A Global Affairs Commentary

September 2001

Central Asia: On the Periphery of New Global War

By Abid Aslam

The Bush administration is seeking help from states that can provide geographic access to Afghanistan. Much attention has focused on Pakistan and, to a lesser degree, Iran. The former is considered a shaky ally and the latter has yet to graduate from the enemies column of Washington's international relations ledger.

Turkey and U.S. allies in the Persian Gulf likely will provide a launch pad for some U.S. retaliatory strikes but they don't border Afghanistan.

That leaves Central Asia's Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan on the front line. Each country faces its own security, sectarian, and economic challenges, however, and collectively, the region poses potentially uncomfortable questions for the U.S. administration.

Washington has not yet made clear what kind of presence it intends to establish in the region, how long it intends to stay, what level of support it expects from local powers, or what it's willing to do to secure it. Many of the details are unlikely to be made public, at least until the initial campaign is over. In whatever way Washington intends to harness the region, will it demonstrate the necessary commitment, sensitivity, and flexibility to avoid the cynicism, betrayal, and resentment sown—and reaped many times over—in Afghanistan and Pakistan?

Tajikistan is embroiled in its own clan disputes, which have taken on religious overtones. The peace process has largely achieved an end to civil war, in part by incorporating self-described Islamists into the government. Nevertheless, some armed groups continue hostilities in areas over which the cash-strapped government and its security apparatus have insufficient control. These include the outskirts of the capital, Dushanbe. The security problems discourage the government from embarking on democratic reforms even as they suppress economic activity.

Islamist rebels in Afghanistan have been fighting to overturn the government of Uzbekistan and their incursions have spilled over into Tajikistan (and Kyrgyzstan). Thus, the government in Dushanbe might have reason to want to quash the Taliban but is concerned about a possible Islamist backlash if it participates in a U.S.-led war against its neighbor. Some 10,000 Russian troops under Moscow's command are based in the country and patrol its Afghan border with the mandate to keep rebels and refugees out. If Vladimir Putin's government opts out of the U.S.-led war, then Moscow effectively will have decided on behalf of Dushanbe, which remains heavily dependent on Russia not only for defense but also for economic sustenance. In addition, Tajikistan shares a border with China; Beijing is understood not to want any U.S. forces there.

Turkmenistan has offered vague assurances of support to Washington. It has kept the Taliban at bay by offering an open border and steady electricity in exchange for assurances the Afghan militia would stay out of its territory. Turkmenistan also has tried to mediate between the Taliban and Northern Alliance. It commands uninterrupted territory and air space from the Caspian Sea to the Afghan border. At a minimum, Washington will want overflight rights. If a ground war is to be launched, however, Turkmenistan could be a valuable staging area; it was from there that Soviet forces entered Afghanistan in 1979.

Uzbekistan, targeted by Afghan insurgents despite having a well-equipped and well-paid military, has said it is willing to discuss any form of cooperation with Washington. According to analysts at Stratfor, Inc., it has a usable air base in the city of Termez, near the

FOREIGN POLICY IN FOCUS

Afghan border, and its proximity to that sliver of Afghanistan controlled by the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance could provide infiltration routes for U.S. ground forces.

Despite Turkmen and Uzbek ties to Moscow, which remains wary of the United States gaining a foothold in the region, Stratfor suggests Washington could provide promises of economic benefits and defense cooperation sufficient to win them over.

In a limited sense, the process could be quite straightforward: military and intelligence assistance, a few bilateral and multilateral loans, some aid money, promises of joint military operations, and perhaps a state visit or other such symbolic gesture when it's all over.

But the equation could be far more complicated than mere mission planning.

Central Asia's economies have endured catastrophe since the collapse of the Soviet Union and, as a consequence, their societies are deeply divided. This is especially true of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, which have been battered by exclusion from the ruble zone, disruptive and often corrupt privatizations, falling world cotton prices, and last year's drought.

In both countries, the gap between small elites benefiting from market liberalization and majorities being driven to economic desperation is growing. Reports of unrest, born of deprivation but expressed in communal and territorial terms, are becoming increasingly frequent.

"While most Central Asians have been steadfastly passive in the face of post-Soviet upheaval, indications are increasing in some localities that a breaking point is near," says the International Crisis Group (ICG), a think tank specializing in conflict resolution. "If it is reached, spontaneous uprisings or organized underground political activity, increasing militancy, and a readiness to seek the overthrow of current regimes can all be anticipated. The most dangerous social force is a desperate population that has little to lose."

In other words, economic aid and loans—if conditioned on continued adherence to market-friendly policy prescriptions, or not conditioned at all—could merely stoke the fires of revolt by fueling disparity and corruption.

