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After September 11, An Unexpected Chance

The terrorist attacks on the United States of September 11, 2001, demonstrated what can happen when the international community turns its back on a region—in this case, Afghanistan and its neighbors—and its problems. Yet despite all the money subsequently devoted to the war on terror and to preventing a repeat of the circumstances that allowed Al Qaeda to thrive, the prospect of new failed states developing in Central Asia is greater today than it was then. In March 2005 Kyrgyzstan's president, Askar Akayev, was driven from office by an angry mob, and less than one month later Uzbekistan's president Islam Karimov used force to reassert control in the Ferghana Valley.

For most of the first decade of independence, Central Asia's leaders liked to cite the situation in Afghanistan as the source of many of their problems, claiming it created an environment in which political reform was risky and economic reform needed to take a backseat to political stability. But the population in the region—sparked in part by successful revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine—will no longer tolerate these kinds of excuses.

The situation in Afghanistan shows signs of stabilizing, even though reconstruction there is proving to be a slow and reverse-filled process. The Taliban's hold on power has been broken, the Al Qaeda camps have been largely liquidated, and a national political consensus seems to be developing around the idea that the country should be ruled by a democratically elected government.

Although armed opposition to the government led by President Hamid Karzai remains, fueled in part by a burgeoning drug trade, the ouster of the Taliban substantially reduced a major security risk for these states. And

even if Karzai should fall, the threat posed to Afghanistan's neighbors will be mitigated as long as there is a substantial U.S. and international military presence in Afghanistan, logistically supported by the presence of the two U.S. bases in Central Asia: the Manas airbase in Kyrgyzstan and the Khanabad base in Uzbekistan.

This new security environment created an unexpected second chance for the Central Asian states. Alongside the bases came the prospect of increased international assistance to the states of Central Asia as part of a regional strategy to support nation-building efforts in Afghanistan.

The thesis of this book is that much like their first efforts at state building, there is little likelihood that even now the Central Asian states will "get it right." The Soviet-era leaders still in power in these countries show no more—and in some cases even less—inclination to promote democratic political transitions than they did previously, and support for the transparency necessary to sustain economic reform remains virtually absent throughout the region.

Furthermore, the international community has done little to change the mind-set of these leaders. Although funding for the Central Asian states increased, the increases were short term and relatively meager, given the magnitude of economic challenges they face. Donor nations have been unwilling to reevaluate their fundamental approaches to foreign assistance and development needs in the region, so the incentives for reform remain ineffective.

Western interest in Central Asia has been quick to wane, partly because problems have cropped up in other parts of the world. The United States became preoccupied with the war in Iraq, and in general the international donor community became quickly disappointed by the initial results of their efforts at reengagement. By 2004 few outside observers viewed the prospects of reform in much of Central Asia any more favorably than they had three years earlier, and many viewed prospects as even more negative. And when President George W. Bush set the goal of building a community of free and independent nations in his January 2005 State of the Union Address, that was no indication that regime change or democratic institution building in this part of the world be a priority for his administration.[1]

A Fish Rots from the Head Down

Well-thought-out Western engagement is a necessary condition for changing the trajectories of development in this part of the world, but alone, it is

insufficient. The outside world can provide foreign direct investment, technical assistance, loans, and grants-in-aid to these countries, but the will for reform must come from within the Central Asian states themselves, as we have seen in Kyrgyzstan. It must come from populations willing to endure the dislocations of economic and political transitions. And even more important, it must come from leaders willing to observe constitutional term limits, willing to hold free and fair elections—even if elections result in their defeat at the polls—and willing to leave office if such a defeat occurs. Democratic reforms can often translate into shorter periods in office than leaders or their families might like.

Reform also requires a kind of selflessness from leaders, a capacity to convince the population that their actions are designed to advance a national interest rather than simply motivated by the ruler's personal gain. This element has been sorely lacking in Central Asia. Even the most nationally spirited of the region's leaders have been compromised by charges that they or their family members have benefited from rigged privatization schemes. The worst behave so outlandishly that they appear as caricatures of greed and personal aggrandizement.

