pressrel/2004/44april6.htm).

37. B. Lynn Pascoe, deputy assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, "Uzbekistan: The Key to Success in Central Asia," testimony before the Subcommittee on Central Asia, House International Relations Committee, Washington, DC (June 15, 2004) (www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/33579.htm).

38. *Ibid.*

39. Richard Boucher, "Secretary of State Decision Not to Certify Uzbekistan" Press Statement, Washington, DC (July 13, 2004) (www.state.gov/t/pa/prs/ps/2004/34363.htm). On the day this announcement was made in Washington, the local press in Central Asia announced that Assistant Secretary of State A. Elizabeth Jones had arrived in Tashkent. See "V Tashkent pribyvaet pomoshchnik gossekretaria SShA po delam evropy i evrazii" (U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Arrives in Tashkent), *RIA-Novosti* (July 13, 2004).

40. John McCain, "When Decency and Expediency Clash," *Financial Times* (June 14, 2005).

41. Svetlana Gamova and Arkadii Dubnov, "'Troianskii kon okazalsia smirnym: Rossiia bolshe ne boitsia GUUAM'" ("Trojan Horse" Proves Quiet: Russia No Longer Fears GUUAM), *Vremia novosti* (June 6, 2001) (www.vremya.ru/print/10486.html).

42. President Karimov was quoted widely in the Russian-language media as saying that integration should go further than cooperation and should be equivalent to forming "union" relations. See www.polit.ru/news/2005/10/07/souyz.html.

43. There were other indications that Russian leaders sought to demonstrate a willingness to pursue partner relations with the United States. As the U.S. military initiative went forward in the form of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, Putin made several important concessions, including not opposing the U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty and withdrawing from bases in Vietnam.

44. S. Frederick Starr argues that Putin initially tried strenuously to convince the Central Asian leaders not to agree to cooperate with the Americans. After many words of sympathy and condolences at the Crawford, Texas, meeting between Putin and Bush, where the basis for the Russian-American strategic partnership was worked out, Putin then "spent the next three days on the phone, cajoling the presidents of the five newly independent states of Central Asia not to cooperate with American requests to use their territory for strikes against Afghanistan" ("Putin's Ominous Afghan Gambit," *Wall Street Journal Europe* [December 11, 2001]).

45. In July 2003 the IMF announced that Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan would be shifted to a department renamed the Middle East and Central Asia Department. See "IMF Managing Director Horst Köhler Announces Changes in Organization of IMF Area Departments," International Monetary Fund, Press Release No. 03/130 (July 30, 2003) (www.imf.org/external/np/sec/pr/2003/pr03130.htm).

46. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, in response to a question asked at a press conference in Astana, Kazakhstan, in October 2005, announced that Central Asian states would be shifted from the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs to the newly renamed Bureau of South Asian and Central Asian Affairs. The Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs was by far the largest State Department division in terms of numbers of countries. See Condoleezza Rice, "Remarks at Eurasian National University, Astana, Kazakhstan, October 13, 2005" (www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/54913.htm).

47. A.D. Bogaturov, "Tsentralno-Vostochnaia Aziia v Sovremennoi Mezhdunaronoj Politike" (Central-Eastern Asia in Contemporary International Politics), *Vostok (Oriens)*, no. 1 (2005): 116. Aleksey Bogaturov is a deputy director of the Russian Academy of Sciences Institute for the Study of the USA and Canada.

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