
Kazakhstan and Central Asian Security: Ensuring Regional Stability in the Eurasian Balkans

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INTRODUCTION

On November 12, 2011, the Republic of Kazakhstan, the world's ninth-largest country and one of the most stable political regimes of the former Soviet Union, suffered a deadly suicide terrorist attack perpetrated by radical Islamists in the southern city of Taraz. Given the seven casualties and the extent of subsequent media coverage provided by all major TV channels, newspapers, and news websites, this act of terror will likely destroy the myth of stability that has surrounded Kazakhstan since its independence. Considered by its neighbors to be a relatively sound and prosperous state and endowed with tremendous mineral riches inherited peacefully during the USSR's dissolution, the country had never experienced any significant terrorist activity until this year.

Kazakhstan's erstwhile peace was most probably a side effect of two factors that set the country apart from its two southern neighbors, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. First, there is its long-standing political stability: since

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independence in 1991, Kazakhstan has been ruled by President Nursultan Nazarbayev, a former Soviet apparatchik who is now well-respected in the country. Second, the government has typically managed to strike a balance between uncompromising repression of extremist movements on the one hand and lax complacency on the other. In addition to guaranteeing peace and instilling confidence in the future, the country's stability has been especially important for maintaining foreign investors' pursuit of joint ventures in Kazakhstan's vast oil fields on the Caspian Sea. Though Kazakhstan has never been regarded as a truly democratic state and is frequently criticized by domestic and international NGOs for its poor human rights record and harassment of independent journalists, the government has avoided the major domestic trouble that sometimes engulfs the region.

In 2005, the Kyrgyz Republic, dubbed by then-President Askar Akayev as "the only island of democracy in Central Asia," underwent the "Tulip Revolution," which ushered in a new government and sent President Akayev into exile in Russia. Just five years after this peaceful regime change, a popular uprising began in response to rampant corruption and ever-worsening economic conditions in a country that was literally being robbed by different clans. The uprising led to a bloody coup that deposed President Kurmanbek Bakiyev and resulted in yet another new administration. In an attempt to secure protection from the new Kyrgyz authorities, Bakiyev fled to Belarus with the personal support of Belorussian President Alexander Lukashenko, commonly known as Europe's "last dictator." Kyrgyzstan's frequent bouts of political instability have consistently worried the leadership of neighboring Kazakhstan, leading the latter's regime to believe that tougher controls on Kazakh society could serve as a guarantee against both extremist movements and political opposition forces believed to enjoy foreign sponsorship.

Kazakhstan's other neighbor, Uzbekistan, has handled domestic dissent much more harshly. After the 2005 Andijan protests¹ that were crushed by riot police at the government's behest, several countries (including the U.S. and various EU member states) rushed to announce severe sanctions against high-ranking Uzbek officials. These sanctions included an arms embargo, a temporary ban on travel to Europe, and a freeze on financial assistance (which could yet be lifted on the condition of a transparent investigation into cases of abuse against civilians). In November 2005, the UN General Assembly's Social and Humanitarian Committee adopted a resolution put forward by the European Union, containing a harsh condemnation of Uzbekistan's response to the peaceful marches by Andijan dwellers. (Thirty-nine countries voted against the resolution including Russia, Azerbaijan,

Belarus, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan). Nonetheless, this did not prevent President Islam Karimov from further tightening his grip on power, motivated by short-term objectives of neutralizing potential sources of mutiny and showing his Western partners that their human rights-oriented rhetoric was futile.

Despite enormous differences in their handling of politically motivated violence and extremist activities, both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan remain heavily exposed to radical Islamist movements (typically originating in Afghanistan or Pakistan with combatants recruited from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, or Syria) that preach social unrest and crime as a means to subvert the government. Both nations have traditionally been considered the principal source of instability in the Central Asian region. As Rajan Menon, a Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, noted in 2003, “greater Central Asia’s environment is ideal for the purposes of al-Qaeda and other Islamic radical movements,” given its “instability and ubiquitous corruption.”²

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This situation should be particularly worrying for the United States, whose troops are still actively engaged in Afghanistan and will need continued

logistical support from Central Asian republics in their fight against the Taliban and other extremist groups in neighboring areas, including Afghanistan and Pakistan. In the worst-case scenario, Kazakhstan falls victim to protracted instability brought about by the troublesome activities of Islamist organizations seeking to overthrow current regimes through political violence. The “Eurasian Balkans,” as Zbigniew Brzezinski has referred to the huge landmass of the Eurasian continent, could potentially write a sad new story of massive state failure in most countries located within its borders or in its periphery. The Central Asian region, which Brzezinski describes as “the black hole in the very center of Eurasia,”³ could then cause difficulty for neighboring Russia and China, both internally fragile countries that wield nuclear arsenals, as well as for the Middle East. The case of Kazakhstan—with the rise of everyday violence aggravated by growing fears over its leaders’ ability to fight terrorism and extremism—might then become the last falling domino (with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan,

and a potentially explosive Uzbekistan), bringing down the system of Central Asian regional security on which many hopes have been placed in recent years.

