

WORKING P A P E R S

Revisiting the Twelve Myths of Central Asia

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About the Author

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NEARLY TEN YEARS HAVE PASSED since the countries of Central Asia received their independence. This impending anniversary is a good opportunity to look at how these states are managing the state-building process, and in particular what symbolic or ideological defenses they are offering for their actions. States need little protection from their successes but are always seeking ways to explain away their various failures. This paper looks at the “myths” that the leaders of the five Central Asian states are using to explain away the very disappointing results in both economic and especially political reforms and shows how U.S. policy makers have bought into some of these myths as well.

Myths woven by political leaders rarely lead to fairy-tale-like happy endings, nor are they likely to do so in Central Asia. These myths were designed to raise public confidence at a time of great uncertainty, but as I argue throughout this working paper, they have generally had quite the opposite effect. After ten years of independence, stagnation is more prevalent than progress in the region, and security risks have increased rather than abated.

Six years ago, as these states were moving toward their fifth anniversary, I engaged in a similar exercise. The result was a paper on the “Twelve Myths of Central Asia,” prepared for a UN Development Program (UNDP) conference on regional cooperation that was held in Kyrgyzstan in June 1995. The English version of this paper, which appeared in the published conference proceedings, is available on the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace web site, and the myths themselves are reproduced in appendix one. The Russian version, also from the conference proceedings, was widely reprinted in the region.

Because this piece still enjoys a sufficient readership in Central Asia, I was recently asked to revisit these same twelve myths and comment on their continued applicability as the tenth anniversary of independence approaches. The paper that I produced, written in Russian, was delivered at a round table on ethno-political problems in Central Asia that was sponsored by the Open Society Institute of Kazakhstan and held near Almaty in March 2001. As with the first paper, the updated discussion of these myths of state building was presented to an exclusively Central Asian audience.

The current working paper is a slightly expanded version of this presentation, refocused to include a discussion about how some of the “myths” about Central Asia reverberate in Washington. The original paper was written before the U.S. policy community was fully sensitized to the potential of the Caspian region’s vast oil and gas preserves, and the rush to ensure access to them by U.S. companies has certainly fueled the atmosphere of myth making in both Washington and the region. In some cases, the original myth has been modified slightly to better reflect the way problems have evolved with the passage of time, but in every case the thematic focus of the original myth has been preserved.

MYTH ONE: The states of Central Asia are somehow natural and will survive as currently constituted through the guarantees of *de jure* statehood.

The oil wealth of the Caspian region has made the states of Central Asia seem to be of increased strategic importance for the United States, and now three successive presidential administrations have stressed the importance of helping them secure their independence—the most recent pledge, that of the Bush administration, coming at a time when the security risks in the region are becoming heightened. Afghanistan remains a battleground, and the tentacles of narcotrafficking and international terrorism that emanate from it are reaching into the neighboring Central Asian states and creating a potentially lethal mix when combined with locally based opposition groups.

The Central Asian states all face enormous challenges in the coming years, not the least of which is the transfer of authority to a new generation that has reached political maturity since independence. It is not clear whether this transition will proceed smoothly, especially in states such as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan that have engaged in little or no economic reform and have done little to develop the kind of institutions necessary to create political stakeholders.

Five years ago the focus was on the exercise of sovereignty and the different ways in which these states understood and were trying to exercise their sovereignty; now, however, the question has shifted to that of statehood and whether it will be sustained. Despite this, the leaders of the states of the region continue to view the existence of their nations as somehow preordained. They retain a misguided optimism that if internal opposition groups threaten the political incumbents and the regimes that they have created, then somehow the United States will help bail them out—or certainly failing that the Russians will. U.S. military assistance to unrepentantly repressive regimes, like that of the Uzbeks, simply fuels their complacency. Although the United States has provided limited and focused training and technical assistance, military exercises conducted under the aegis of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) Partnership for Peace, which included air drops of troops based at Fort Bragg, simply have allowed Central Asia's rulers to assume that a demonstration of U.S. capacity was an expression of intention.

At the same time, though, the difficulties that were identified five years ago as confronting each of these states in consolidating its sovereignty and independence are largely unchanged. Although now confident that its vast resources can be translated into wealth and international standing, Kazakhstan remains a territorially vast but land-locked state that is relatively underpopulated. It shares an enormous—over 3,000 miles (6,846 km)—border with Russia, and even with the steady departure of Kazakhstan's Russian population, this border is still dominated by enclaves of ethnic Russians on both sides. Russia seems to have accepted the idea of Kazakh statehood, much more so than seemed likely five years ago, but there is always the risk that Russian politics will change, and a new leader with more aggressive intentions toward Kazakhstan might always come to power.

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan remain weak states. Tajikistan is marginally stronger than it was five years ago, when it was just emerging from several years of civil war. However, the government in Dushanbe does not exercise effective control over all the parts of the country, and it too is being eroded from within. The international drug industry now operates openly in the country, and the mayor of Dushanbe is reported to collect taxes from the city's narco-barons.

This same drug trade has been just one of a number of factors weakening the Kyrgyz regime

from within as well, although the scale of the corruption problem there appears less than in Tajikistan. Kyrgyzstan, however, is a small weak state surrounded by more capable neighbors who are able to assert themselves pretty much at will. The Uzbeks have been the quickest of these to demonstrate their military capacity, unilaterally fixing national boundaries to their own benefit, and often doing this in a way that works to the detriment of Kyrgyz villagers. All this further contributes to the destabilization of southern Kyrgyzstan, an area rocked by violence in 1990.

Uzbekistan, in some ways the most “natural” nation-state in all of Central Asia, could also prove to be quite fragile. Ethnic Uzbeks make up over 70 percent of the nation’s population and rule over a land mass that seems neither too small nor too large and is resource-rich enough to more than provide for the country’s growing population. However, ten years of erratic and ineffective economic reform, combined with a regime that is increasingly more repressive politically, could eventually lead the country to split along regional lines. A more likely scenario is in some ways even more unpleasant—that growing popular unrest will translate itself into isolated and sporadic bursts of anomic violence, quite possibly organized by Islamic activists, and sustained through popular support.

The government in Ashgabat has also done little to further Turkmen economic or political development in the past five years. Saparmurat Niyazov, termed Turkmenbashi (head Turkmen), the country’s purported founder and only president, has further consolidated his power. But he has used his power erratically, so it is difficult to know whether even the improved conditions for investment that are currently on offer will stir any foreign interest in the Turkmen economy. After years of resisting shipping its gas through Russia, Turkmenistan has now once again agreed to Gazprom’s and Itera’s terms for part-barter/part-cash and below-market-price sales of the majority of their gas. It may be that Turkmenistan’s riches will always be mortgaged to the pipeline systems of Russia and Iran and that the Turkmen population may never be able to benefit from the land’s riches.

The Central Asian states would not be the first to experience state collapse as a stage in the state-building process. There have been many failed states, particularly in Africa, that preserve their *de jure* independence but are lawless or chaotic societies in which anarchy or civil unrest prevails. Although all of Central Asia’s leaders fear the damage that would be done by the failure of a neighboring state, everyone’s focus remains on what is going on within the confines of their own national boundaries.

The current period of state formation remains one of ethno-national consolidation. For all the invocations of multi-ethnicity and the need to protect national minorities, each of Central Asia’s countries is turning into the homeland of the nationality whose name it bears. The boundaries of the states that emerged from the former Soviet Union will be difficult to alter, but a state may exist only formally, in its juridical sense. Although *de jure* statehood may well be preserved throughout, three or four of Central Asia’s countries could evolve quickly into states that have *de facto* ceased to exist. Statehood may exist only as a technicality for the convenience of the ruling elite, with those who rule doing so largely for their own benefit and discharging few of the functions of governors for the governed.

Central Asia’s rulers are all working hard to propagate the myth of statehood, trying to convince their population that independence is a positive end in itself. It is very easy to offer

promises of a “radiant” future just around the corner. Those who were raised in the Soviet Union are of course familiar with such claims, as they were at the root of that country’s ideological system.