None of the region's presidents was truly prepared for the job of leading an independent state. While we can debate what the ideal training would be, bad training is easy to identify and would certainly include a successful career in the top ranks of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union—an institution that demanded blind obedience and inspired devious behavior. Central Asia's current leaders were all members of the Soviet elite, and the heads of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan were the Moscow-appointed leaders of their respective republic's Communist Party when the Soviet Union collapsed in December 1991. Kyrgyzstan's Askar Akayev took charge of his republic in 1990 in a coup staged by the local communist elite against the Moscow-appointed boss, who was already a liability to the Kremlin.[2] And the leaders who ousted Akayev in 2005 also served in the Communist Party system. All of these individuals rose through the ranks of the Soviet system thanks to their tenacity and skill as political infighters, not because of any political leadership or original thinking. The challenge of founding new states demands precisely those qualities that the Soviet system chose not to reward.

With the dissolution of the USSR, Central Asia gained independence without having to fight for it. That, in some respects, was a real advantage, for it involved little suffering or loss of life. Yet as a result, Central Asia's

presidents generally lack the political legitimacy gained from leading a struggle for national independence.

Tajikistan's Imamali Rakhmonov is a somewhat special case. A former Soviet-era collective farm chairman from a remote region, Rakhmonov was placed in power in 1992 by the commanders who eventually won that country's civil war, which was fought between 1992 and 1997 for political control. A very unworldly man, Rakhmonov built his reputation on a high level of tolerance for brutality, even by local Tajik standards. Rakhmonov's first years in power were a time of bloody payback in the country, marked by vigilante justice against suspected enemies. These traits have made it very difficult for Rakhmonov to expand his power base, which is drawn almost entirely from his native region of Kulob.

In Kyrgyzstan, much changed between the early 1990s when Askar Akayev, the self-styled democrat, was popularly embraced as a nationalist figure and 2005 when Akayev, the increasingly corrupt autocrat, was ousted by members of his own ruling elite.

Akayev, a physicist by training and party functionary by career, had sought to emphasize how different he was from the region's other leaders. In his first years in office, Akayev was eager to cultivate an image of being the Thomas Jefferson of Central Asia, as Strobe Talbott, then Undersecretary of State, referred to him in 1994. His subsequent actions, which included jailing prominent political rivals, such as vice president-turned-opposition leader Feliks Kulov, turned such claims into a source of ridicule, when it became clear that the diminutive Akayev had very little in common with his physically imposing American role model.

Rakhmonov and Akayev, together with Nursultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan, Saparmurat Niyazov in Turkmenistan, and Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan have to varying degrees behaved like rulers who are frightened of their populations. Each has used the state instruments at his disposal to hold power, stunting the development of political institutions in the process, though always in the name of greater national gain.

New U.S. Presence

Since September 11, 2001, the expanded U.S. presence in the region has become one of these state instruments stabilizing the Central Asian regimes' grip on power Although the various nations' contributions to the war on ter-

ror have varied in strategic significance, each of the region's leaders believed that his efforts should translate into new leverage with the United States.

The Uzbeks were the first to provide a military base to the United States, turning over facilities at Khanabad in Kashi prior to the beginning of the military campaign in Afghanistan. The Tajik and Kyrgyz governments also lobbied for the U.S. military to use their facilities, eager for the boost it could bring their economies. The Dushanbe airport in Tajikistan was used by the United States and France as a "gas-and-go" refueling base during various phases of the military operation in Afghanistan. The United States established a full base facility in Kyrgyzstan, taking over part of the Manas airfield, the country's major commercial airport near Bishkek, and deploying 1,100 military personnel there. In addition, the United States also gained limited landing rights at three airfields in Kazakhstan.[3]

Only Turkmenistan imposed strict limits on its military cooperation with the United States, citing its claim to "positive neutrality." But it did serve as a major transit point for humanitarian assistance bound for Afghanistan, and such cooperation was enough for the United States to reward President Saparmurat Niyazov with a visit from U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in April 2002.

The September 11 attacks turned the countries of Central Asia into frontline states for the Bush administration, which previously had given little thought to direct engagement with Afghanistan and placed no priority on increased security cooperation with the Central Asian states.

For years Western analysts had been pointing to the security risks associated with Afghanistan's degeneration into lawlessness and had warned of increasing danger as the Taliban leaders consolidated their hold to include about 90 percent of the country's territory. This theme was frequently repeated in speeches by prominent Russian and Central Asian leaders, almost all of whom believed that anti-regime activists in their own countries had ties to Afghanistan's theocratic rulers.[4]

Central Asia's leaders were eager to link up with the U.S. effort to oust the Taliban because it would rid them of a troublesome neighbor. And many leaders also hoped that direct military cooperation with the United States might translate into security guarantees offered by Washington for their own increasingly less popular regimes.

