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Secretary of Defense visiting Kyrgyzstan.

4th Communications Squadron (Jerry King)

Making the Most of Central Asian Partnerships

By LYLE J. GOLDSTEIN

Afghanistan demonstrated the global reach and fighting effectiveness of the Armed Forces. Although carrier aviation, long-range bombing, and specialized ground capabilities warrant praise, less noticeable efforts by military leaders and diplomatic officials can be easily overlooked. In fact, the deployment to Central Asia during this latest crisis was the culmination of years of preparation. As the first important American presence in the former Soviet Union, Operation Enduring Freedom signals revolutionary change for the security of Central Asian region.

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Laying the Foundation

A brainchild of General John Shalikashvili before he was named Chairman, the Partnership for Peace (PFP) program was adopted by North Atlantic Alliance in January 1994. Its objectives are supporting transparency, promoting democratic control of the military, increasing the readiness

Rescue exercise in Uzbekistan.

1st Combat Camera Squadron (Bethann Hunt)

and capabilities of partner nations to cope with crises, generating cooperative relations with NATO, and developing forces to operate within the Alliance. Early critics faulted the program as lacking in substance and as a political smokescreen for indecision on expansion. However the three exercises conducted in its first year illustrated that the Partnership for Peace would function in the realm of action, not just words. Significantly, one of the exercises, Cooperative Bridge, occurred in Poland and was the first on the territory of the former Warsaw Pact.

contact on the ground was complemented by expanding links on senior levels

Despite economic and social problems, the newly independent states (NIS) of Central Asia proved to be enthusiastic participants in the PFP program. Kazakh and Kyrgyz troops took part in Cooperative Nugget at Fort Polk in 1995, a peacekeeping exercise, and soon officers from the new states were attending military schools in the United States. Both NATO and Central Asian leaders agreed to form the Central Asian Peacekeeping Battalion (CENTRASBAT) in late 1995, one of seven regional units organized under the Partnership for Peace. As an indication of the implication of these events, the Secretary of Defense visited the region in 1996. The battalion participated in a notable exercise in 1997, the longest airborne operation on record. Embarking in North Carolina, 500 soldiers from the 82d Airborne Division and paratroopers from Central Asia flew 6,700 miles before jumping into Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. After the drop, the troops trained in checkpoint control, vehicle inspection, riot control, mine clearing, and humanitarian operations.

Cooperation between the newly independent states and the West became more urgent after 1998, when the Taliban captured terrain on the Amu Darya River, which divides Afghanistan from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Symbolic of a deepening cooperation, General Anthony Zinni, became the first Commander, Central Command, to visit Uzbekistan. He oversaw CENTRASBAT '98, which featured soldiers of 10th Mountain Division who exercised with Central Asian troops, along with contingents from Russia and Turkey, in both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

These formative relationships saw their share of blunders and awkward moments. In one case during the exercise in 1998, Kazakh troops angered their Uzbek hosts by jumping in ahead of schedule. In another case, Zinni and his party became ill after flying in an inadequately pressurized Russian transport. But the object of such exercises is identifying problems. As one officer noted: "The goal is to prepare in advance, so that . . . we're not meeting people for the first time."[1] In 1999, 5th Special Forces Group trained Uzbeks in marksmanship, patrolling, and map reading.

Contact on the ground was complemented by expanding links on senior levels. Distracted by the Kosovo War, the media paid little attention when leaders of the Central Asian states came to

Guiding aircraft in Uzbekistan.

1st Combat Camera Squadron (Reynaldo Ramon)

Washington for ceremonies marking the 50th anniversary of NATO. But the visit clearly illustrated that these nations, though distant from Europe, aspired to closer relations with the Alliance.

Zinni traveled to Uzbekistan twice more in 1999, while the Secretary of State also visited Tashkent in 2000. At the request of the participants, the exercise was expanded to include several battalions in a combined brigade. It included small unit tactics, urban warfare, and mountaineering as well as peacekeeping and humanitarian training. When he was attending CENTRASBAT '00, the current commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), General Tommy Franks, made comments that revealed a keen awareness of unfolding events: "Afghanistan [is] a failed state [and] is destabilizing to this entire region. We remain concerned about the export of extremism. . . ."[2] Cognizant of the threat, the Pentagon rotated units through the region, including Navy SEAL teams in summer 2001.[3] A solid foundation for Enduring Freedom had been created.