KAZAKHSTAN AS AN ISLAND OF STABILITY

Before 2011, Kazakhstan was a relatively peaceful place to live. While Uzbekistan fought its own Islamists by shutting down clandestine cells and prosecuting the perpetrators of terrorist acts, including a series of bombings in the capital city of Tashkent in the spring of 2004 that took the lives of forty-seven people,⁴ Kazakhstan witnessed its neighbor's struggles while maintaining the need for stricter government controls on religious and political activism. At a time when, in the closing years of the twentieth century, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) was taking its toll on Uzbek law enforcement officials and ordinary citizens, Kazakhstan decided to wage a war on another radical movement, Hizb-ut-Tahrir, that originated in the southern provinces of the country in the mid-1990s. Using a strong network of indoctrinated youths who had previously benefited from training on guerilla warfare, the radical Sunni group later spread its activities to Kazakhstan's northern regions. The first arrests of the movement's most active members followed in 2004. Although Hizb-ut-Tahrir's supporters abstained from carrying out terrorist acts on Kazakh territory such as suicide bombings or shootings directed against police and national security officers, they were active in energizing the disenfranchised populations of some rural and urban areas by promising social equity, decent work, and better distribution of national wealth. Despite a series of pinpoint operations leading to the arrest and incarceration of radical Muslim preachers and their followers, Kazakhstan did not manage to eliminate Hizb-ut-Tahrir's presence on its vast territory, which includes its porous borders with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan as well as uninhabited mountainous and desert areas.

Still, up until the recent surge of radicalism in Kazakhstan's western provinces, the country benefited from a "safe nation" status, at least in the steppes of Central Asia. The *2011 Legatum Prosperity Index*, compiled by the London-based Legatum Institute,⁵ ranks Kazakhstan 49th out of 110 countries in their "Safety & Security Sub-Index." This rating places the country eight positions higher than Uzbekistan, while Russia is ranked 82nd. Although other post-Soviet Central Asian countries are not featured in the Safety & Security Sub-Index rankings, it is apparent that Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan would not score better than Kazakhstan, even if enough data were available. Both the Kyrgyz and the Tajiks have

constantly suffered from political instability. In the early 1990s and again in June 2010, Kyrgyzstan's southern province of Osh experienced intense interethnic tensions,⁶ and the 1992-1997 Tajik civil war caused the deaths of 50,000 to 100,000 people. Turkmenistan's leadership—once associated with the odious figure of its capricious dictator Saparmurat Niyazov⁷—has been suspicious of diversity of opinion and thought. Furthermore, due to the lack of sufficient data, the Legatum Institute did not rank Afghanistan, having almost certainly had insurmountable practical difficulties in assessing the country's security situation due to its high internal turmoil. Meanwhile, its neighbor Pakistan ranked 109th out of 110 countries, mostly because of its presumed role in fomenting instability in the whole of greater Central Asia. The Legatum Institute's Kazakhstan ranking is used by specialized international affairs media, one of which, *The Diplomat*, points to the country's "low levels of emigration among professionals, intellectuals, political dissidents, and the middle class," and places it in the top ten safest places in the Asia-Pacific.⁸

During the last two decades, Kazakhstan promoted itself not only as a peaceful and stable country with rapidly growing democratic institutions and robust economic growth, but also as a stakeholder in the security of its neighbors. On November 12, 2010, exactly one year before the deadly terrorist attacks in Taraz, U.S.

Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs Andrew J. Shapiro and Kazakhstan's Ambassador to the U.S. Yerlan Idrissov signed a new transit agreement allowing the U.S. Air Force to fly over Kazakh territory en route to Afghanistan. The Joint U.S.-Kazakh Statement stated that "conflict and instability in Afghanistan are threats to the region and the world. Bilateral cooperation, as exemplified concretely by this Air Transit Agreement, helps to counter these negative trends by

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enabling progress on our common efforts regarding the security, stabilization, and reconstruction of Afghanistan."⁹ This move clearly demonstrated Kazakhstan's willingness to become more actively engaged in its neighbors' affairs, deeming the country's 2010 chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to be an appropriate platform for putting forward concrete measures in favor of the Afghan

people. In addition to his promise to President Barack Obama at the April 2010 Washington Nuclear Summit to take an active part in reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan, President Nazarbayev addressed the OSCE Informal Ministerial Meeting in Almaty, outlining Kazakhstan's commitment to help the Afghan government rebuild its economy and bring about domestic stability.¹⁰

It did not take much time for Kazakhstan to discover that its own security was far from guaranteed, especially in the context of pervasive regional instability that was considered costly and disturbing by foreign investors and governments. The myth of Kazakhstan's solidity began to crumble in May 2011, when the first suicide bombing, which claimed the lives only of its perpetrators, took place in the country's western region.