The Taliban regime had few friends in Central Asia because most rulers saw it as threatening to their secular visions of nationhood and, even more troubling, as tolerating the presence of local and international terrorist

groups, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the Al Qaeda network. Most of the region's leaders also linked the lawlessness in Afghanistan to a major increase in the opium and heroin trade across their states. But the sense of threat varied, as did the price that the various Central Asian rulers were willing to pay to effect regime change in Afghanistan. By late 1999, however, attitudes toward the Taliban had hardened throughout the region, in large part due to the coordinated series of bombings in Tashkent in February 1999, and an armed incursion into Kyrgyzstan by Afghan-based fighters from the IMU several months later, in which several foreigners were taken hostage.

Cognizant of the deteriorating security environment in the region, the United States increased military assistance to and cooperation with several of the Central Asian states but saw little urgency in the situation, even as the United States became more concerned with the need to contain the threat posed by Al Qaeda.

The U.S. reevaluation of the strategic importance of the Central Asian states struck a responsive chord in the region. Presidents Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan and Askar Akayev of Kyrgyzstan had long been pressing for some form of increased international intervention in Afghanistan, as had Tajikistan's Imamali Rakhmonov. All three men had also been seeking ways to more fully engage with the United States, believing that Washington's preoccupation with oil- and gas-rich states of the Caspian meant that their importance was being eclipsed by Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.

U.S.–Tajik relations began improving steadily after an internationally led negotiating effort resulted in the introduction of a government of reconciliation in June 1997. But Rakhmonov wanted to further advance this relationship as part of his effort to find strategic counterbalances for Russia's lingering military presence.[5]

Akayev wanted to reverse a deteriorating U.S.–Kyrgyz relationship—and to do so without modifying his domestic policies. Akayev's domestic policies had become a sore point with U.S. policy makers, who were frustrated by restrictions on the role of opposition and independent political groups in Kyrgyzstan introduced in the late 1990s. Akayev's interest in cooperating with the United States was heightened by Uzbekistan's rapid support for the U.S. war effort. An alliance between Tashkent and Washington would change the strategic balance within the Central Asian region, and Akayev did not want his smaller and weaker country to become even more vulnerable to pressure from its more powerful neighbor.

The U.S. military's Enduring Freedom operation in Afghanistan seemed a tailor-made opportunity for Karimov, who saw close ties to the United States as critical to Uzbekistan's ability to develop a defense policy that was fully independent of Russia.

Many in the U.S. Defense Department were pleased with the Uzbek military's performance in a series of programs that grew out of the Partnership for Peace program run by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Military cooperation between the Uzbeks and the Americans increased after the Tashkent bombings in February 1999, in which Karimov appears to have been targeted by religious extremists presumed to have ties to the IMU, though no one has claimed responsibility for the attack.[6]

Karimov's refusal to engage in sustained economic or political reforms had seriously hampered prospects for a close Uzbek–U.S. relationship. At least two U.S. Secretaries of Defense, William Perry and Donald Rumsfeld, had been fulsome in their praise of Tashkent and lauded the prospect of U.S.–Uzbek cooperation. Rumsfeld seemed quite uncomfortable with using human rights—on which Karimov's record is infamous—as a yardstick when evaluating potential strategic partners.[7] But in the end there was too little to be gained in Washington from a close public partnership with remote Uzbekistan for any substantial sea change in relations to occur.

New Chance for Reform

In and of themselves, the pro forma promises Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan made regarding their newfound commitment to human rights made these states no less embarrassing allies for the United States, especially Uzbekistan. But the increased U.S. military presence, combined with Washington's claimed willingness to spend more foreign aid dollars in this part of the world, might have served as an opportunity to jump-start their stalled reform process. This book looks at precisely what would have been necessary to do just that.

Chapter two explores whether the regimes in place throughout Central Asia were prepared prior to September 11 to use the renewed international interest in the region the events unexpectedly sparked to resolve pressing economic and social challenges.

Chapter three details the degree of international involvement in the region prior to September 11, and looks at what were the building blocks in place for future engagement.

