Shifting sands in Central Asia?

Martha Brill Olcott

One man’s loss can be another man’s gain, and it seemed this might be the case with the Central Asian states in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. In assembling a coalition for the war on terrorism, the United States reached out to a number of national leaders with whom Washington previously had limited interaction, promising that the United States would be more attentive to their problems in return for their support. United States policy makers spoke of more assistance, and the leaders of most of the states in the region recommitted themselves to the goals of economic and political reform.

Many, including this author, saw this as a chance for a new beginning for the Central Asian states, an opportunity for the leaders of the region to distance themselves from the mistakes of the past decade. The ouster of the Taliban and the Al-Qaeda network changed the security environment in the region. So too did the international campaign to dry up the funding provided to terrorist groups by international Muslim charities.

All of this provided these states with the very breathing space that they previously claimed they lacked and that had prevented further economic and political reforms. It also brought them a much desired recommitment by the principal multilateral organizations, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), to devote more resources to help these states work through the problems of economic, political and social reform. Many of the region’s leaders hoped that this would mean more grants in aid and debt relief than before.

The Central Asian leaders also had great hopes that the reconstruction of Afghanistan would work to their direct short- and long-term economic benefit. They hoped in the short run they could profit from the supply and the transit of humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, and that in the long term the opening of new transit routes across Afghanistan would spur foreign direct investment (FDI) in their region. Easy access to the ports of Pakistan would substantially shorten the time needed to move goods from Central Asia to Europe and Asia and would make goods manufactured in the region more competitive. Turkmenistan in particular hoped to finally be able to ship its gas freely to market, across Afghanistan to Pakistan and even India, a potential windfall for a land-locked energy producer forced to ship to market across the territory of competitors.

At its inception, the war on terrorism looked like it would mark the

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beginning of a major geopolitical shift in Central Asia. The establishment of two new U.S. airbases in the region, located outside of Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan and in Khanabad-Karsi in Uzbekistan, implied that Washington was replacing Moscow as the security guarantor in the region. This increased U.S. presence seemed to diminish China’s role as well.

From the point of view of many American and European observers, this change was a positive one. They thought it would free the Central Asian states to pursue independent foreign policies. There was also some hope that the Central Asian states would use the leeway created by Russia’s withdrawal to try to address more effectively a number of unresolved regional problems, such as the shared water system and partially delineated national boundaries.

Resolving some of these issues would alleviate many of the major security threats facing these states and could prove to be a stimulant for greater regional cooperation in areas of trade and economic development. As much as the leadership in the Central Asian states was committed to the idea that each country had to define the expression of its autonomy, the realities of geography and the region’s relative physical isolation meant that all would gain from greater cooperation.

Years after the beginning of the war on terrorism, many of the hopes for a new beginning in Central Asia appear to remain unfulfilled. Some of the blame lies with the international community, which has been slow to provide funds, but most of the responsibility lies within the states themselves.

**Have geopolitics changed?**

The region may be changing less than a cursory glance would suggest. Russia’s influence in the region was waning steadily well before the September 11 attacks, while the influence of the United States in the region had been steadily on the rise.

The United States seems unlikely to reduce its presence in Central Asia in the near future. Washington is sure to want to preserve its ability to achieve quick response times in Afghanistan. The bases in this region are consistent with the new security doctrine of the Bush administration, which calls for the maintenance of U.S. military outposts abroad.\(^2\) The United States has also signed a long-term security partnership with Uzbekistan, which seems at a minimum to ensure continued U.S. commitment to the reform of that country’s military.\(^3\) Moreover, the United States is slowly extending similar offers to the other Central Asian states, and it has increased spending on upgrading border security and improving narcotics interdiction throughout the region. At the same time, it is clear that U.S. interests in the region seek to serve more wide-ranging strategic goals.