Independence can certainly be a victory for the people. But the people of Central Asia had no voice or vote in the decision about independence, and it is easy for the ruling elite to claim that the status of independence has enriched the population, that there is a form of moral superiority associated with it, and that this somehow compensates for the various social and economic hardships that it brings.

Independence can be a catalyst for the birth of a nation, or it can lead to national disintegration. Such disintegration is now present everywhere in each Central Asia country to varying degrees. In many places, the current strategy of nation building is more or less reaching a dead end, and although each state has the possibility of making the necessary course correctives, few of the region’s leaders seem willing to do so.

MYTH TWO: Some kind of multilateral organization will rise on the ruins of the Soviet Union, capable of solving common problems while preserving state sovereignty.

The consequence of disintegration is that weak states threaten the stability of their somewhat stronger neighbors. We already see this pattern developing in Central Asia, as armed Uzbek groups taking refuge in Tajikistan (in particular fighters of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan who are allied with Juman Namangani) and then sneak into the high mountains of Kyrgyzstan to get a better vantage point for forays into Uzbekistan’s Ferghana Valley.

All of the region’s leaders talk of the need for a regional approach to solve the seemingly unhampered movement of international terrorist groups across the new national boundaries, as well as other regional security problems, such as narcotrafficking, and potential security problems, such as the management of Central Asia’s previously Soviet-managed unified water system.

Water management is likely to prove to be the region’s most deadly potential security problem, worse even than the consequences of the capture of the economy by narcobusiness or the impact that the increasingly more popular Islamic groups are likely to have on these societies. Agriculture is a critical sector in all five countries, and the dominant one in the region’s two principal cotton producers, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Cotton is a water-intensive crop, and these countries are both downstream users, with Central Asia’s water originating in the mountain streams of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. This water is still provided for free, while the upkeep of reservoirs is paid for by the country in which they are found. Efforts to create a new regional water-management system have been foundering, despite offers by both the United Kingdom and the United States to sponsor a regional dialogue.

Initially the region’s leaders hoped that their membership in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) would provide the right forum for addressing issues like water management and the region’s interconnected energy and transport system. But fearing that Russia would use this organization for its own neo-imperialist purposes, almost none of the region’s rulers wanted the CIS to develop an effective institutional framework. The one exception was Kazakhstan’s Nursultan Nazarbayev, who advocated a Euro-Asian Union (EAU), with a

binding interstate parliamentary system.¹ While opposing such institutional solutions, Central Asia's other leaders still believed it inevitable that such a regime somehow would develop, as all were more or less the product of the Soviet system.² At first, they almost by habit deferred to these nonexistent institutions, believing that interstate activities simply would not be regulated until they developed. A good example of this was the problem of the delineation of national borders, which was put on hold until 1999.

In place of the myth of the CIS, we may now talk about the myth of regional multilateral organizations. One of the reasons for the demise of the CIS was the lack of equality among its members. Equality existed only on paper, not in practice. The prospects for the creation of an effective regional organization on the basis of the five Central Asian states, or even any subgroup of them, seem quite limited. Multilateral organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperative Organization, which includes four of the Central Asian states as well as Russia and China, are also unlikely to fare much better.³

Not one of these states is willing to surrender sovereignty to a multilateral organization, something that crippled the CIS from the onset. They are even less likely to transfer authority to an organization of weak states that lacks a potential naturally strong state or leader. There has been historic competition among the peoples of Central Asia, which is exaggerated by the fact that most of Central Asia's leaders do not appear to like one another. In particular, there seems to be considerable personal competition among the three men who used to serve together as communist party leaders under Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. Uzbekistan's Islam Karimov, Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbayev, and Turkmenistan's Saparmurat Niyazov each seems to wish to show that his country is the region's most important and that he should be viewed as the region's preeminent figure because of this.

In part because of this competition, despite all the lingering interconnections among states, the leaders of the region do not see their countries as part of a functioning regional subsystem and have devised policies that are inward looking rather than outward looking. Nowhere is this more evident than in the area of trade and finance. Central Asia could have formed an attractive market of more than fifty million people, but instead each of the countries adopted some form of economic protectionism, with the exception of World Trade Organization (WTO) member Kyrgyzstan. In some countries, such as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, these barriers support a weak and indefensible currency; in others, such as Kazakhstan, the barriers are largely retaliatory. The net effect of all of these barriers is to introduce hardships on those millions of Central Asians whose livelihoods were somehow dependent on cross-border trade and to further dampen the prospects for foreign investment in light industry throughout the region.

For all their differences and personal squabbles, however, the Soviet-era leaders that head these countries (and all got their start in one way or another under the Soviet system) do meet fairly regularly to discuss their common problems. Thus, while regional *integration* is not possible, at least for the foreseeable future, regional *cooperation* is.

However, even the prospects of regional cooperation should not be exaggerated. The current group of political leaders all share a common language and a common group of experiences. The next group may not, and the ones who come after them seem certain to have much less in common.

Regional cooperation is also being impeded by a new and very dangerous myth that is beginning to take root. This is the myth of eternal competition among the peoples of Central Asia—a myth that is convenient for the region’s ruling elites because it takes away some of the pressure for meaningful regional cooperation. In reality, however, the peoples of the region have always lived more or less peacefully together. Certainly, there were ethnic tensions in the area; for hundreds of years nomadic livestock breeders have vied with sedentary farmers over access to water and land, and this legacy plays a role in many of the current rivalries. Probably the region’s most volatile rivalry remains that between the Tajiks and the Uzbeks, and at the local level ethnicity can serve as a trigger or rallying point for dissatisfied citizens.

But exaggerating the degree of tension is foolish, as it creates an expectation that there are major interethnic tensions steaming below the surface that seem certain to implode. This leads to inappropriate comparisons being made, such as that Central Asia might disintegrate according to a Balkan-like scenario—something that the history and culture of these two dissimilar regions makes unlikely.

MYTH THREE: Statehood will prove ephemeral through Russian reassertion of control, or the weakest states will fall victim to a regional hegemon.

Independence has been seen as something that is simultaneously preordained and ephemeral, an obvious contradiction. The speed with which independence was achieved has led to exaggerated fears of instability, provoked by forces external to the region, those from neighboring states, and political opposition groups found within these countries themselves. While asserting the “naturalness” of their independence as the culmination of a centuries-old but interrupted process of national liberation, down-deep, for all their professed nationalism, the former Communist Party stalwarts who are these countries’ “founding fathers” initially saw independence as something that was startling and so potentially beneficial to them personally that it was hard to believe that they could “get away with it.”

Russia became the center of their fears, as Russian rulers had both dominated and guided some of these areas for more than two hundred years. Five years ago people simultaneously cast Russia in the role of potential savior and potential villain. Many still held a deep-seated belief that Russia’s relative withdrawal from this region was temporary, and that when Russia healed itself it would naturally reassert its geopolitical interests in all the areas that Moscow had traditionally dominated. Some in the region even privately admitted that this would be a good thing, as the Russians could help protect the Central Asian peoples from each other. U.S. and other Western leaders also initially believed that Russia could serve as a positive economic and political model for these states.

Ten years after independence it is still difficult to predict when and if Russia will be healed from the economic and political traumas associated with the simultaneous end of communism and the loss of empire. Certainly the United States is no longer willing to grant Russia a mentoring role in Central Asia and in the energy sector in particular is working with these states to help separate and insulate their economies from that of Russia.

U.S. policy is only one small influence on the geopolitics of the Central Asian region. It certainly has not been sufficient to convince Russia to withdraw and has quite generally had the

opposite effect of serving as a source of pressure on Moscow to remain active in the region. But Russia itself has not completely decided on its future role, and its leaders are still grappling with how to redefine Russia's national interest to take into account the country's diminished capacities.

Some observers fear that driven out of a broader global arena, the Russians will grow even more assertive in the countries of the former Soviet Union. However, there is strong evidence to suggest that Russia will be more moderate in its approach and will decide to choose its opportunities for engagement more carefully. Russian behavior in the south Caucasus should not be viewed as an indicator of likely actions in Central Asia, as the former borders of Russia's north Caucasus republics are intricately tied to developments in warring Chechnya.