KAZAKHSTAN AS THE LAND OF UNCERTAINTY

On May 17, 2011, the city of Aktobe trembled after a powerful explosion in the local National Security Department's detention facility. An individual purportedly affiliated with Salafi Islamists blew himself up within the walls of the law enforcement authority, an institution that is a symbol of state power and watches over the country's daily activities. Though Kazakh authorities denied rumors that the bombing plot had been carried out by a power-seeking terrorist organization, the reaction of the international community suggested otherwise. Lithuanian Foreign Minister Audronius Azubalis, who took over the OSCE chairmanship from his Kazakh colleague after the OSCE Astana Summit in early December 2010, immediately expressed his interpretation of the bombing by declaring that he "strongly condemn[ed] [that] terrorist act."¹¹

The United States was also rapid in its assessment of the incident and its reaction strained relations between the two countries. That month, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security published the revised version of *The Supervision of Aliens Commensurate with Risk Report* in which Kazakhstan was declared to be far from secure. For example, in the section "Screening Aliens from Specially Designated Countries," the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) "uses a Third Agency Check (TAC) to screen aliens from specially designated countries (SDCs) that have shown a tendency to promote, produce, or protect terrorist organizations or their members (see appendix D for a list of SDCs)."¹² In the appendix detailing "specially designated countries," Kazakhstan is listed along with Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Uzbekistan, and several other countries.¹³ As Kazakh authorities became familiar with the content

of the report, its Foreign Ministry issued an official statement reflecting Astana's deep misunderstanding of the American position towards the issue of security in one of its strategic partners in Central Asia. In a press conference, the Ministry's spokesperson Ilyas Omarov explained that "the situation fundamentally contradicts the existing spirit of strategic partnership between Kazakhstan and the United States, and therefore we expect our U.S. partners to take immediate action to correct it."¹⁴ The following day, the U.S. Embassy in Kazakhstan issued its own assessment of the situation, asserting that "The U.S. Government does not consider that Kazakhstan in any way supports terrorism. On the contrary, we regard Kazakhstan as a strategic partner in our common struggle against terrorism. We value and acknowledge Kazakhstan's support for counter-terrorism in international fora such as the OSCE, where Kazakhstan served as Chairman-in-Office in 2010."¹⁵ The United States Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Marc Grossman, who replaced the late Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, supported this view on his visit to Astana in early August, stating: "I fully support the position of the American Embassy in Kazakhstan on this issue. The fact that Kazakhstan and America are partners in combating terrorism is obvious. Kazakhstan is not a country that represents a terrorist threat."¹⁶

The outcome of this diplomatic incident—with the U.S. Government issuing reassurances and clarifying statements in order to preserve relations with an important partner—is revealing. When asked a few months later about the American vision of Kazakhstan in light of the May 2011 suicide bombing and the Kazakh Foreign Ministry's reaction to the "specially designated countries" list, American Ambassador to Kazakhstan Kenneth J. Fairfax said: "The difference is the expectation. The better you are, the more people expect. There's never any such thing as being good enough."

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I agree with the people who say Kazakhstan has emerged as a clear area of stability, an area where economic development is taking place, where the business investment climate is better than in the region."¹⁷

Kazakhstan's ambiguity about its own international commitments further aggravated its loss of favorable status within the State Department and among Washington-based pundits. In early May, the Kazakh Parliament's lower chamber ratified an international agreement between the

government of Kazakhstan and NATO, which stipulated the dispatch of Kazakh army officers to Kabul for the purpose of assisting coalition forces in their fight against the Taliban. Before the Senate had the chance to make its own pronouncement on the fate of this rather modest agreement (which called for sending four soldiers to ISAF headquarters to handle logistical paperwork), Taliban contacts warned Kazakhstan that such a decision “will leave a long-term negative impact on relations between Afghanistan and Kazakhstan and the region.”¹⁸ Consequently, the outcome of the vote was no surprise: the Senate declined to ratify the controversial text, especially considering the negative reactions of the population, which clearly reflected its unwillingness to assume dangerous commitments in a foreign country. The harshest criticism was voiced by veterans of the Afghan War (1979-1989) who had fought the *mujahidin* on behalf of the Soviet Union, and who now feared Kazakhstan’s unilateral entanglement in Afghan internal affairs. In twelve days’ time, they even managed to collect the signatures of 112,000 Kazakh citizens (in a country of 16 million people) protesting against the government’s plans to intensify cooperation with coalition forces.¹⁹

NEW LAW ON RELIGIONS:

A SHIELD AGAINST EXTREMISM OR A PROMISE OF SOCIAL RIFT?