When the terrorists flew their planes into the World Trade towers and the Pentagon, each of the Central Asian states was in the throes of political or economic crises of varying severity, created in part by a series of bad policy choices on the part of the countries' ruling elite. As chapters four and five show, most of these problems have yet to be resolved, and the security risks posed by the failure to do so are escalating, a subject tackled in chapters six and seven.

Each of the Central Asian states has developed a strong presidential system, and in the most extreme case, Turkmenistan, the president has near absolute power. The political choices that have been made in each of these countries will complicate the inevitable but still-pending transfer of power to a new generation. None of the Central Asian states has developed the political institutions necessary to support a democratic transition. Presidents and parliaments have not been elected democratically, and all too often the latter serve as little more than presidential rubber stamps. In several countries disenfranchised groups in society are growing restive. Violence in Uzbekistan's Andijan province in May 2005 foreshadows future unrest and how easily it may be triggered.

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are well along in their transition to market economies, but some countries, like Turkmenistan, have not begun, or others, like Uzbekistan, are trying to recreate momentum for a process that was halted in its early stages. Corruption is endemic throughout Central Asia, and there is little protection of private property—a situation that hobbles the performance of even the region's strongest economies. The Central Asian states all have predominantly young populations that are generally growing faster than the opportunities for employment, which creates fertile breeding grounds for recruiters from radical Islamic groups that have been openly operating in Central Asia since the late 1980s.

All the states in the region are engaged in completely revamping Soviet-era education and healthcare systems. Some of these states are doing this far more successfully than others, but in much of the region the patience of the population to withstand the disruptions that accompany even the best grounded of the social reform programs shows signs of strain.

Many political and economic problems created by the collapse of the Soviet Union were exaggerated by the inward-looking policies of state-

building strategies, which often had deleterious consequences for the economies of neighboring states. We address this in the following chapter. The international community had little leverage to prevent this, because the United States and other Western governments and institutions used a country-specific approach to the design and delivery of development assistance rather than a framework designed to reinforce regional cooperation.

Five States versus One Region

The international financial community's approach reinforced the unwillingness of Central Asian leaders to give ground in dealing with shared regional problems, which have only been partly addressed, as chapters three and seven explain. Even today, though much less so than in 1991, the Central Asian states remain partially interdependent, which is a legacy of having been part of a single state. All depend in part or in whole on water from the Aral Sea basin, share hydroelectric and other energy systems, and have principal cities linked by highways that crossed largely arbitrary republic boundaries. Although tens of millions of dollars, including a lot of international assistance money, has been spent on reducing these interconnections, the Central Asian states still lack effective bilateral or multilateral institutions to manage the potential conflicts that their intimate geography and shared Soviet history continue to create.

At the same time, for all the complaints about the arbitrariness of national boundaries and all the talk of the relative "newness" of these nationalities, at independence each of the Central Asian states had a distinct titular nationality, with its own culture, language, and history. Although these people had much in common, there were also at least a dozen different permutations of national rivalries, especially when one added into the mix the hundred-odd minority nationalities and ethnic communities also living in the region. Most of these rivalries had their roots deep in history, but all had been further exacerbated by the ways in which scarce resources were allocated during the Soviet period.[8]

Ethnic competition has complicated the state-building process, a theme that appears throughout this book because it has affected foreign policies and domestic strategies in each of these countries. Central Asia's national leaders have consistently sought to demonstrate their uniqueness from their neighbors. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have always been relatively

more open to the recommendations of the international community, and the Tajiks have become receptive too since the 1997 culmination of their civil war in which some 60,000 people died. But to underscore their distinction, the leaders of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan sought to carve out a model of political and economic development that is said to be in keeping with the specificity of their national culture, rather than to accept strong international direction (and what they saw as inappropriate formulaic strategies).[9]

When the prospect of increased international assistance was raised in late 2001 and 2002, the Uzbek leadership began to reconsider its economic and political strategies. But as we see in chapter four, the Uzbek government has moved much more slowly and introduced fewer reforms than promised. Its introduction of account convertibility was late and incomplete, and the Uzbek government has yet to rescind regulations that restrict the free trade regime.[10] Uzbekistan's go-it-alone strategy has stifled the development of its own small- and medium-size business sector specifically and defeated prospects for regional trade more generally. This strategy has had serious economic consequences for neighboring Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan as well, contributing to their disappointing economic progress.