Russian leaders believe that events in Central Asia could destabilize the situation in the Russian Federation, but increasingly they seem to be accepting Robert Frost's observation that, "good fences make good neighbors," and they are demarcating and fortifying their over 3,000-mile-long border with Kazakhstan and heightening security at the transit points. Russia also plans to maintain a military base and some 12,000 troops in Tajikistan to help secure the Afghan border, but no other state has accepted Russia's invitation to send in troops, and little pressure seems to be placed on them to do so. Not only did Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan not want foreign troops based on their territory, but they did not want to have to pay for their garrisoning. Failing that, Russia is offering technical assistance to the militaries of these countries and charging for such services, with the hope that not only will these armies be better capable of their own defense, but also that they could be offensively deployed in neighboring nations.

In the past year, Russia has tried to reinvigorate the collective security arrangement to which Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan all subscribe (along with Armenia and Belarus)⁴ and held joint exercises in Central Asia in 2001.⁵ Relations between Russia and Uzbekistan, which withdrew from the arrangement in 1999, are being developed on a parallel track, and the two militaries are cooperating more closely today than at any time since the Tajik civil war of 1992 when the Uzbeks provided Russian ground troops with air cover. Increasingly Russia is finding ways to respect the sovereignty of these states, more or less in an effort to ensure that they are pursuing state policies that also advance the cause of Russian military security. In particular, the prospect of forward deployment of Kazakhstan's army is quite attractive to the Russians. The Kazakh system of command and control continues to be quite close to that of Russia's own.

Five years ago it might have seemed a pipedream, but today it is possible to envision a plausible scenario in which the Kazakhs—and not the Russians—intervene in a chaos-riven Uzbekistan. Kazakhs, not Russians, have offered to send troops to southern Kyrgyzstan to help protect against "Islamic terrorists." In general, Russia has become less interested in Central Asia, and this interest is likely to further diminish as the region becomes demographically and culturally more Asian. The goals of Russia have taken on a more commercial character: the conquest of markets and the lessening of security threats, all of which must be accomplished without large financial expenditures. Russia will not guarantee collective security, focusing instead on the security of Russia itself.

Nonetheless, the future of some of these countries, especially Kazakhstan, will continue to be linked with that of Russia. The nature of the relationship between Russian and Kazakhstan, for

example, is steadily evolving, and it is becoming more and more obvious that Russia no longer has the ability to dictate the terms of such a relationship. However, it is still too early to speak of a real partnership between the two countries, although Kazakhstan is increasingly becoming Russia's junior partner. This is especially apparent since Vladimir Putin's coming to power, as he seems to recognize Nursultan Nazarbayev's greater international experience.

In place of the myth of Russia, another myth has arisen—the myth of a Greater Uzbekistan that could alter the map of Central Asia. Uzbekistan's neighbors often dramatically exaggerate that country's capacities. Even so, weak but militarized societies unquestionably make bad neighbors, and civil unrest in Uzbekistan might prove far more destabilizing in the long run to Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan than any deliberately aggressive policy that Tashkent might pursue.

The Uzbeks, who have the region's largest army, fuel their neighbors' fears through small and large gestures alike.⁶ Claiming Timur (Tamerlane), the fourteenth century conqueror, as their national hero, the Uzbeks were the first to begin border demarcation.⁷ They used force to set boundaries in disputed villages in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, as well as to fortify them, and landmines set by the Uzbeks in the border zones have led to several civilian deaths in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.⁸ Much of the Uzbek behavior seems to be imitating that of the Russians. Uzbekistan is a major gas supplier, and the old Soviet pipeline system has left Kyrgyzstan and the southern part of Kazakhstan dependent on Uzbek resources. Like the Russians, the Uzbeks are quick to turn off the spigot when debts mount, and also like the Russians, they are not above using these energy supplies to extract other kinds of concessions. For example, at the height of the heating season in winter 2001, the Uzbeks managed to get the Kyrgyz to agree in principle to a territorial exchange, where the Kyrgyz would receive some marginal pastureland and the Uzbeks a direct highway link to the previously isolated Uzbek enclave contained within Kyrgyzstan.⁹ Such actions are feeding the desire of leaders in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan to remain active members of collective security agreements that include Russia.

MYTH FOUR: International agencies and organizations will provide sufficient support and assistance to preserve the governments of Central Asia.

As leaders of newly independent states, the region's rulers turned with real expectation to the international institutions and agencies for help in meeting the challenges of economic, political, and social reform that lay before them, and they worked hard to broaden their international contacts. All the leaders felt inadequate to meet these tasks in some regards, and a few have sometimes seemed almost paralyzed by this fear, vacillating between competing advisors and contradictory advice. Their search for solutions has led many of these leaders to perpetuate the myth that international institutions and organizations will provide financial support, and if necessary, even the military assistance necessary to preserve the independence of the states of Central Asia.

The place where this myth was best developed was Kyrgyzstan, where Askar Akayev initially used international assistance to substitute for national income lost through the collapse of agriculture and industry, and did so by suggesting a readiness to engage in economic and political reforms that far outstripped his willingness to impose discipline to end corruption in the

economy or to tolerate the uncertainties created by permitting political opposition to freely function. Now President Akayev is no longer as concerned with pleasing representatives of international institutions as he was a few years ago, in part because he is aware of a growing “donor fatigue” that affects how much money will be forthcoming to even the most seemingly worthy of states. He also knows just how difficult it is to repay the money when debts come due. Kyrgyzstan’s international debt is now 1.3 times its gross national product.

Although few in the region still expect that the West will offer economic assistance with few strings attached, the oil-producing countries in the region—and those critical to alternative transport routes that bypass Russia—continue to harbor expectations of continued Western assistance, particularly in the form of project-specific loans and political risk insurance. They also continue to hope that Western military assistance, through partnership with NATO nations, will help contain at an early stage any political risks that might threaten any of these projects.

Ten years into independence, however, it is becoming clearer to all in the region what Western institutions are and are not prepared to do. It is equally clear that there are more crises demanding international attention than there are funds for assistance. As Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are discovering, states that reject the macro-stabilization advice of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund are pretty much left to their own devices to face the social and economic consequences of their decisions. In the Turkmen case, the rejection of international advice has made Turkmenistan a highly unattractive prospect for investment, which is one of the things that has helped push the Turkmen back into the arms of Gazprom and Itera, the two large conglomerates in a position to sell Turkmen gas abroad.

Although the United States and other NATO members are providing military training and some military assistance to several of the states of the Central Asian region, this should not be misread as a sign that direct military assistance would be forthcoming in the event of a foreign threat to any of these states.¹⁰ Caspian oil may be promising to the West, but it is not yet vital to Western security interests. In fifteen or twenty years it may be, but this is not known, and states behave in quite different ways to protect secondary and tertiary security interests than they do their primary ones.

It is impossible to predict what form assistance would take in the case of an external threat, but it certainly seems predictable that the level of Western interest in the region will diminish once the Caspian export routes are firmed up and the constructions of pipelines begun. Part of the disproportionate attention that these states have been getting from the United States and other Western powers has to do with the politics of oil and gas development, with national governments supporting their firms when decisions are being made about who will develop valuable deposits and how the oil from them will be shipped to market. In general, the timetable of the Western countries is quite different from that of the Central Asian states. Right now everyone is in a “hurry-up” phase because the clock is beginning to tick on some of the twenty-year production sharing agreements that provide oil producers with tax holidays.¹¹ Once pipelines are built and production begins, the focus on the region is likely to shift to potential new areas of energy exploration. There will of course be interest in maintaining the flow of oil, but relations will move on to a “maintenance” phase.