Speaking at the September 1, 2011 opening of the fifth parliamentary session, Kazakhstan’s President Nazarbayev highlighted the need to ensure the respect of law by various religious organizations, whose activities have been carefully monitored by the newly-established Agency for Religious Affairs since the May bombing. In the president’s view, the best policy towards the spread of extremism is imposing rigorous restrictions on religious groups, irrespective of their current registration status (required of all religious associations) or their sectarian affiliation. “Whoever wants may come [to Kazakhstan], whoever wants may open a mosque and name it after his father. No one knows what these mosques are really doing, no one has approved [their opening],” Nazarbayev said. “But, as a state, we should put our home in order.”²⁰ The president’s message signaled that the main target of renewed government controls would be Muslim associations and places of learning and worship, such as mosques, religious schools, and non-profit volunteer groups mainly engaged in conducting public lectures on the tenets of Islam. In mid-October 2011, the president signed into law a bill banning traditional Muslim prayers in state institutions ranging from schools and prisons to ministries. This piece of legislation immediately

attracted heavy criticism from various religious associations, the official Muslim authority of Kazakhstan, human rights activists, and international organizations. The U.S. Embassy in Astana began formal consultations with the Kazakh Foreign Ministry, declaring as its main goal the search for consensus on some controversial paragraphs in the bill, such as the one asking for compulsory re-registration of existing religious groups, some of which are traditionally supported from the U.S. (such as the “Grace” missionary church in the city of Karaganda).

Meanwhile, another bombing took place on October 31 in the city of Atyrau, close to the Caspian Sea and scores of major oil production sites jointly operated by Kazakhstan and its foreign partners. The Jund-al-Halifat (Soldiers of the Caliphate) terrorist organization claimed responsibility for this attack on the office of the regional prosecutor and later explained that it was a direct response to the parliament’s adoption of the law aimed against Muslims. According to the recent Jamestown Foundation report on this incident, “the Kazakhstan cell of the Soldiers of the Caliphate are known to have established contacts with extremist organizations in Afghanistan in September 2011, and key figures Rinat Habidulla, Orynbasar Munatov and Damir Znaliev are hiding in the border area of Afghanistan and Pakistan and taking part in combat operations against NATO forces in Afghanistan from Khost province in coordination with the Haqqani group of Taliban militants.”²¹

Following the Atyrau bombing, Kazakhstan’s prominent opposition leaders suggested that the terrorist threat to Kazakhstan could be a mere smoke-screen or a carefully-staged show serving the presidential administration’s plot to defang opposition forces by pretending to defend national security. One such statement was issued by President Nazarbayev’s former son-in-law and ex-Deputy Chairman of the National Security Committee, Rakhat Aliyev, currently in exile in Vienna. Another critical reaction came from the ex-president of Kazakhstan’s BTA Bank, a crisis-stricken financial institution whose restructuring plan has drowned in a litany of judicial procedures and struggles with the Kazakh government. Although such a reading of the Atyrau

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and Aktobe events could shed some light on the actual gravity of the situation in a country that has heretofore been largely unfamiliar with terrorism, many questions are still to be answered. In any event, the immediate cost of the bombings is already apparent in public fears about personal safety. In mid-November, unconfirmed reports about the planned withdrawal of Peace Corps volunteers from Kazakhstan started circulating around the capital city. Lisa Murray, a youth development volunteer currently deployed in South Kazakhstan, wrote on her personal blog about the expected closure of Peace Corps activities in the coming months.²² “This serious decision was made largely [due] to growing safety issues, including terrorism and what has apparently become the highest sexual assault/rape level among [Peace Corps] countries worldwide,” Murray explained.²³

The fear of social unrest, instigated by a growing rift between practicing Muslims who perceive government policies as discriminatory and the state authorities implementing such policies, can cause serious trouble, particularly in the context of the economic crisis and ever-growing uncertainty about a peaceful political transition in Kazakhstan. Rumors have circulated since the start of the summer that the seventy-one-year-old Nazarbayev’s health is deteriorating²⁴ and that numerous clans are preparing to vie for power in an unprecedented showdown. If the transition process were to begin in such a difficult international and domestic environment, radical forces would stand a better chance of engaging in a successful destabilization campaign benefiting from disunity among various political groups. The complicating factor of Kazakhstan’s situation is that it has gradually become a linchpin of regional security in the post-Soviet area, where its economy’s spectacular growth stands in stark contrast with other Central Asian republics’ stagnating systems. The country’s potentially rapid transition from a safe and peaceful country enjoying the full benefits of its economic development and a minimal commitment to political freedoms (as guaranteed by its participation in various international instruments promoting democracy and human rights) to a declining, unstable autocracy vulnerable to the influence of Islamist radicalism, could deal a mortal blow to Central Asia’s chances of ever exiting the Eurasian “black hole.” It is in the interest of all players—particularly Russia, China, and the U.S.—to prevent this worst-case scenario from ever happening.