Not only has a regional market failed to develop in Central Asia, but an atmosphere of protectionism has been nurtured in its stead. Throughout the Soviet period the Central Asian states were forced into a ghetto of Moscow's making, but regional integration need not be synonymous with international isolation. A regional market would have helped facilitate the integration of these states into the global economy—not inhibit it, as so many leaders of the region mistakenly thought. Given the distance to markets in the United States, Asia, and Europe, the development of a regional market joining Central Asia's neighboring parts of Russia, Iran, Afghanistan, and China would have spurred the development of local businesses. Pooling the capacities, supplies, and markets of these states would have expanded the variety and complexity of medium-size enterprise projects available for investment.

Although the region's leaders have championed the cause of increased cooperation, their deeds have generally belied their words. The Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, and Kazakhs joined together in 1994 to establish a Central Asian Union, eventually renamed the Central Asian Economic Community, and expanded it to include Tajikistan. But, the organization did little to stimulate increased economic cooperation, largely because none of the member states would delegate any authority to it.

Instead, the states of Central Asia began to treat one another as potential rivals or, worse yet, as enemies. This has been particularly true after the rise of the IMU in the late 1990s. Discussions on free trade were overshadowed by the introduction of policies of armed protectionism, stimulated in large part by Uzbekistan's decision to begin formally delineating and even mining its borders with neighboring states in 1999.

Most Central Asians were not terribly concerned that choices being made in their national capitals were adversely affecting those living in neighboring states. After all, their Soviet-era experience with calls to sacrifice national (then termed "republic") interest for a common good had taught them to expect that those making the sacrifice would generally lose more than they would gain.

Each of the states in the region became preoccupied with creating an international identity separate from that of each of its neighbors. The change in psychology seeped down from the leaders to the level of political aspirants and even to ordinary citizens. This is particularly true of those living in the two largest states of the region—Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Over time, however, Kazakhstan's leaders began looking to a larger international arena for examples with which to compare themselves, whereas Uzbekistan's elite became even more inward looking, at least with regard to domestic politics.

Turkmenistan had gone one step further; Ashgabat was following a policy of de facto isolationism with its doctrine of "positive neutrality" and nonengagement.

Learning to Live with Independence

It was not surprising that it took a while for the Central Asian leaders to orient themselves to the larger international community, the theme of chapter three. The presidents of these countries were not particularly eager for the dissolution of the USSR, even though following the failed Communist Party coup of August 1991 most realized it was likely to be inevitable and supported resolutions declaring independence drafted by their republic parliaments.[11] Compared with the disturbances in most other parts of the USSR, however, the situation in Central Asia was generally very quiet in the final days of Soviet history.[12] The one exception was Tajikistan, where there was near-revolutionary political frenzy sufficient to force the Gorbachev-appointed head of the republic (Kakhar Makhkamov) to resign under pres-

sure in September 1991, setting in motion a series of events that would culminate in a full-fledged civil war some six months later.

The disturbances in Tajikistan highlighted the dangers associated with independence. No leader felt exempt from the risk of popular unrest, given the economic burdens that were created for each new government when the Soviet Union was dissolved. Each president became the formal master of his republic's economy but lacked the understanding of how to manage its assets or how to meet its inherited social welfare burdens.

Though formally independent, each republic was still fully tied to Moscow, which among other things was still printing all the money to pay pensions and salaries. All feared that Russia's president, Boris Yeltsin, would still try to dictate their economic and political choices, while formally recognizing each union republic of the Soviet Union as a sovereign subject of international law. At the same time there was a deep-seated fear of what would happen to these countries if Moscow left them to their own devices. Not only would republic leaders be left to deal with their own increasingly demanding populations, but they might have to cope with potentially rapacious neighbors, with whom they shared ill-defined borders and to whom they were still economically linked.

It soon became clear that most of these early fears were exaggerated. Tajikistan's devastating civil war was not a harbinger of similar unrest in neighboring states. It proved finite, and eventually, the process of international mediation led to a largely successful process of national reconciliation in Tajikistan.[13]

The risks associated with independence did not disappear for Central Asia's leaders but instead took on new forms. Tajikistan's civil war had many hidden costs, including reinforcing the perception of the region's ruling elite that the public was prone to uncontrollable violence. Long after the fighting in Tajikistan had ended, it was still used as an explanation for why the Central Asian states must move slowly with democratization.

