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U.S. Intervention in Afghanistan: Implications for Central Asia

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Just when it looked the Central Asian countries were facing the growing joint political hegemony of Russia and China in the region, the events of September 11 opened the door to an increased and indefinite-term U.S. military presence. This not only involves the prosecution of the war in Afghanistan but also, in particular, a new agreement recently signed with Uzbekistan to establish a U.S. military presence in this Central Asian nation. This agreement provides for American use of military bases and facilities, and it paves the way for a long-term U.S. military presence, not excluding the stationing of U.S. troops on a standing basis.

Given that Russia and China were deep in the process of establishing a strategic condominium ("joint rule") over Central Asian affairs, how did this surprising new military arrangement with the U.S. develop? To understand this new development requires recalling how Islamic militancy in Uzbekistan has manifested over the past two years and what the region's response to it has been. In 1996, a regional grouping initially called the "Shanghai Five" was established to delimit and demilitarize the border between China and several countries (Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) belonging to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Annual summits of the Shanghai Five began in 1998, and the grouping shifted its focus from border relations to Islamic militancy the following year.

Uzbekistan wavered between interest and disinterest in the Shanghai grouping, principally because President Islam Karimov did not want to fall under Moscow's security umbrella. For many years he has courted and been courted by the United States. Washington designated Uzbekistan a "strategic partner" in 1995, and in 1998 the country joined the "GUAM" (Georgia-Ukraine-Azerbaijan-Moldova) grouping, turning it into GUUAM. [See "What is GUUAM Anyway?" at http://www.fpif.org/commentary/0102guuam.html] Despite recently revealed U.S. security cooperation with the country stretching back at least two years, Uzbekistan found in mid-2000 that Russia was the only big power willing to provide troops to fight the insurgent Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). So Uzbekistan fell back closer to Russia.

In June of this year the Shanghai Five, now with Uzbekistan as a member making six, was institutionalized as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a self-standing international organization with an autonomous secretariat (in Shanghai). At the founding meeting, China's deputy foreign minister responsible for SCO affairs emphasized to the gathered international press and diplomats that Beijing intended to use the organization to promote trade and investment in its search for influence over Central Asia. But those are not the only instruments that Beijing uses. There has been significant ethnic-Han Chinese immigration into Kazakhstan and Siberia. Leaked documents indicate that this illegal immigration is encouraged by official policy.

Russia's interest in SCO is to represent itself as Asia's interlocutor with the United States. Indeed, the Ljubljana meeting between Putin and Bush, their first, took place only two days after the end of the SCO founding conference. The SCO also intended to create a joint rapid-deployment force at an "anti-terrorism center" in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Such an antiterrorist center was planned to function as a joint coordinating center for the SCO and the CIS. That prospect raised the specter, in some minds, of Chinese and Russian troops eventually

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stationed together in Central Asia at the core of a military and political bloc. Whether exaggerated or not, that impression was certainly reinforced by the first major Sino-Russian treaty in fifty years, also signed earlier this year, formally the "Treaty on Good-Neighborly Relations, Friendship and Cooperation," which provides for increased Russian arms sales to China and the training of Chinese officers at Russian military schools.

All indicators were that Russia and China were reaching an understanding that would have set the framework for geopolitical realities in Central Asia for the next several decades. But the sudden and perhaps long-term U.S. military presence in the region, in the wake of the attack on the World Trade Center, radically changes the equation. It would be simplistic to suggest say that Central Asian energy resources explain all this new interest in this previously ignored region. The oil companies do not drive U.S. foreign policy, and U.S. foreign policy does not drive the oil companies. They interact, combine, frequently reinforce each other, and sometimes get in each other's way, but their relationship is dynamic, not mechanistic. Moreover, pipelines from Central Asia through Afghanistan do not make much sense in view of the logistical problems and other options available.

The geopolitical significance of the U.S. war in Afghanistan for Central Asia is the on-the-ground foothold that it gives the American military in the region. Certainly China views the U.S. presence as a hindrance to its strategic objectives of dominating the region, and probably Beijing does not believe that the U.S. has staying power there. But the U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan increases the prospect of a continuing U.S. military presence on the ground in Uzbekistan—above and beyond the presence of "merely" economic instruments of diplomacy such as the presence of the international energy companies. It has monkey-wrenched an incipient consolidation of Sino-Russian hegemony over Central Asia and motivated the beginning of a rapprochement between Moscow and Washington, the eventual success of which, however, remains in doubt.

These changes in big-power politics in Central Asia are not set in concrete. But by unfreezing the earlier-emergent Sino-Russian joint hegemony over Central Asia, the U.S. has also opened up the reconnections between Central Asia on the one hand, and, on the other, South and Southwest Asia. As a result, Uzbekistan is confirmed as the geopolitical "pivot," and Central Asia the "shatterbelt" of the broad Eurasian landmass.

Demographic and economic realities over the next two decades would have further accentuated the present centrality of Central Asia to world politics and geo-economics, regardless of the Afghanistan war. Now, however, it is occurring earlier than one might have anticipated, and therefore under different circumstances. The implications of the war will be far-reaching for Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, as the U.S. likely increases its aid, trade, and military and diplomatic presence after the end of hostilities in Afghanistan.

This offers the countries concerned a respite from the earlier emerging Sino-Russian visegrip, and chance in the early twenty-first century finally to implement serious moves toward economic reform and democratization. Some modest steps in this direction are underway. The United States seems to back an international effort to enhance the ability of the peoples of the region to satisfy their own basic needs for adequate food, shelter, and access to medical care. However, for this to succeed, sustained attention to issues beyond military assistance and the stationing of troops must be given—a concern that is not always the strong suit of American diplomacy, even when such leadership is needed.

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Who's Who in the Bush Administration

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