CHINA AND RUSSIA: TWO GUARDIANS OF REGIONAL STABILITY

The Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China both have important stakes in Central Asia’s present and future. Both have had expe-

rience fighting against extremist elements: be it in Chechnya where Russia waged two mostly unsuccessful wars against local rebels and a coalition of Islamist guerilla fighters, or in the province of Xinjiang, where China is still confronted with the problem of secessionism. Both countries understand the limits of multilateral action, but still tend to coordinate their actions within the framework of regional organizations initiated to deal with terrorism, extremism, separatism, and collective security. The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), founded in 2002 on the basis of the 1992 Tashkent Treaty, is the main international forum for former Soviet republics to discuss their mutual interests on a wide range of security issues. Dominated by Russia,²⁵ the CSTO was founded “to strengthen peace and international and regional security and stability, and to ensure the collective defense of the independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty of the member States, in the attainment of which the member States shall give priority to political measures.”²⁶ Russia’s military capabilities and the history of its engagement in Tajikistan during the 1992-1997 civil war (when it secured the Tajik-Afghan border) make it a preponderant partner in ensuring a well-functioning mechanism of regional security based on shared goals of peace and territorial integrity.

At the same time, the limits of Russia’s power are quite clear, and they stem from the very nature of the CSTO as it was initially conceived. As approved at the 2002 Tashkent summit of heads of state, the CSTO Charter (Art. 5) explicitly states that “the Organization shall operate on the basis of strict respect for the independence, voluntary participation and equality of rights and obligations of the member States and *noninterference in matters falling within the national jurisdiction of the member States*”²⁷ [emphasis mine]. In practice, this clause has been interpreted to limit the Organization’s operational capabilities. In May 2010, CSTO Secretary General and former KGB officer Nikolay Bordyuzha said that “the CSTO did not consider it necessary to send peacekeepers to Kyrgyzstan²⁸ and would leave it to the Kyrgyz government to handle the crisis.”²⁹ Russian President Dmitry Medvedev confirmed Moscow’s non-interference interpretation of the Tashkent Treaty by saying: “Only in the case of a foreign intrusion and an attempt to externally seize power can we state that there is an attack against the CSTO.”³⁰ Therefore, if Kazakhstan were ever to be engulfed by an Islamist tide, no possible action on behalf of the CSTO could be envisaged.

China’s main lever of influence in Central Asia is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), founded in 2001 by the leaders of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan.

Using its enormous economic potential and constantly growing military capacity, Beijing tries to lure its Western neighbors into multilateral cooperation extending far beyond the guarantee of military assistance in the case of external aggression. It includes, for example, intensive collaboration in regional trade and joint investment projects. Still, the SCO's major mandate is its fight against all forms of radicalism, as established in the 2001 *Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism*. The Convention's preamble recognizes "that terrorism,

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separatism and extremism constitute a threat to international peace and security, the promotion of friendly relations among States as well as to the enjoyment of fundamental human rights and freedoms."³¹

ever to find itself unable to ensure security in the region (or if it simply renounced this complicated and often ambiguous role), China would most likely have to take the baton, as it would otherwise risk losing control of the security situation within its neighbors' borders, which would constitute a challenge to its own stability. Would China be ready, however, to intervene in Kazakhstan's internal affairs to overcome a growing threat of religious radicalism and political extremism in order to protect its own economic interests? Despite the ongoing debate about China's ever-increasing appetite for regional hegemony,³² direct involvement in the sovereign matters of

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Central Asian neighbors is very unlikely. Although China has practiced the policy of gradual penetration and projection of its “soft power” as an unrivaled regional economic powerhouse, it has never succeeded in inspiring trust, but has instead sowed fear and rancor among its Western neighbors. In early 2011, Kazakhstan saw a string of protests directed against China’s purported plans to strike a ninety-nine-year-long lease contract for a million hectares of arable land in the country’s east and south in exchange for renewed financial aid in a period of severe crisis.³³ Therefore, China’s role in the “reanimation” of the potentially derailing machine of regional security is unlikely to be one of leadership.

WHAT ROLE FOR THE U.S.?