The United States seems certain to continue to provide some assistance in the area, although even now with the increased spending in the area of security, most of the assistance money goes toward the advancement of U.S. commercial interests, whether it be for investment guarantees or for programs to advance the rule of law in property relations. European and Japanese assistance too has a strong commercial agenda, as transport projects designed to link the region with Europe and China, bypassing Russia, would lead to the import of more European and Japanese goods to these states and facilitate the export of products made in joint-ventures by people from these countries. If the security climate sharply deteriorates in the area, all of these projects could be put on indefinite hold, and none of these projects are currently moving quickly enough to make a strong contribution to the economies of the Central Asian states in the next decade.

MYTH FIVE: The present elite can achieve immortality through the creation of dynastic succession.

Despite repeated efforts by U.S. and Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) officials to convince them of the risks of this strategy, the region's leaders have downplayed the importance of political institution building, choosing instead to concentrate on the consolidation of their own personal power. Five years ago, the region's leaders were all beginning to behave as if they were immortal, making little provision for political succession. But at that time there was still faint hope that two of the region's most popular leaders, Presidents Akayev and Nazarbayev, might consent to participate in free and fair presidential elections, and that after their second term of office they would accept existing constitutional limitations and step down, setting the precedent for a peaceful transfer of power that is founded on political institutions.¹²

These hopes were short-lived. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan changed their constitutions in the mid-1990s, and then in the late 1990s once again held presidential elections that fell far short of international norms.¹³ Now each of the region's leaders has effectively set himself up as president for life, with little formal planning for what comes afterwards. Some constitutions provide for a formal succession process, but invariably the designated successor's post is filled by a political lightweight whose ambitions pose no threats to the country's incumbent strong-man. In fact, the Turkmen and Uzbek constitutions do not even recognize the possibility of the president dying while in office and only provide for his temporary incapacity.¹⁴ More important, little has been done to encourage the development of political institutions that would regulate political competition, not to mention integrate a new generation of potential political leaders into positions of responsibility. The leaders themselves have had no interest in doing this, and the United States and other Western countries have not been aggressive enough about using conditionality to get the message across that blindness to the need to transfer power does not mean that it will not be inevitable. Western leaders, like those in the region, have been more interested in policies that address immediate concerns—the problems that are occurring on “their watch,” so to speak—and not those that are on a more long-range trajectory.

Over the past five years, however, the region's leaders have aged, and in some cases become noticeably physically frailer, but the pace of institutional development has slowed even further. The seemingly most ill of these leaders, Turkmenistan's Saparmurat Niyazov is coping with the ravages of passing time by dyeing his hair and doctoring his portraits that blanket the capital city

of Ashgabat and outlying regions to depict a younger, more healthy looking man than in fact exists.¹⁵ Turkmen readers are regularly reassured that Niyazov is in good health, with reports on how he has passed yet another physical with flying colors conducted at the world-class hospital facility on the outskirts of the capital that was erected almost solely for the purpose of treating him. The future without Niyazov, whose 120-foot gold-plated statue sits atop a large tower and rotates with the sun, is almost unthinkable. Turkmenbashi's writings are now replacing history books and religious tracts in the schools, but he "modestly" claims that he is no prophet.¹⁶

Some of the region's leaders are doing a bit better coming to grips with their own mortality but are often doing so by attempting another kind of longevity, through the creation of family dynasties. All in the region are watching with interest efforts by Azerbaijan's President Heydar Aliiev to have his son, Ilham, designated as his heir. The process of establishing political dynasties has not gone as far in the countries of Central Asia, but at the same time the region's leaders are younger as well. There is every reason to assume that both Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbayev and Kyrgyzstan's Askar Akayev will try to arrange a transfer of power to one of their children. Akayev seems to be grooming his young son Aidan, who was educated in the United States, whereas Nazarbayev's preference seems to be daughter Dariga, actually a child from his wife's first marriage. But in Kazakhstan the nod could go to one of his two sons-in-law or to a brother's son. The latter choice would be closest to traditional Kazakh dynastic practice.

In these quasi-traditional societies, everyone feels obliged to try and provide for their family members, close and more distant kin alike, and leaders are not expected to be an exception to this rule. Such practices withstood seventy years of Soviet rule, but introducing dynastic rule would have very weak historical precedent, as both the Kazakh and Kyrgyz nomads had a bitterly divided nobility that could not keep order in the steppe well before the Russian conquest.

Efforts to reinstate some sort of modern-day princely system can become very dangerous. The efforts at transferring power to the next generation are apt by definition to be destabilizing. In every country in the region, members of the elite from disfavored wings (be they regions, hordes, clans, tribes, or families) have been sitting by, waiting for the opportunity to grasp more economic and political power. As institutions to ensure a peaceful transfer of power do not exist, there is no foundation upon which to rest their hopes. There is also no example of a voluntary resignation of power, and there is little reason for optimism that any of the region's leaders will simply retire. If they do, they seem certain to do so in favor of a hand-picked successor. The patience of the population and the elites, though, is limited, and if the masses show any inclination toward growing restive, the frustrated groups within the elite may be quick to try to take advantage of the situation.

MYTH SIX: The Central Asians are growing tired of the uncertainties of democracy.

These men may think that they can successfully transfer power to heirs of their own choosing because they have begun to believe their own rhetoric of how the people of Central Asia are tired of the uncertainties of democracy. But the Central Asians have never really had an opportunity to tire of democracy, as the region's flirtations with democracy building have been brief at best; it is the leaders who are frightened of the uncertainties that come with democratic rule and not the people themselves.

The region's leaders all openly argue that democratic systems are too dangerous to introduce in the current social and security environment and that the various peoples of Central Asia lack the cultural underpinnings necessary to support a democratic polity. It is easy to find nondemocratic or authoritarian episodes in the history of any people, and of course the histories of those living in Central Asia are no exception. But it is a racist argument to claim that one people is more or less fit for democracy than another. In the past few decades we have seen democracies develop in many unexpected places, both in Europe and in Asia, and we have seen a number of potential democracies freeze their political development, or worse yet, revert to less democratic forms.

It is difficult to develop a democracy or to sustain democratic development without the creation of the institutions of civil society, such as a free press, the right of assembly, and the right of free association. In 1991, all five Central Asian states were beginning to develop some of these institutions of civil society. In 1996, these institutions were still surviving in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Now, nowhere are these institutions flourishing, but everywhere in the region there would be sufficient elite and even popular support to reinvigorate their development.

A committed minority remains in place, eager to see democratic development move forward. President Akayev's most prominent critic, former Vice President Feliks Kulov, who is serving a seven-year term in a maximum security prison on charges of which he was initially acquitted, had ample opportunity to flee the country between the two arrests but chose to stay and become a political symbol instead, and his fate continues to provoke small but regular public protests and demonstrations. Kazakhstan's former Prime Minister Akezhan Kazhegeldin decided to put personal safety first and remains abroad, where he is regularly threatened with arrest by Kazakh law enforcement's use of international channels. But Kazhegeldin has become an active international lobbyist for the cause of democratic reform in Kazakhstan and maintains a well-funded and active organization in country, which tries to help sustain both an independent press and a labor movement.

Political consensus-building measures in the aftermath of Tajikistan's civil war are at least worthy of mention, for that country is the only one in the region in which the government has reached some accommodation with Islamic religious activists and has done so in a framework that supports democratic goals. Here, too, a strong and extra-legal presidency is also developing, and this, rather than Tajikistan's Islamist population, is the cause of the country's growing political abuses.

At the time of independence, Uzbekistan had the best developed network of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including two fledgling secular parties, Erk and Birlik.¹⁷ But then the principal founders of both parties were driven into exile, minor figures were arrested, and the leadership's families have been persecuted. Nonetheless, there remains a core group of democratic activists in Uzbekistan, including local human rights monitors, who continue to pursue what are now clandestine activities, risking arrest and torture of themselves or close relatives. The NGO movement in Turkmenistan was the least well established, and that country's political activists suffer a fate analogous to that of the Uzbeks. However, there is a small opposition movement, based in Moscow, that centers on former Foreign Minister Avdi Kuliyeu and former Prime Minister Saparmurad Soyunov, who has close ties with Russia's powerful gas lobby.¹⁸

MYTH SEVEN: Victors decide all, but political and economic change will eventually make winners of everyone.