In addition to Kyrgyzstan, according to the ICG, the risks are greatest in Tajikistan's Gharm region and Badakshan province and in Uzbekistan's Ferghana Valley and Namangan province—one of the country's poorest regions despite a strong agricultural base, and increasingly the focus of serious unrest.

"The problems of such localities should take precedence for both national governments and international donors but they have been virtually absent from policy planning," the ICG said in a June report. "Urgent measures are needed to combat the increasing probability that violent conflict will grow out of these localities."

Central Asian states have made high-profile moves toward regional security cooperation, notably through the Commonwealth of Independent States' (CIS) Collective Security Treaty led by Russia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization led by China and Russia. Nevertheless, the region's neighbors have not worked well with one another and, on the contrary, have violated one another's security interests.

Issues of contention have multiplied in light of an increase in Islamist militancy since 1999. Uzbekistan allowed or supported armed incursions into Tajikistan and harbored dissidents whom Dushanbe accused of treason. Tajikistan has provided a base of operations to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). While supposedly searching for IMU targets, Uzbekistan bombed Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, causing numerous civilian casualties. Uzbekistan mined its largely unmarked borders with the other two countries, resulting in dozens of deaths.

The question will soon become whether Washington is sufficiently interested in the region to make major investments in its security—not only in military and geostrategic terms or by coordinating antinarcotics efforts, but also with respect to the underlying causes of tension, including economic disparity and ethnic alienation.

So far, U.S. involvement has aimed to strengthen the capacity and independence of Central Asian states only insofar as this can reduce Russia' s influence and aid U.S. interests in gaining access to natural resources—including oil and natural gas. Russia has sought to preserve its own security interests; likewise, China's chief concern has been to prevent Central Asia from becoming a base for Uighur groups seeking an independent homeland in Xinjiang province.

In turn, the real but greatly exaggerated existence of militant Islamists has been used to legitimize repressive measures that, if experience elsewhere is any indication, ultimately risk nurturing the very threat they are designed to contain.

Uzbekistan and Tajikistan (as well as Kyrgyzstan) repress a range of Islamic religious practices and domestic religious groups. In the process, they turn up the heat on simmering social and political tensions. In the view of a number of analysts (including those at the ICG) Russia, China, and America have merely reinforced Central Asian governments' instincts to crack down on even apolitical forms of religious observance and organization as threats to ruling elites' hold on power.

In this context, it is particularly ominous that Bush himself has labeled the IMU a terror group with links to suspected terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden. "The United States supports the right of Uzbekistan to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity from the violent actions of the IMU, and commends the measures in the course of the current incursions to minimize casualties and ensure the protection of innocent civilians," the State Department said in a September 15 statement.

The instinct to repress indiscriminately may be given added impetus by a crusade against the Taliban, Bin Laden and his Al Qaeda organization, the IMU, and perhaps Islamists further afield. To the extent that aggression against groups deemed to be legitimate targets is accompanied by broader repression, the prospect for ethnic or religious minorities and the economically marginalized appears clear: greater insecurity and alienation.

This is, after all, a time when public support for government in what Eqbal Ahmad once described as Central Asia's "reluctant sovereignties" has begun to erode.

As so many commentators have opined since the fateful attacks of September 11, the best security measure against militant Islamists is the practice of tolerance and democracy. This argument, however, presupposes the existence of enough trust and stability to mediate political differences. It also requires enough economic opportunity, if not actual surplus, to redistribute so as to offer hope to the desperate and narrow the gaps between them and the objects of their discontent. In Central Asia, arguably, these conditions do not yet exist.

(Abid Aslam <aaslam@igc.org> is a contributing editor at Foreign Policy In Focus and the North America and Caribbean editor of Inter Press Service, an international news agency.)

Who's Who in the Bush Administration

http://www.fpif.org/republicanrule/index.html

Essays Include:

- Robert Cutler — *A First Glance at Bush's Policy Toward Russia*
- Karen Hansen-Kuhn — *Bush's Trade Policy: The NAFTA Express*
- Chris Hellman — *What Can We Expect from the Penatagon?*
- Neil Hicks — *The Bush Administration and Human Rights*
- Chris Toensing — *Bush's Middle East Policy: Look to His Advisors*
- Tomas Valasek — *George W. Bush and the "Other" Europe*
- Carol Welch — *Republican Rule and the IFIs*
- Ian Williams — *The United Nations: Beating Around the Bush*

And Many Others!

Profiles Include:

Richard Lee Armitage
Paul O'Neill
Richard N. Perle
Colin Powell
Condoleezza Rice
Donald Rumsfeld
George Schultz
Paul Wolfowitz
Ann Veneman
Robert B. Zoellick