Familiar Ground

When Special Forces hit the ground after September 11 there was a reunion between Uzbek and American soldiers.[4] The United States had secured the northern flank of the coalition by early October after two visits to the region by the Secretary of Defense. Long-term investments paid off. A Uzbek officer who had attended the Air Command and Staff College reportedly coordinated his nation's response to U.S. requirements. Compared to limited cooperation in the Persian Gulf, not to mention the backlash in Pakistan, the newly independent states offer a relatively stable base from which to project power into the region.

Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, the frontline states, share an 850-mile border with Afghanistan. Bases are within 200 miles of Mazar-e-sharif, 300 miles of Kabul, and 600 miles of Kandahar. As the springboard for Soviet war in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan had a network of facilities and roads to project force south. Support by Tashkent has been significant and timely; Americans were being deployed to Khanabad air base in southern Uzbekistan less than a month following September 11. Three thousand troops have landed in Khanabad, including elements of 10th Mountain Division, which played a leading role in Operation Anaconda in March 2002. Because of concerns about the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), American forces in Uzbekistan have kept a low profile. But preliminary reports suggest that the

The Newly Independent States of Central Asia

deployment has been well received by the Uzbek people. IMU was so intertwined with the Taliban that its leader and many fighters apparently were killed in the fighting for the north Afghan city of Kunduz in late 2001.

Special Forces have also operated from bases on the Afghan border in southern Tajikistan. In addition, C–17s have been refueling at the airport in the capital, Dushanbe. Although Tajikistan was not part of the Partnership for Peace or CENTRASBAT exercises, the Pentagon took a crucial step in January 2001, when the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense visited to establish bilateral ties. In contrast with Uzbekistan, Tajikistan is more dependent on Moscow, thus cooperation has relied largely on relations with Russia. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan proved to be ideal for supporting the Northern Alliance. Indeed, it is not surprising that the Taliban fought desperately for Mazar-e-sharif and that it was the victory that began to unravel the Taliban in early November 2001, given that this vital crossroads controlled the best supply route into Afghanistan.

The more secular states of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have also been critical. Indeed, the allied base outside the Kyrgyzstan capital, Bishkek, was the focus of increasing attention in spring 2002. It is home to a squadron of Marine F–18s which began operating from the base in April and French Mirages which flew combat sorties during Operation Anaconda. These forces joined both cargo and tanker aircraft deployed at the 13,000-foot strip.

Unloading cargo at Manas, Kyrgyzstan.

1st Combat Camera Squadron (Efrain Gonzalez)

Since Kyrgyzstan is more liberal than Uzbekistan or Tajikistan, the local press has debated the virtues and costs of hosting the Americans. Polls offer conflicting evidence on public opinion. Events of late March 2002, including the involvement of U.S. soldiers in a serious driving accident in Bishkek and, more significantly, rioting in the poverty-stricken southern portion of the country, have shaken the political scene. But overall, the paucity of radical Islamists has made Kyrgyzstan a favorable location for basing troops. Kazakhstan has offered its aerodromes to the antiterrorism effort, but so far coalition aircraft have only made use of permission to overfly its territory.

ties between ethnic groups also produced diplomatic and intelligence benefits

Aside from providing bases in an environment of relative stability, Central Asia has made important diplomatic, military, and intelligence contributions. Having vocal support from a bloc of regional Muslim states has enhanced coalition legitimacy, demonstrating that the war is not against Islam. This support has been vital to securing the peace. Turks lead the international security force in Kabul, no doubt in the expectation that they will be less offensive to the sensibilities of the Moslems. For similar reasons, Central Asian forces are a logical choice to work with the Turkish military. Although deploying Uzbek or Tajik troops as peacekeepers in the southern Pashtun areas of Afghanistan is inadvisable, Kazakh and Kyrgyz forces would be acceptable. As past exercises have illustrated, Central Asia possesses the requisite military capabilities.