Over the past five years, Central Asia's leaders have been honing their "winner-take-all" philosophy. But the societies that they rule are complex and filled with populations who are reluctant to accept a loss of the benefits that they are used to enjoying and who are replete with former political and economic stakeholders used to being accommodated.

Five years ago, the region's leaders were very defensive before their populations, and most believed that they still had an obligation to try and meet the old obligations of the social welfare system. Now, although the leaders still promise that the dislocations will be short-lived, few of them have the expectation that all popular needs can be met, particularly because the government's tax base is not stable in this protracted period of economic reform. So the focus has increasingly become that of insulating the rulers from the ruled, which has the further advantage of allowing those in power to accumulate a disproportionate amount of assets in their own hands.

Now more than ever, Central Asian leaders believe that the victors must decide all, and although they claim that everyone's lives will eventually be improved when the government's policies finally achieve their desired ends, in reality the number of economic and political stakeholders is being constantly reduced. With every passing year the number of "winners" in Central Asia seems to grow smaller. Titular nationalities are being rewarded at the expense of other groups, and in all five countries it has become more difficult for those outside of the ruling circles to share in the economic and political spoils. The criteria for inclusion in the inner circles continues to grow ever more restrictive.

Probably the biggest change is in Kyrgyzstan, where the arrests of opposition leader Topchubek Turgunaliyev (from the "Erkindik" opposition party) and former Vice President Feliks Kulov were designed to serve as a warning to any who might try and rock the boat of state in any way. Turgunaliyev, a mild-mannered former academic, was sentenced to sixteen years in jail. These arrests have not fully silenced opposition to President Akayev, but they have dramatically upped the stakes of protesting. The dampening of opposition has certainly worked to the benefit of the ruling Kyrgyz family, as now President Akayev's close and distant relatives are likely to have fewer roadblocks placed in their way as family members seek to consolidate their economic holdings.

The situation in Kazakhstan has not changed as dramatically, although the gap between those who are "in" and those who are "out" of political favor appears to be broadening. In the Kazakh case this has the potential to upset the delicate balance that has always been maintained between the leading Kazakh clans (and hence the three Kazakh *zhuz* or hordes) as well as between the various regional elites.¹⁹ The move of the capital to Astana has helped the "in" group to consolidate its position, through a sieve-like capital-building fund as well as through the actual contracts for construction. Hundreds of millions of dollars are reputed to have changed hands when Western companies bought rights to Kazakhstan's oil deposits, creating vast new opportunities to launder money.²⁰ The conditions of a market economy have allowed a privileged group to translate political influence into vast capital holdings, which can now even be legally repatriated.²¹ But membership in this group is being increasingly restricted to those close to the president, his wife, or his two sons-in law.

The vast difference between the official and unofficial currency rates in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan has given both these governments a powerful tool to reward the few who are favored and to do so at seemingly little direct cost. But the impact of these policies—in Uzbekistan in particular—may prove to be highly destabilizing in the long run. During Soviet rule, leading Uzbek families both in Tashkent and in the Ferghana Valley had been able to use the gray areas of Soviet law to function as entrepreneurs and even to accumulate capital. Some of these people became close to President Islam Karimov, who himself comes from Samarkand, and have been able to benefit economically from Uzbekistan's independence. But most of this elite have been kept at arms length by the regime, and the slow pace of economic reform has given them little opportunity to accumulate more capital. Uzbekistan's currency is soft, and control of access to dollars has been tightly maintained, leaving foreign investors with little incentive to invest and bring new technology into the country. Some of this elite have managed to “export” their assets, and Uzbek businessmen dominate the economies of southern Kyrgyzstan and southern Kazakhstan. But these outlets are insufficient to meet the pent-up demand of frustrated potential entrepreneurs who are eager for market reforms and who may well latch onto whatever means of trying to seize power that come their way.

MYTH EIGHT: Nationalism is eternal and immutable.

The perpetuation of all of these exclusionary practices on the part of these regimes gives increased potency to some myths of the past. In each of these countries, leaders continue to be concerned about forces that threaten the unity of the state leaders and the competing ideologies that they use to advance their causes, be they regional, subethnic, or supra-ethnic, such as Islamic radicalism. All of this seems to strengthen official desire to emphasize Soviet-era ethnic divisions as the building blocks for a new national consensus in these now independent states.

Most Central Asians' understanding of nationality and ethnic identity is still shaped by the Stalin-era divisions of society that divided the Soviet population into well over a hundred ethnic communities, which each enjoyed varying legal statuses based on size, history, economic capacity, and location. Central Asia's five principal nationalities—the Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, and Turkmen—were all deemed worthy of union republic status, and so received independence.

As appendix two details, each of the new countries were multi-ethnic in makeup, with some more so than others. But in every case the ruling elite is determined to build patriotism around the notion of an ethno-national state. Some of these efforts, such as those of the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, are more focused on tolerance for ethnic minorities, whereas others, such as the Uzbeks, are trying to recast ethno-nationalism as civic patriotism.

However, it is proving difficult to sell any of these visions to populations weary of ideological manipulation by the state, especially one, like that of the late Soviet era, that is doing such a poor job of meeting popular expectations in the social sphere. Independence, though, has also led to a growing sense of ethnic empowerment by the titular nationality, but this is not generally translating itself into political loyalty.

At the same time, the process of post-colonial societal redefinition has already begun, although as in Soviet times, nationality continues to be recorded on passports and most other official documents. Assimilation is already taking place among those who are deemed “marginal”

to the titular nationality, people who came from ethnically mixed families or were members of subethnic groups that are represented in two different national communities. For example, it is easier for an Uzbek of Kipchak ancestry who lives in southern Kazakhstan to re-identify with the Kazakhs than it might be for someone whose ancestors originally came from Bukhara, and the re-identification process would also be easy for a Kazakh Kipchak living in Uzbekistan or an Uzbek Kipchak living in Kyrgyzstan. A Lokai living in Tajikistan might also find it easier to begin the process of ethnic re-identification as these former Turkic tribesmen never really considered themselves a part of the Uzbek nation, or at least his children might be willing to switch nationality. Where local bilingualism is prevalent, such switches are easier, and Uzbeks who lived in Tajikistan, like Tajiks who lived in Uzbekistan, could almost always speak both languages fluently, with the Uzbek and Kyrgyz dialects spoken near the border generally mutually intelligible.

On the one hand, the dominant nationalities in each country are consolidating, but on the other, they are also breaking down. Both patterns are often observed in the same country, where in some areas new groups are coming to identify with the dominant nationality, whereas in other regions there is an increase in subethnic identity, be it clan, *zhuz*, or a local territorially based identity. It is still unclear in many cases what will be the dominant political influence—centripetal or centrifugal forces.

Take the case of Bukhara, for example, where there is a very strong regional identity. In some ways this is very good; as in Bukhara it is not particularly important whether one is of Uzbek or of Tajik background, but that one is native to the region. Many people speak both languages freely, and this Bukharan identity could form the basis of an ethnically blind sense of Uzbek civic patriotism. Or alternatively, it could be the basis of a serious separatist movement.

Loyalties are very complex and potentially fluid in southern Kyrgyzstan as well. Right now the benefits of Kyrgyz citizenship far outweigh the disadvantages of ethnic minority status, but a dramatic improvement in political and economic conditions across the border in Uzbekistan could leave Kyrgyzstan's Uzbek population feeling quite differently. Subethnic identities are strong enough in both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to successfully undermine either state, if the right preconditions were in place.

Although the potential effects of interethnic competition should not be overestimated, their influence is likely to increase during periods of heightened elite competition, such as that of a succession struggle. This means that policies prevalent throughout the region that leave certain clans, *zhuzes*, and regions feeling relatively disenfranchised politically are potentially quite dangerous. Generally speaking though, national identities seem to be hardening throughout the region, and so too are the Soviet-era concepts of “us” and “them.” Increasingly, those who live in neighboring countries are becoming “other”—in some cases seemingly like close-kin and in others far more distant relatives—and the irredentist populations who live within each country are becoming ever more potentially dangerous minorities.