The Tajik civil war also served to reinforce the Uzbek government's economic conservatism, because officials were frightened of what would happen if human security were somehow compromised and social welfare commitments were not maintained. These fears led to the maintenance of price supports long after neighboring Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan had abandoned them and fostered an atmosphere of economic isolation as Tashkent was fearful that traders from neighboring states would profit from Uzbekistan's lower prices.

The disorder in Afghanistan further complicated the process of state building throughout Central Asia. Opposition groups from Central Asia were able to take refuge in Afghanistan, and Islamic groups in particular (from both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) found this a welcome refuge even in the territories dominated by the Northern Alliance. This was the case even before the Taliban took power in Afghanistan and allowed the Al Qaeda network to establish training camps for international terrorists.

The Central Asian states used both the situation in Afghanistan and the civil war in Tajikistan as excuses for not addressing their unresolved problems of economic and political reform. In reality, however, by the mid-1990s, for all their fears that Islamic extremism might pose a security threat, the region's presidents were also beginning to feel more firmly in control of their countries than they had just a few years previously. Independence began to seem irreversible, but one consequence of this was that there would be no one to bail them out if they faltered, and now more than ever the region's presidents did not want to be turned out of office. Independence had been of enormous personal benefit to these men, especially the four in power in 1991.

The region's rulers and their families began accumulating vast personal fortunes when they figured out how to manipulate the transfer of economic authority from Moscow to the republics. Independence provided Central Asia's presidents with near-total control of all assets of any value in their countries. Given the almost complete absence of private property under the Soviet system, there was enough economic redistribution in even the poorest republics to make their leaders rich. The Soviet system also sharply limited the number of potential political stakeholders in the new Central Asian states. There were no property owners with vested economic interests to deal with, and these presidents' only serious political rivals were former colleagues from the communist elite, who with the dismantlement of the Communist Party now lacked the political instrument that they had previously used to advance themselves.

Learning about One's Friends

With time, the sense of perceived threat from Russia also began to recede, or at least was redefined. Although formally the heir to the USSR, Russia still had to reinvent itself and faced the same economic and political challenges as the other newly independent states. The Kremlin was preoccupied with

Russia's problems, and those that they had helped stir up in the Caucasus. As a result Moscow had less inclination and ability to directly intervene in Central Asia than the region's leaders had originally expected. Russia remained intimately involved in Tajikistan, but its military presence there proved the exception, not the rule.

The leaders of the Central Asian states eventually decided that the biggest threats they faced came from their own citizens, which we address in chapter two. Although the risk that dissatisfied elements would be incited by external forces decreased, the fear that they would be organized by frustrated and displaced local elites remained. The continued independence of their states was not at issue, but the current leaders' capacity to perpetuate their rule was not assured. And if their power were threatened, it was becoming increasingly unclear from whom they might obtain help.

By the mid-1990s, the leadership in Moscow was preoccupied with its own political succession crisis, and after Vladimir Putin took power in late 1999, the new Russian president quickly became mired in Chechnya. As chapter three shows, with the Russian army both overextended and largely unreformed, Moscow's interest in trying to speak for or act in the interests of its Central Asian neighbors was diminishing almost as rapidly as its capacity to do so effectively.

Russia's level of military engagement in Central Asia peaked with the Russian intervention in Tajikistan in late 1992. The Tashkent Collective Security Agreement, signed on May 14, 1992, ceased to be the basis of a regional force when the Uzbeks pulled out in 1999. Russian military cooperation remained quite high with the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs, but when terrorists from the IMU took hostages in the mountains of Kyrgyzstan's Osh oblast, the Russians refused to respond to the Kyrgyz call for help.[14] Bluntly put, Russia's military was not in a position to cover its own needs, let alone the Central Asians'.

Yet there was no other regional power ready or able to fill the gap. Sharing borders with three of the five Central Asian states, China had a strong interest in the region, but the Chinese did not feel pressed to maximize their influence. Their concern was to ensure future strategic advantage while minimizing the risk that the Central Asian states might create immediate security threats for China.

Smaller regional powers, including Iran and Turkey, did see the creation of independent states in Central Asia as potentially shifting the geostrategic balance to their respective advantage. Both states had strong cultural affini-

ties with the Central Asian states, and although both pursued aggressive policies in the region, each lacked the resources to become the deciding influence in any of these countries.

With its substantial U.S. support and NATO membership, Turkey was able to develop a stronger, but by no means commanding presence. The Central Asian states had long seen cooperation with the United States and NATO as a ticket to the future. But prior to September 11, the West had little interest in funding the rapid entry of the Central Asian countries into the global security system, and it seems now that little has changed.