As noted earlier, the hypothetical destabilization of Kazakhstan could represent a real threat to U.S. interests in greater Central Asia, a region comprising large chunks of the Eurasian landmass including Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Mongolia, and Western China. The success of the U.S.-led military action on Afghan soil is contingent upon the internal political dynamics of neighboring states especially Kazakhstan, the most economically developed and politically sound entity in ex-Soviet Central Asia. Although Russia’s and China’s readiness to intervene in order to uphold potentially crumbling regimes may be reinforced by their common desire to avoid further large-scale security problems in the Central Asian arena, any such interference in a sovereign state’s internal affairs might become a serious challenge to either Moscow’s or Beijing’s regional legitimacy. As for the U.S. role in the future of Central Asia, its policy should be linked with its political and military commitments. The Iraqi and Afghan experiences have clearly shown that the democracy promotion agenda is unworkable in countries with very different mindsets, cultures, and political history. Any attempt to interfere in the domestic problems of Central Asian republics could not only draw harsh criticism and even some tactical riposte from Russia or China, but also send the already tangible anti-American sentiment skyrocketing to new heights. Therefore, the U.S. position should be translated into a carefully planned multilateral policy based on the following principles:

First, the U.S. should continue to support political transition in Kazakhstan (and its neighbors) by promoting fair and transparent elections, and speaking out strongly every time such elections do not take place. The discrepancy between the aspirations of the majority of citizens and the policy implemented by elected bodies (such as the presidency and the parliament) can create a dangerous gap, leading to a Tahrir Square-like

phenomenon (in which the regime is destroyed by protesters), exacerbated by the domino effect that launched the Arab Spring (in which geographically and/or ideologically close countries undergo “contagious” popular revolutions). The lackluster response of U.S. authorities to the actual Arab Spring in the Middle East demonstrates the importance of making ossified political regimes evolve in the direction of real democracy, instead of either turning a blind eye to their existence or overlooking major political shifts that precede waves of protest.

Second, the U.S. is in no position to use, and has no practical interest in using, military force in ex-Soviet Central Asia, either to combat terrorist or extremist movements or to prop up vulnerable regimes. Both Russia and China have sufficient strategic and tactical capabilities to ensure regional security on their own, using existing and functioning mechanisms of multilateral diplomacy through the CSTO, the SCO, and other regional structures. As an observer state in the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA),³⁴ the U.S. can regularly participate in the discussion of fundamental security problems on the Eurasian continent, but the use of military leverage should at all times be reserved for the regional powers that perceive Central Asia’s security as a vital interest.

Third, the years-long Gordian Knot in Afghanistan, which the current U.S. administration is unable to cut without creating a domestic and international controversy or compromising its moral principles, is becoming a heavy burden on a U.S. economy that has already been weakened by the global financial crisis. Practice shows that the absence of efficient political institutions capable of providing minimum services, such as security, accessible healthcare, continuous education, and basic entrepreneurial opportunities, is the main problem in a country where physically scattered Taliban rebels cannot be defeated by an international coalition trained in modern warfare. Since the U.S. cannot negotiate a long-lasting peace with an organization that denies basic human values and is keen on reestablishing its sphere of influence in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and probably in the whole of Central Asia, its margin of maneuver is limited. Military disengagement from Afghanistan seems the only plausible option, and such a situation will inevitably lead China to assume a more responsible role for regional security, without giving it a ready recipe for further extending its political clout across the region. As for the potential Russian-Chinese joint domination of Central Asia, similar fears have proven to be unfounded, as differences between the two countries are so great that coordinated policy can only be a short-term option.

CONCLUSION

The emergence of an Islamist threat in Kazakhstan, Central Asia's most stable and economically advanced society, represents a serious challenge to regional security. As previously observed in other Central Asian republics (Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan), neither mild attitudes verging on mere laxity nor repressive measures that stifle the external manifestations of the problem but fail to address its root causes are efficient or morally acceptable. It is clear that further democratization, conducted in a way that best addresses the population's aspirations, is the most powerful tool of resistance to radical ideologies.

In the absence of such measures, the regional security mechanisms established by Russia, China, and a multitude of other countries will continue to play a stabilizing role in terms of ensuring non-penetration of state borders by radical elements. However, the efficacy of such mechanisms is limited in scope and time, for the stability of Central Asian regimes—undermined by corruption, profligacy, economic inefficiency, and contempt for civil rights and liberties—cannot be sustained by mere technical stopgaps. Therefore, only a balanced approach to the problems of terrorism and extremism can guarantee the attainment of substantial results, and the unwillingness of the local regimes to tolerate the emergence of fair political competition should not be a justification for not implementing necessary democratic and modernizing reforms. This balance is certainly hard to find, but in its absence, either chaos or ironclad autocracy may emerge.

The United States role in Central Asian affairs should consist of aiding Kazakhstan and its neighbors to carry out necessary democratic transformations, without pursuing a vigorous democracy-promotion agenda or helping to build a façade of democracy. The United States' present-day extensive engagement in different parts of the world, where it has vital interests, excludes any military option in today's Central Asian context.

At the same time, constructive U.S. diplomacy could be an asset in building and maintaining a regional framework, which will prevent the emergence of renewed Russian or Chinese dominance in Central Asia.