MYTH NINE: When the ethnic Russians leave, the Central Asians will come to terms with their colonial past.

As the Central Asian states come to fear Russia less, they become less concerned with the fate of the Russian minorities still living in their countries. While none of the states in Central Asia are pushing the local Russian population out, despite protestations to the contrary, most are generally content to see them go. Local Russians are not becoming ethnically, culturally, or linguistically assimilated with the dominant nationality among whom they are living. With time Central Asia's Russians are losing any hope of being awarded some sort of special status, particularly in a place like Kazakhstan where they began independence at near numeric equality with the country's titular nationality. Both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan do provide a special status for the Russian language, unlike that granted to any other minority.

In fact, the region's Russians did not view themselves as a minority when the process began, because overall across the entire Soviet Union they were a majority population. However, after the Soviet Union fell apart they had to confront their minority status, and many chose not to accept it but to emigrate to Russia instead. Over the past dozen years much of the able-bodied Russian (and other European) population has moved out of Central Asia. In places like Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, the Russian population is largely pension-aged.²²

The decision to leave the region is essentially a rational one. Ethnic Russians have realized their future opportunities are limited. This is true even in Kazakhstan, where the fate of the Russian language is distinct from that of the Russian nationality, a situation analogous to what happened in post-colonial India and Pakistan, where English remained the leading language long after the departure of the English themselves.

The nature of Central Asia's "Russian problem" is evolving as the region's demographic makeup is transformed. Ethnic Russians who are able are likely to continue to leave the region—or at least dream of doing so. After a decade of relative Russian indifference to their fate, Central Asia's ethnic Russians hold few illusions that assistance will be forthcoming. Those who remain in the Central Asian states seem likely to grow resigned to their second-class status.

It is now time to begin dissociating the problems of the ethnic Russian minority from those of the colonial past. However, the region's leaders have little interest in working through the problems associated with their colonial heritage. The invocation of the colonial past is becoming a part of the litany used in explaining problems or insufficiencies in the process of political and economic development. It is a ready excuse that can be offered up for any problem, be it a preexisting one, or something that has been exacerbated by recent policies.

The bottom line is that the Russian and Soviet colonial past is offered up as an explanation for why the population of these regions should not expect too much of their governments. Here U.S. and other Western policy makers and pundits have not always played a helpful role. Competition with Russia for control of these countries' natural resources has increased U.S. willingness to "play the colonial card." The insufficiencies of the old Soviet system were legion, and it did support a resource-based, export-oriented economy that placed "common" need above the local one. But it is also dangerous to oversimplify the Soviet past. Ten years of independence has led to even deeper entrenchment of the export-oriented, export-based economy. For oil- and gas-rich states such as Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, this could someday lead to a filling of state

coffers, with money aplenty for downstream industrial projects. But in the case of Uzbekistan, this has meant increased dependency on the production and export of raw cotton, a crop that damages the environment and is still grown on cooperatively owned plots and sold to the government at state-determined purchase prices.

MYTH TEN: Central Asians are violent by nature and must be ruled with an iron hand.

The heightening of ethnic consciousness in turn makes the region's rulers even more wary of their populations. Eager, too, to ward off international pressure for political reform, the region's governments are spreading the myth that Central Asia's peoples are inherently violent, and so both need and want an iron hand to restrain them. All of the region's governments have regularly used force to sustain their authority, rather than divesting power to different elite groups, much less divesting power to the people.

Governments justify their behavior by arguing that the Central Asians are incapable of sharing power in a harmonious fashion, citing as evidence Tajikistan's civil war, which was sparked in part by competing regional elites.²³ Moreover, the region's rulers frequently invoke history to justify their reluctance to engage in power-sharing arrangements. That the Central Asians generally acquiesce to the use of an "iron hand," however, does not mean that they have a cultural affinity toward dictatorship.

In many places the writing of history remains as politicized today as it was under the Soviets, as rulers try to invoke the past to defend their choices in the present. Events that were suppressed by the Soviets are now being trumpeted, and rulers who were criticized are now generally treated as national heroes. So, for example, somebody like Timur, whose historic legacy is mixed at best, especially when looked at from the point of view of the peoples he conquered, is now described as the founder and philosopher of Uzbek statehood. His writings are presented in a museum in downtown Tashkent that commemorates him as a guide for modern state building.

It is easy for those in charge to talk about authoritarian rule being in the historical memory of the Central Asian population. But in the end, Uzbek authorities' threats to rape the mothers and sisters of "suspected" Islamic activists who refuse to confess their "treasonous" activities probably explain more about a growing tendency to submissive behavior than affinity for strong rulers that is passed on genetically and instilled culturally.

Central Asia's population still shares the hopes and expectations that were produced by the political and economic thaw of the late Soviet years across all of the Soviet Union. Independence further kindled these hopes, which were never uniformly expressed across society. Those living in cities had one set of expectations, particularly those living in republic capitals, and those living in the countryside had quite another. National cultures, of course, gave a somewhat different content to these demands, but qualitatively there was much that was common. Urban elites had very different expectations than those living in rural areas. In a generation's time, discussion of post-Soviet space will no longer have any meaning, as differences will become more noticeable than common characteristics. It is possible that by then the "iron hand" will be a natural form of governance for the region, if the increasingly more authoritarian regimes in the area manage not to provoke the chaos that they seek to forestall.

MYTH ELEVEN: Islam is fundamentally dangerous and must be contained.

When Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev started talking about cultural renewal in the late 1980s, people throughout the Soviet Union began to press for a new relationship between religion and society, one which allowed an individual the freedom to practice his or her traditional faith as the dictates of conscience defined it. With independence, the Russians and most of the other Christian populations of the Soviet Union have been reasonably successful at realizing this goal.

The same has not been true in the Muslim-dominated regions, and the suspicion with which most of Central Asia's rulers regard Islam has increased over time. This attitude is quite characteristic of the Central Asian elite, not just those who are in charge, but of many who are in opposition as well, and it is one that often plays well with Western audiences.

The Central Asian elite, of course, is not formally against Islam, but it is very wary of revivalist or fundamentalist Islam, of people who are eager to live by "the exact teachings of the book." They want to keep these republics as secular states and to prevent devout Muslims from forcing all of their co-religionists into the public observance of the faith.

It is not difficult to understand the negative feelings of the Soviet-era elite—both Muslim and non-Muslim—toward revivalist Islam, as their lifestyles would be directly threatened by the imposition of Islamic norms, and their hold on power could be as well. The post-Soviet world is a unique one, as the colonial-era elite remains in power with the right to divide up all of state property and is able to limit political access of the next generation. In these conditions, Islam can be a useful tool for the state's opponents. Islamic revivalists are keenly interested in advancing the cause of social welfare, and the state has real difficulty maintaining the level of social protection in a time of economic transition.

In the absence of a civil society, there are few secular political institutions around which opposition can coalesce. Islam, especially the mosque and the medresseh, is about the only organizational center available to those in opposition to the regime, and it is very difficult to restrict popular access to it. As a result, the advocacy of Islamic goals can be useful for both the regime's supporters as well as for its detractors. All depends on the rules of the game, and these are still in flux.

The challenge posed by Islam remains particularly acute in Uzbekistan. Islam is particularly deeply rooted in many parts of the country, and the precedent of competition among Islamic fundamentalists, modernists, and conservatives is well established. All three traditions withstood the vicissitudes of Soviet rule. Some of today's radical groups even have their roots in an anti-Russian uprising that occurred in the Ferghana Valley in 1898, and a few of the leaders even studied with a "holy-man" who witnessed the revolt as a young child, and who much to Soviet displeasure survived to a very old age.

Uzbek President Islam Karimov believes that Islam can be managed, as do most of his colleagues. In fact, all of Central Asia's leaders remain committed to the social engineering approach that characterized Soviet rule. They believe strongly that religion can be managed by the state, as can the development of Islam, and that governments are competent enough to influence the social evolution of society. The relationship of religion to mass belief is much more complex and interactive than the region's leaders credit it with being. Although the governments

of Central Asia are in no position to regulate the religious beliefs of the masses, they may exert their influence on social processes. But in trying to do so, these governments could inadvertently trigger social explosions.