Region Still at Risk

Even without the events of September 11, it was only a matter of time before the Russians were overshadowed in the region by the slowly but steadily growing role of the United States, as well as by the Central Asian states' own broader engagement with the United States and other European and Asian states. This said, the opening of U.S. military bases in the region was a dramatic act, simultaneously an affirmation of the Central Asian leaders' claim of the region's strategic importance and a symbolic end to the Russian and Soviet empires.

It also served as a public demonstration of Russian power in retreat. After years of blustering pronouncements warning Washington not to reach too deep into its backyard, Moscow rather quietly accepted being eclipsed by the United States in areas Russia had long dominated, at least as a temporary necessity. The increased U.S. presence in Afghanistan and Central Asia came in pursuit of a goal—the defeat of the Taliban and the removal of Al Qaeda from Afghanistan—that Moscow desperately shared but lacked the money, military technology, and international support to achieve.

Moscow also recognized that Washington's presence in its backyard was the product of extraordinary events that were wholly unrelated to Washington's attitude toward its former Cold War rival. Although quick to recognize all five newly independent states, the United States initially had been content to take a backseat to Russia in the region.

Prior to September 11, energy policy dominated U.S. strategic engagement in the region, and we address this in chapter three. U.S. policy makers had mixed success in finding ways to maximize the role of U.S. companies in Caspian oil and gas development, but this was not terribly

troubling because the exploitation phase of most major projects was still a long way off.

The strategic potential of Central Asia, however, was of growing interest to the U.S. military and security agencies after 1999, which sought increased cooperation with their counterparts in this region. But there was no sense of imperative from the U.S. side about helping these states meet their security needs, reform their militaries, or wean them away from Russia.

This situation has not really changed even with the U.S. bases in the region. Since September 11, the United States has increased the amount of money available for military training and the overall reform of the armed services of the Central Asian states but has not assumed responsibility for supervising and completing the reform process or for ensuring the internal security of these states.

Moreover, the nature of the long-term U.S. commitment to these states is still in question. The arrangements on bases and landing rights give Washington maximum flexibility to remain in the region as long or as short a time as it deems prudent, and the United States shows no evidence of leaving Central Asia any time soon. The United States has signed agreements with the Uzbeks that talk of a long-term security partnership between the two countries, and Washington has laid the foundation for somewhat less inconclusive military-to-military cooperation with Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Although the United States has promised to keep increasing spending for border security, narcotics interdiction, removal of nuclear materials, and officer training, it has not elaborated long-term commitments or binding security guarantees for any of the states in the region.

As discussed in chapters four and five, neither the promised assistance nor the stationing of U.S. troops in the region will eliminate the security threats that the Central Asian states face. Central Asia remains a region at risk. The change in the status quo in Afghanistan does little more than provide the states of Central Asia with breathing room. Homegrown opposition groups will just have to go further afield for their training and work harder to raise the money to sustain their operations.

The reconstruction of Afghanistan, however, would be of real economic benefit to the Central Asian states. It would allow for the development of new transit corridors across Afghanistan, creating relatively rapid access to the open ports of Pakistan and the possibility of supplying India with Central Asian oil and gas, as well as a host of other economic opportunities.

All of these economic benefits are still somewhat distant prospects, however. Today Afghanistan remains a source of drugs, not jobs, for Central Asia, with no sign that opium cultivation and the heroin trade will diminish. Thus, for the foreseeable future, Afghanistan's neighbors will warily monitor their shared borders. The Uzbek–Afghan border is small and fairly well controlled, but Afghanistan's borders with Turkmenistan and Tajikistan are long and highly porous.[15] With the increase in opium cultivation that followed the ouster of the Taliban leaders, drug traffickers in larger and larger numbers have begun plying the land routes between Afghanistan and Central Asia to reach their markets in Europe.