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Kazakhstan has no other choice than to operate a smooth and peaceful transition whose immediate result will be to reassure the population of the government's capacity to cope with real threats to national security and domestic safety, and to provide foreign partners with the guarantee of a continued multi-vector foreign policy tack based on multilateral diplomacy and democratic commitments. The ineluctability of democratic reforms in the whole of post-Soviet Central Asia and even beyond that area is particularly tangible today, when the harsh consequences of the world financial crisis have revealed many structural weaknesses of rigid societies which are living off the oil or natural gas rent and are averse to greater political liberalization. The Balkanization of Central Asia can be prevented, but it will only be possible if a transition to democracy, the implementation of needed social and economic reforms, and constructive foreign support are combined together with the sole objective of finally making the "black hole" of Eurasia disappear. ■

ENDNOTES

- 1 The mass protests in Andijan, Uzbekistan's fourth-largest city and located on the border with Kyrgyzstan, took place on May 13, 2005. According to the official death count, about 200 people were killed by riot police, whereas human rights activists believe that the number of casualties could be a lot higher (at least 1,500 people). Uzbek authorities were heavily criticized following the "Andijan massacre" (as those bloody events later came to be known) for the indiscriminate use of force against protesters and also for playing the Islamist card in order to justify the brutality of their repressive operations.
- 2 Rajan Menon, "The New Great Game in Central Asia," *Survival*, 45(2) (Summer 2003): 189.
- 3 Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy And Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 87.
- 4 This is how those tragic events are described in the 2006 article published by the *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*: "On March 29, 2004, two deadly bombs exploded in the Uzbek capital Tashkent, one day after an explosion in the central city of Bukhara. They were the start of a chain of violent attacks over three days that left 47 people dead. The use of suicide bombers during these bombings was a first for Central Asia and was the first deadly violence in the country since a series of car bombings in Tashkent in 1999." Gulnoza Saidazimova, "Uzbekistan: Effect of Tashkent Explosions Still Felt Two Years Later," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFERL)*, March 27, 2006, <<http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1067140.html>> (accessed November 5, 2011).
- 5 The Legatum Institute's official website, <<http://www.li.com/AboutUs.aspx>> (accessed November 17, 2011).
- 6 In 1990, before both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan became independent, thousands of Uzbeks living near the border with Uzbekistan started to argue for the creation of an autonomous region in which the Uzbek language, culture, and traditions would be given a special status and state protection. Moreover, ethnic clashes erupted between wealthy Uzbeks owning hectares of land and poor Kyrgyz laborers who demanded an equitable distribution of this land property. According to the official count, more than

- 1,200 Kyrgyz and several thousands of Uzbeks might have died as a result of massive pogroms in the town of Osh and neighboring villages. Twenty years later, the June 2010 ethnic tensions in the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan broke out in the wake of the Bishkek revolution which brought down the Bakiev family and installed a temporary government led by former Foreign Affairs Minister Roza Otunbayeva. For more information on the number of casualties, please refer to endnote 28.
- 7 Turkmenistan's former president Saparmurat Niyazov was one of the most controversial figures in Central Asia's modern history. He changed the names of the months (for example, renaming May after his favorite Turkmen poet), introduced a new national holiday, Cantaloupe Day, and later fired more than 15,000 medical workers, leaving dozens of small towns without adequate medical care. In his later years, the Turkmen dictator reduced the length of obligatory school education and at one point even attempted to create a real penguin park in the midst of the desert.
 - 8 "10 Safest Places in the Asia-Pacific," *The Diplomat*, October 26, 2010, <<http://the-diplomat.com/photo-essay/2010/10/26/the-10-safest-places-in-the-asia-pacific/>> (accessed November 20, 2011).
 - 9 U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesman, Press Release, November 12, 2010, "Joint Statement on United States-Kazakhstan Air Transit Agreement," <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2010/11/150867.htm>> (accessed November 20, 2011).
 - 10 Georgiy Voloshin, "U.S. and Kazakhstan Sign New Air Transit Agreement," *Central Asia and Caucasus Analyst*, November 24, 2010, <<http://cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5453>> (accessed November 20, 2011).
 - 11 Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Press Release, May 17, 2011, "OSCE Chairperson Condemns Suicide Bomb Attack in Kazakhstan," <<http://www.osce.org/cio/77601>> (accessed November 20, 2011).
 - 12 *Supervision of Aliens Commensurate with Risk*, Department of Homeland Security, Office of Inspector General, OIG-11-81, May 2011 (revised), <http://www.oig.dhs.gov/assets/Mgmt/OIG_11-81_May11.pdf> (accessed November 19, 2011), 8.
 - 13 *Ibid.*, 18.
 - 14 "Kazakhstan Unhappy with Inclusion on 'Terrorism List,'" *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFERL)*, July 22, 2011, <http://www.rferl.org/content/kazakhstan_unhappy_with_inclusion_on_terrorism_list/24274184.html> (accessed November 20, 2011).
 - 15 Embassy of the United States to the Republic of Kazakhstan, Press Release, July 22, 2011, "U.S. Embassy Statement," <<http://kazakhstan.usembassy.gov/st-07-25-11.html>> (accessed November 20, 2011).
 - 16 "Kazakhstan and USA are Strategic Partners in Combating Terrorism—M. Grossman," *KNews*, August 1, 2011, <http://knews.kz/en/news/politics/kazakhstan_and_usa_are_strategic_partners_in_combating_terrorism__mgrossman.html> (accessed November 16, 2011).
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 - 19 "112 Thousand Kazakhstan Residents Signed Against Sending Officers to Afghanistan," *Tengri News*, July 3, 2011, <http://en.tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/2530/> (accessed November 19, 2011).