MYTH TWELVE: The Central Asians are still in search of the correct answer or policy that will bring prosperity, peace, and health to all, but ten years is still too short a time to expect such an answer to be found.

Whereas five years ago the region's leaders were looking for a magic solution to their problems, now they are seeking an instant explanation for why this has not yet been found. The one that they have fastened on is that ten years is a very short time in the life of a nation and that the transition to independence is by definition a difficult one. Naturally, it follows from this that the lives of most people have grown more difficult, but people can now take consolation from the fact that they are living as masters in their own country and that conditions are certain to improve with time.

Western observers may choose to accept this explanation, yet this myth is becoming increasingly harder for most people living in the region to believe. Anyone travelling throughout Central Asia cannot fail to notice worsening social conditions: growing illiteracy, deteriorating health conditions, rising unemployment, a growing gap between the city and the countryside, and so on.

It is becoming harder for people to figure out of what they have in fact become the masters. In places like Uzbekistan, the state is more brutal today than at any time since the Stalin era, and their treatment of devout Muslims is almost indistinguishable from the punishments meted out to them during the "Great Terror." For those living on the ruined state and collective farms of rural Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, gaining control of one's fate feels much like abandonment, as most of the farmers lack the resources to buy or work the land effectively, and both national and local authorities show no interest in helping them cope with the economic challenges of transition.

Overall, people are simply losing confidence that things will be improving anytime soon. Rumors of signing bonuses by foreign firms and billions of dollars in international assistance that are unaccounted for circulate widely in each of the Central Asian countries, and while such rumors cannot be proved, there are enough visible signs of conspicuous consumption by a small new elite to give substance to the stories that these same people have vast fortunes socked away abroad.

Decolonization in Central Asia is becoming increasingly reminiscent of what occurred in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, where a number of states have spent the past forty years stepping backwards from the levels of development that characterized their country and its population at the time of independence or in the first decade after independence was achieved.

Truly, ten years is not a long time, and the negative trends that this working paper describes could prove to be mere temporary glitches in the very difficult process of transition. But given the political and economic trajectories chosen by nearly all of Central Asia's leaders, it is even easier to imagine that conditions will continue to deteriorate. Maybe when the ruling families

begin to have sated their ambitions for wealth and power things might improve. But the rulers and the ruled seem to tell time in different ways, whether the international community wants to take note of this or not. Most people need the hope that things will improve either in their lifetime or that of their children. Those born in the Soviet Union were raised on a diet of “deferred gratification,” and all independence seems to have brought is a new version of the old dietary staple.

Decolonization is a lengthy process—one that seems to go on forever in some countries of the world—but a population’s patience eventually expires.

NOTES

- ¹ In addition to convening an inter-governmental parliamentary assembly, the EAU member states were to share a common currency and common foreign economic policies. Highlights of Nazarbayev’s plan for the EAU were published in *Izvestia*, June 8, 1994, p. 2, as translated in RusData DiaLine, *Russian Press Digest*. Additional information is available in ITAR-TASS, April 21, 1994. See also Martha Brill Olcott, Anders Åslund, and Sherman W. Garnett, *Getting It Wrong: Regional Cooperation and the Commonwealth of Independent States* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999), pp. 112, 118.
- ² See appendix two for details.
- ³ The Shanghai Five, formed of the five states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, China, and Russia) that inherited the old Soviet-Chinese border, was created on April 26, 1996. In June 2001 it was expanded to include Uzbekistan, and its functions expanded to include regional cooperation to meet shared security threats.
- ⁴ The Tashkent Collective Security Treaty, signed in May 1992, established the heads of state as the Collective Security Council. The signatories were Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Armenia, and Uzbekistan, later joined by Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Georgia. Uzbekistan, Georgia, and Azerbaijan formerly withdrew from the Tashkent Treaty in April 1999. For more, see Olcott, Åslund, and Garnett, *Getting It Wrong*, pp. 77–108.
- ⁵ Joint command exercises “Southern Shield of the Commonwealth” were held in March 2000 and April 2001. During these exercises, troops from Russia, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan, along with participants from Armenia and Belarus, were drilled and prepared for possible terrorist acts in the Central Asian theater of operations. See Vladimir Georgiyev, “Maneuvers in Moscow,” *Defense and Security*, April 6, 2001, p. 5.
- ⁶ Although Uzbekistan still has the largest army in the region, the total size of Kazakhstan’s armed forces (64,000) now exceeds that of Uzbekistan (59,100), in large part to better protect the Kazakh state against its southern neighbor. Kazakhstan has also created new border districts along its southern border. Uzbekistan’s army consists of 50,000 troops, followed by Kazakhstan with 45,000, Turkmenistan with 14,500, Kyrgyzstan with 6,600, and Tajikistan with 6,000. See International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2000–2001* (London: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- ⁷ Amir Timur (1336–1405) controlled a territory stretching from Asia Minor to India. Timur, who prided himself on being a descendant of Chinggis Khan, was a member of the Mongol White Horde and lived before the present-day Uzbek people were ethnically constituted. See Edward A. Allworth, *The Modern Uzbeks* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Institution Press, 1990), pp. 242–48.
- ⁸ In August 2000, there was a border clash between Uzbek guards and Kyrgyz villagers, resulting in several serious injuries; there have also been exchanges of fire along the Kazakh-Uzbek border. There have been at least twelve reported deaths from landmines in Kyrgyzstan and thirty such deaths in Tajikistan. See “OSCE Criticizes Mine Fields on Tajik-Uzbek Border,” *The Times of India*, January 17, 2001, p. 3.
- ⁹ The enclave of Sokh was juridically part of Uzbekistan but fully physically contained within Kyrgyzstan. When word of this agreement, signed on February 26, 2001, leaked out in April, the Kyrgyz were quick to stress its provisional character, but members of Kyrgyzstan’s parliament began to call for President Askar Akayev’s resignation.
- ¹⁰ In 1999, the United States provided \$7.15 million in military assistance to the states of Central Asia under the International Military Education and Training (IMET) and the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programs; in 2000, an estimated \$6.30 million in military assistance was provided as part of these programs. See U.S. Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification for Foreign Operations, Fiscal Year 2001*, March 15, 2000.