Even more disturbing is the regular flow of unwanted human traffic, including opponents of the Central Asian regimes, and in particular, those from the remnants of the IMU who have enjoyed safe haven in Afghanistan. And such safe haven is likely to continue to be provided to fighters on an individual basis even by Afghanistan's current rulers. Ties of kinship link Afghanistan's Uzbek and Tajik populations with relatives in Central Asia, and even the most distant of kin will offer refuge to those in political flight. Families who fled to Afghanistan to evade arrest by Soviet authorities in the 1920s are rumored even now to be offering sanctuary to IMU fighters hiding from U.S. forces.[16]

The presence of U.S. troops in Central Asia is of enormous psychological importance, but it does not address any of these problems. Neither do the redefined relationships that are emerging between Russia and the Central Asian states. Limiting Russia's role in the region does not improve the security environment for these states, nor will Russia's reemergence in the region necessarily lead to better risk management. Over the past two years, Russia and China have both signaled an interest in playing a larger role in ensuring the security of the region, but new security arrangements are still largely in discussion stages.

Although it was not the U.S. intent, the Bush administration's renewed engagement with all of the Central Asian states will inevitably redefine strategic relationships in this part of the world. But it will likely do so in ways that will not be readily apparent for quite some time.

The changing security environment in the region certainly helps foster the confidence of leaders of some of the Central Asian states, most particularly President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan, the architect of an increasingly more complex and multivectored foreign policy. Likewise in Uzbekistan, President Karimov has also sought to more aggressively position himself as the close partner of several great powers rather than to align him-

self with a single country or bloc. The politicians who have positioned themselves as successors to Akayev in Kyrgyzstan have done much the same, signaling their willingness to continue along Akayev's foreign policy path.

Although some of the leaders in the region sought briefly to redefine themselves in ways that were designed to appeal to U.S. authorities in the aftermath of September 11, none has tried to reinvent himself as democratic. If anything Central Asia's rulers now feel more able to be antidemocratic, which we discuss in chapter five. Leaders of the region's energy-rich states in particular feel more invulnerable. Even though they do not say so directly, figures like Kazakhstan's Nazarbayev make clear that they—not the United States or other outsiders—will set the limits of change in their societies, citing cultural imperatives or the dangers associated with empowering the masses in Asian or Islamic societies.

Central Asia's leaders were quick to appreciate that U.S. priorities in the war on terror have been framed by the need to eliminate the current threat. This approach may have made it easier for Washington to deal with the region's present leaders in the short run, but it creates the possibility that current U.S. policies might inadvertently create new security risks down the road.

U.S. policy makers are aware that this contradiction exists and it comes out clearly in every congressional hearing on Central Asia, of which there have been several each year since 2001.[17] Almost invariably, expert witness after expert witness talks about the long-term security risks associated with the failure to reform the economic and political systems of these countries, whereas the parade of U.S. government officials notes the strategic importance of the region and why it is in the U.S. interest to continue to engage with these states.

So while a percentage of U.S. assistance is earmarked to promote the development of democratic societies in this region, in reality Washington has been content to do business with the existing ruling elite, no matter how insecure or grasping it may be. Part of the problem is that most U.S. policy makers give democracy as little chance of succeeding in the region as Central Asia's rulers do themselves. And this very attitude is helping to stimulate the social and economic instability that serves as the breeding grounds for terror.

As this book went to press, the patience of the U.S. government with Uzbekistan was reaching its breaking point. The trial of twenty-three businessmen in Andijan, charged with ties to Akromiya, a splinter group of the

radical Islamic Hizb ut-Tahrir movement, had led to an emotionally charged situation in the town. The night after the trial ended, May 12–13, long, peaceful protests turned violent and ended with a siege in which weapons were seized from government stores and a local jail emptied of prisoners at gunpoint. What happened after that is still subject to contention, although unquestionably the government of Uzbekistan's efforts to quell public protest on May 14 was accompanied by a high loss of civilian life.

But while these events were widely reported, and calls for Washington to break off ties with Tashkent frequently heard, the Bush administration had few effective levers of influence at its disposal, to influence the behavior of its fractious ally, President Karimov, and—unlike in Ukraine and Georgia—there were no ready substitutes in the wings to replace him.

In the aftermath of September 11, there really was an opportunity to reshape the trajectory of development in this part of the world. But neither the Central Asian states nor the international community has made good use of this "second chance."

Too many still believe that peace and security in the Central Asian region can be preserved in the absence of economic and political reform in each and every Central Asian state. The problems will not be resolved without the Central Asians' own initiative. If we are to prevent states in this part of the world from descending into chaos, the international community must help them identify solutions to the economic, political, and social challenges with which they are confronted and then help them find the courage to stick to this path. Unfortunately, no one inside this region or beyond it has made this a priority.