- 20 "Kazakh President Wants Tougher Laws to Counter Extremism," *Al Arabiya News*, September 1, 2011, <<http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/09/01/164942.html>> (accessed November 20, 2011).
- 21 Farkhad Sharip, "Militants Escalate Terrorist Attacks In Kazakhstan," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 8 (211), November 15, 2011, <<http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm>> (accessed November 20, 2011).
- 22 Lisa Murray, "Sudden Departure...", November 22, 2011, <http://lisainkazakhstan.blogspot.com/2011/11/sudden-departure_22.html> (accessed December 15, 2011).
- 23 Joanna Lillis, "Peace Corps Pulling Out of Kazakhstan?," *EurasiaNet.org*, November 18, 2011, <<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64538>> (accessed November 21, 2011).
- 24 In July 2011, the German tabloid *Bild* reported that President Nazarbayev had been admitted to the University Medical Center Hamburg-Eppendorf in northern Germany for urgent treatment. In Kazakhstan, it has been extensively rumored that Mr. Nazarbayev is suffering from cancer, but no official confirmation of such rumors has been made.
- 25 The CSTO has members not only in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) but also in the Caucasus (Armenia) and Europe (Belarus). This geographical extension leads to some dilution of Russia's powers, as it has to engage in peacemaking between Armenia and Azerbaijan as well as keep Belarus in its sphere of influence. (Minsk is now used to pitting Moscow and Brussels against each other in an attempt to extort financial aid from both of them).
- 26 Collective Security Treaty Organization, "Charter of the Collective Security Treaty Organization," *United Nations Treaty Collection*, <http://untreaty.un.org/unts/144078_158780/5/9/13289.pdf> (accessed November 1, 2011).
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 The 2010 Kyrgyzstan crisis relates to the April uprising in Bishkek, which brought down the corrupt Bakiyev government, and to ethnic clashes between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in May (Jalalabad) and June (Osh) of the same year. According to most estimates, almost 2,000 people were killed, and about 100,000 Kyrgyz nationals of Uzbek origin were displaced by violence, seeking refuge in neighboring Uzbekistan. The passivity of central authorities installed by the popular revolution and of law enforcement bodies representing the remnants of the Bakiyev regime, who had pledged allegiance to the new government, only aggravated the crisis by empowering criminal elements to take hold of citizens' possessions. Most Central Asian media expected a rapid intervention by CSTO forces deployed near the capital city of Bishkek, within the framework of mutual assistance. This did not materialize, however, since Russia preferred to watch from the side.
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- 32 In 2005, in his interview for *The Australian*, John J. Mearsheimer, an American professor of political science at the University of Chicago, said rather bluntly that "it is more likely that [China] will want to dictate the boundaries of acceptable behavior to neighboring countries, much the way the U.S. makes it clear to other states in

the Americas that it is the boss. Gaining regional hegemony, I might add, is probably the only way that China will get Taiwan back.” John Mearsheimer, “The Rise of China Will Not Be Peaceful at All,” *The Australian*, November 18, 2005, <<http://mearsheimer.uchicago.edu/pdfs/P0014.pdf>> (accessed November 21, 2011).

- 33 See Georgiy Voloshin, “Land Lease Scandals Blur Pre-election Campaign in Kazakhstan,” *Central Asia and Caucasus Analyst*, March 30, 2011, <<http://cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5527>> (accessed November 21, 2011).
- 34 The Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) is an intergovernmental forum for enhancing cooperation and promoting peace, security, and stability in Asia. The idea of convening such a forum belongs to Kazakhstan’s President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who spoke about it for the first time at the UN General Assembly in 1992. The first ministerial meeting of 15 CICA member states took place in 1999. Today, the CICA’s membership includes twenty-four permanent members, eight observer countries, and three observer organizations (the UN, the Arab League, and the OSCE).