- ¹¹ The production sharing agreement (PSA) between the Azerbaijan International Operating Company (AIOC) and the Government of Azerbaijan became effective in December 1994 and has a thirty-year duration. The PSA between OKIOC (Offshore Kazakhstan International Operating Company) and the Government of Kazakhstan became effective in April 1998 and has a twenty-year duration.
- ¹² Presidential elections were originally set for early 1996 in Kazakhstan and December 1995 in Kyrgyzstan. Constitutional provisions set term limits to two consecutive terms in both countries.
- ¹³ Presidential elections were again held in Kazakhstan in January 1999 and in October 2000 in Kyrgyzstan. In both elections, each president's principal opponent was effectively barred from running. Former Prime Minister Akezhan Kazhegeldin in Kazakhstan was banned because he had a record of administrative arrest, earned by holding an unsanctioned political rally. In Kyrgyzstan, former Vice President Feliks Kulov opted not to take a mandatory language test, after other candidates who were native speakers of Kyrgyz had failed it. Kazhegeldin, who served as Prime Minister of Kazakhstan from 1994 to 1997, headed the Republican People's Party of Kazakhstan (RPPK). Lieutenant General Feliks Kulov was Kyrgyzstan's former Vice President, as well as former Minister of Defense, former Governor of the Chui region, former Mayor of Bishkek, and leader of the Ar-Namys (Dignity) political party.
- ¹⁴ Article 60 of Turkmenistan's constitution states that "the President may be prematurely relieved of office if incapable of meeting her or his obligations because of sickness." In such a case, power would be temporarily transferred to the Chair of Parliament. Likewise, Article 96 of Uzbekistan's constitution holds that "if, for reasons of health...the President of Uzbekistan is not able to meet her or his obligations. . . an acting President will be chosen by Parliament from among the deputies" to serve for three months until a general election.
- ¹⁵ Niyazov suffers from respiratory problems and had an operation on his leg to remove a blood clot in 1994, heart surgery in 1997, and in February 2000 cancelled a meeting with Armenian President Robert Kocharian due to an unspecified illness.
- ¹⁶ See "Turkmen President Objects to Being Called Prophet," *BBC Monitoring*, May 22, 2001.
- ¹⁷ Erk (Freedom) was formed in 1990 by noted Uzbek poet Muhammad Solih; Birlik (Unity) was formed in 1988 by Abdurahim Pulat and Timur Valiyev.
- ¹⁸ Avdi Kuliyeu was Turkmenistan's Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1991 to 1992 and is currently President of the Turkmenistan Foundation. Saparmurad Soyunov was a member of the Turkmen Parliament and Vice Mayor of the city of Qizil-Arvat from 1990 to 1993.
- ¹⁹ The Kazakhs trace from three *zhuz* or hordes: the Small Horde in western and central Kazakhstan; the Middle Horde in north central and northeastern Kazakhstan; and the Great Horde in southern Kazakhstan.
- ²⁰ See Steve LeVine and Bill Powell, "A President and His Counselor," *Newsweek*, July 2, 2000.
- ²¹ On March 21, 2001, the Kazakh Parliament adopted a law allowing the repatriation of capital illegally transferred to foreign bank accounts.
- ²² From 1998 to 2000 alone, the Federal Migration Service of the Russian Federation estimated that 927,000 former Soviet citizens emigrated to the Russian Federation; most of these were ethnic Russians. Note that these figures do not include people who have emigrated to other CIS states, Germany, Israel, or the United States, all of which have received sizeable numbers of former residents of Central Asia.
- ²³ Pro-communist elites from Tajikistan's Khujand and Kuliab provinces did not want to share power with each other or with those from Kurgan Tiube, the region where Tajikistan's Islamists eventually grew quite powerful. The struggle between the three groups plunged the country into civil war from 1991 to 1993 and eventually resulted in an agreement on national reconciliation reached in 1997 that includes most but not all of Tajikistan's groups. The largely Uzbek elite of Khujand still remains frustrated, and the Pamirs of Gorno-Badakhshan remain isolated as well.

APPENDIX ONE: TWELVE MYTHS

From Martha Brill Olcott's presentation "Facing the Future: Twelve Myths about Central Asia," given at the Central Asian Conference on Regional Cooperation in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, in 1995

- MYTH 1: All the Central Asian states can exercise their sovereignty in the same way and to the same degree.
- MYTH 2: The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) will succeed in becoming a supra-national organization.
- MYTH 3: Russia will reunite the former republics.
- MYTH 4: International agencies and organizations will support and, if necessary, help preserve the Central Asian states.
- MYTH 5: The present elites, and the present leaders, are eternal.
- MYTH 6: The Central Asians are growing tired of democracy.
- MYTH 7: Political and economic change can bring only winners.
- MYTH 8: Nationalism is an absolute, immutable category.
- MYTH 9: Russians are different than other minorities—either unfortunate victims now “stranded” in queer Asiatic states, or arrogant colonists who should be encouraged to go “home.”
- MYTH 10: Central Asians are different—violent, unpredictable “Asians” who cannot cooperate with one another and who must be ruled with an iron hand.
- MYTH 11: Islam is fundamentally dangerous and must be contained.
- MYTH 12: There is *somewhere* a correct answer, a correct policy, or a correct leader that, if we can but find it, will bring prosperity, peace, and health to all.

APPENDIX TWO: CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRY FACTS

Kazakhstan

AREA: 2,717,300 sq km

NATURAL RESOURCES

& PRINCIPAL EXPORTS: major deposits of petroleum, natural gas, coal, iron ore, manganese, chrome ore, nickel, cobalt, copper, molybdenum, lead, zinc, bauxite, gold, uranium

POPULATION: 16,733,227 (July 2000 estimate)

ETHNIC GROUPS: Kazakh (Qazaq) 46%, Russian 34.7%, Ukrainian 4.9%, German 3.1%, Uzbek 2.3%, Tatar 1.9%, other 7.1% (1996)

CHIEF OF STATE: President Nursultan A. NAZARBAYEV (since December 1991). Previously served as First Secretary of Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan, Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, and President of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic. Re-elected by popular vote for a seven-year term in January 1999.

Kyrgyzstan

AREA: 198,500 sq km

NATURAL RESOURCES

& PRINCIPAL EXPORTS: abundant hydropower; significant deposits of gold and rare earth metals; locally exploitable coal, oil, and natural gas; other deposits of nepheline, mercury, bismuth, lead, and zinc

POPULATION: 4,685,230 (July 2000 estimate)

ETHNIC GROUPS: Kyrgyz 52.4%, Russian 18%, Uzbek 12.9%, Ukrainian 2.5%, German 2.4%, other 11.8%

CHIEF OF STATE: President Askar AKAYEV (since October 1990). Previously served as Chairman of the Science Department of the Central Committee of the Kyrgyz Communist Party, Vice-President and President of the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences. Re-elected by popular vote for a five-year term in October 2000.

Tajikistan

AREA: 143,100 sq km

NATURAL RESOURCES

& PRINCIPAL EXPORTS: hydropower, some petroleum, uranium, mercury, brown coal, lead, zinc, antimony, tungsten

POPULATION: 6,440,732 (July 2000 est.)

ETHNIC GROUPS: Tajik 64.9%, Uzbek 25%, Russian 3.5% (declining because of emigration), other 6.6%

CHIEF OF STATE: President Emomali RAHMONOV (since November 1994) Previously served as Chairman of the Executive Committee of Kulob Regional Council of Peoples Deputies and Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Republic of Tajikistan. Re-elected by popular vote for a seven-year term in November 1999.

Turkmenistan

- AREA:** 488,100 sq km
- NATURAL RESOURCES
& PRINCIPAL EXPORTS:** petroleum, natural gas, coal, sulfur, salt, cotton
- POPULATION:** 4,518,268 (July 2000 estimate)
- ETHNIC GROUPS:** Turkmen 77%, Uzbek 9.2%, Russian 6.7%, Kazakh 2%, other 5.1% (1995)
- RELIGIONS:** Muslim 89%, Eastern Orthodox 9%, unknown 2%
- CHIEF OF STATE:** President and Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers Saparmurat NIYAZOV (since October 1990). Previously served as Chairman of the Council of Ministers of Turkmenistan, First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Turkmenistan, Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic. In December 1999, Niyazov's term in office was extended indefinitely by the Assembly (Majlis) during a session of the People's Council (Halk Maslahaty).

Uzbekistan

- AREA:** 447,400 sq km
- NATURAL RESOURCES
& PRINCIPAL EXPORTS:** natural gas, petroleum, coal, gold, uranium, silver, copper, lead and zinc, cotton, tungsten, molybdenum
- POPULATION:** 24,755,519 (July 2000 estimate)
- ETHNIC GROUPS:** Uzbek 80%, Russian 5.5%, Tajik 5%, Kazakh 3%, Karakalpak 2.5%, Tatar 1.5%, other 2.5% (1996 estimate)
- CHIEF OF STATE:** President Islam KARIMOV (since March 24, 1990, when he was elected president by the then-Supreme Soviet). Previously served as Minister of Finance of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, Chairman of the State Planning Office, and First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan. On March 26, 1995, in accordance with a national referendum, his period in office was extended to 2000. Re-elected for a five-year term by popular vote in January 2000.

Sources: CIA WorldFactbook 2000; Government of Tajikistan <<http://tajikistan.tajnet.com>>; Embassy of Turkmenistan; Embassy of Uzbekistan; Kyrgyz National News Agency <www.kabar.gov.kg>; International Foundation for Election Systems <www.ifes.org>; Countrywatch.com; and The Transcaspian Project <www.transcaspian.ru>.

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