

Russia, China Warily Watch for American Intrusions in Central Asia

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As small Central Asian countries have struck military alliances with the United States, their leaders have asserted their own power more aggressively. At the same time, the presence of American soldiers threatens to dilute Russia's and China's power to influence the region's politics and economics. Since September 2001, Russia and China have cooperated with Washington's moves and generally affirmed its aims. But as the fighting in Afghanistan winds down, hard-liners in both countries are expressing resentment and apprehension about a prolonged American presence in a region they consider their backyard.

Where elites from smaller Central Asian states revolted after their leaders gripped power more tightly, bureaucrats in Russia are pressuring President Vladimir Putin to resist American maneuvers that would make the United States a fixture in the region. As six American F-18 jets arrived in Kyrgyzstan on April 20, Russia's Duma disavowed a promised rescheduling of Kyrgyzstan's \$133 million debt to Moscow. President Askar Akayev was forced to strongly deny speculation that American bases could "conflict with Russian interests" or start "limiting [Russia's] influence in the region or pushing Russia out altogether."

To this point, Moscow and Washington are officially partners in the antiterrorism coalition. For China, whose relations with the Bush

administration have been rough, the presence of American soldiers is more ominous. Soldiers in Bishkek are only 200 miles from the Chinese border, and Chinese officials vocally worry about mischief. "Beijing's policy is against strategies of force and the U.S. military presence in Central Asia," President Jiang Zemin said on April 21 while visiting Tehran.

China does not fear an invasion so much as a costly, time-consuming struggle for control of the region's natural and capital resources. American silence on its long-range plan feeds those fears. Says a European ambassador in Kabul: "The danger of a new Great Game in Central Asia between the U.S., Russia, and China is very real unless the Americans spell out their intentions."

Putin has already put down Russia's marker. As Russia tries to boost its own oil production and sales, the president has warned Americans that he will not refrain from working without their cooperation. In a January 21 meeting with Turkmen President Saparmyrat Niyazov, Putin raised the idea of creating "a Eurasian alliance of gas producers." While Putin did not address the transport of oil, this idea endangers American efforts to guide the construction of an enormous pipeline from the Azerbaijani capital of Baku through the Georgian capital of Tbilisi to Ceyhan on Turkey's Mediterranean coast.

The pipeline, if it comes together, would carry Kazakh oil and oil from other former Soviet states but would bypass Russia and Iran, denying those countries shipping and construction revenue. While machinations surrounding that pipeline continue, Chinese interests have invested as much as \$6 billion in Kazakhstan's oilfields, for potential pipeline delivery into China.

Whatever these games cost, they could end in shame unless Central Asia becomes a stable place to work and live. Without democratic reforms and with corruption rampant, all Central Asian economies suffer from high unemployment, poor public health, and flimsy public education. The United Nations estimates that 70-80% of the populations of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan live below the poverty level. In parts of Kyrgyzstan, one hears of people eating rats and dogs. Such conditions prevent people from organizing to effectively demand reform, but they offer extremist Islamic groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Hizb-ut-Tahrir ripe ground for recruitment.

Fundamentalism grows in response to the same factors that drove Turkmenistan's Boris Shikhmuradov and other elites into exile: suppression of secular democratic political parties, tight state control over local media, and multiple, persistent corruption scandals. While nobody expects an Islamic revolt like the one that changed Iran in 1979, some elites have concluded that—in the shadow of American, Chinese, and Russian intrigue—their leaders are unwilling or incompetent to reform their political systems. “All the regimes have escalating political problems and we don't know if it will

take one year or three years to see major changes,” says a political analyst in Washington.

As heads of state have stalled, international organizations have stepped in with their own agendas—potentially further reducing Chinese and Russian influence. The World Bank plans to loan \$1.5 billion in the region over the next decade; the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development has announced plans to lend \$300 million this year.

They will bring political influence with their money. “Since September 11, a lot of our shareholders discerned the importance of this region, and we are going to take advantage of that to wield a cohesive policy,” World Bank President James Wolfensohn told reporters in Almaty on April 9. Central Asian presidents may not hear a warning in Wolfensohn's talk of “cohesive policy.” At the same conference where Wolfensohn spoke, Kazakhstani political adviser Ermukhamet Ertysbaev gave his boss license to continue deferring elections. “Foreign investors don't care where they are investing money, be it in a dictatorship or democracy,” he said.

As long as American policy in the region emphasizes troops over reform, some fear this calculation may be right. “The Americans make statements that don't tie them down to anything and which are ignored by the Central Asian regimes,” says Emil Aliev, leader of Kyrgyzstan's opposition Ar-Namys party.

Even if the United States has refrained from sternly demanding reform, some observers say, its presence is making some leaders act so outrageously that the opposition is

growing more vocal. If that continues to happen, Washington may have to decide whether to cast its lot with largely discredited rulers or work to promote messy transitions to democracy. The dilemma grows murkier when one realizes that many of the new opposition leaders have been timeservers in the regimes they now criticize and many are also engulfed in corruption scandals.

As opposition forces coalesce, Russia and China will also have to make long-range decisions about how and when to intervene. So far neither Russia nor the United States is openly supporting the Turkmen opposition. Uzbek President Islam Karimov signed a treaty on March 13 that gives Washington something of an out. While the United States pledges to “regard with grave concern any external threat to Uzbekistan,” it also obligates Karimov “to intensify the democratic transformation of [Uzbek] society politically and economically.” Meanwhile, China and Russia are nervously watching to see if that transformation pits them against the United States or throws the region into chaos.

(Ahmed Rashid is a journalist and the author of two books, Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia and Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia. This is part two of a two-part series. Part one is available at (<http://www.fpif.org/outside/commentary/2002/0205centasia1.html>). This is reprinted by permission from EurasiaNet (online at www.eurasianet.org.)