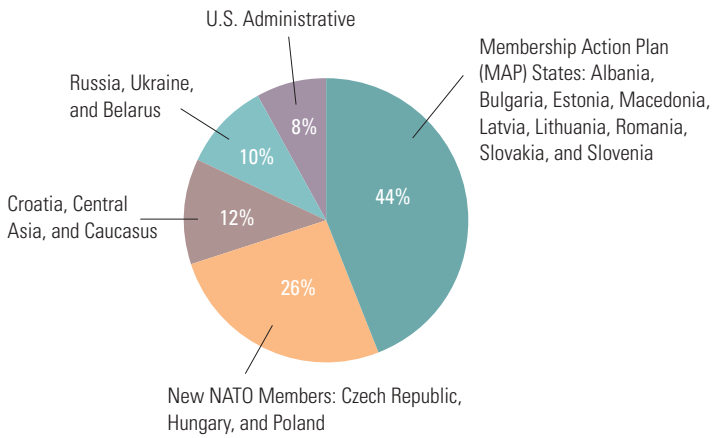
Ties between ethnic groups in Central Asia and Afghanistan also produced diplomatic and intelligence benefits. These relations were critical to the Northern Alliance. And, they are integral to the regime in Kabul. Finally, the newly independent states are essential for humanitarian efforts in Afghanistan. The Uzbek border city of Termez serves as a hub for aid shipments to the north. This aspect of cooperation should not be denigrated, because showing Afghans that their lives will be improved in prompt and concrete ways is crucial to long-term success.

The development of these relationships has been natured by political military engagement in the late 1990s, highlighted by the PFP program within the region. This cooperation is the logical outcome of common interests in regional stability and combating terrorism.

Not Without Contradictions

Two significant problems plagued the budding relationship between the United States and Central Asia. First, relations were limited in

Distribution of PFP Funds by Region, 1994–2000



scope. Although the states had been welcomed into the Partnership for Peace program from the start and soon took part in exercises, it is apparent that NATO gave Central Asian security a low priority. Not only did the scale of the CENTRASBAT exercises tend to be small, but the relative level of resources devoted to bolstering regional military effectiveness was minimal. A General Accounting Office (GAO) study on the PFP program notes that less than 12 percent of the more than $590 million appropriated to assist foreign militaries went to Central Asian nations, with the vast majority going to new NATO members and East European applicants (see figure). These measures reflect two criteria that appear to be prominent in ranking PFP members: proximity to Western Europe and adherence to democratic norms.

Skepticism toward the newly independent states is apparent. For example, a GAO report in July 2001 on PFP effectiveness, *NATO: U.S. Assistance to the Partnership for Peace*, stated: "The partner states range from mature free market democracies in the European Union, such as Finland and Sweden . . . to autocratic command economies with outdated military structures such as Uzbekistan." Illustrating the pervasiveness of such thinking prior to September 11, this report also reveals that a DOD-sponsored review of the Partnership for Peace concluded that "certain programs emphasizing NATO interoperatibility are not well suited for the Central Asian States."

Low prioritization in the PFP program along with persistent skepticism resulted in serious regional misgivings. A story in the Kazakh press noted reluctance on the part of both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to participate in CENTRASBAT '00: "Public opinion in Kyrgyzstan was greatly annoyed at the West's obvious inability to have an impact on the development of events."[5] Indeed, Kyrgyzstan faced serious attacks that summer from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which had close links to the Taliban. The press account continued, "The question arises of what the real significance of the CENTRASBAT exercises is for strengthening security." A Eurocentric NATO view is natural to some extent but has not served the Alliance well under present circumstances. Central Asian states have proven to be invaluable allies in this phase of the global war on terrorism.

The West has underestimated the impressive receptivity in the region to its influence, and the prospects of the newly independent states more generally. Central Asian leaders are committed to fight terrorism, especially in the wake of expanding IMU activities. Indeed, Washington finds common cause with President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan, who told the U.N. General Assembly one year before the September 11 attacks, "Afghanistan has turned into . . . a hotbed of international terrorism [which] stands as a threat to the security of not only the states of the Central Asian region, but to the whole world."[6] Two other reasons why leaders of these states are likely to favor an American presence include the need to balance Russian and Chinese influence and the investment that is likely to follow once there is a Western promise to uphold regional stability.

A consistent objection to increasing U.S. and NATO ties is the poor human rights record of states in the region. Torture is widespread in Uzbekistan. Kyrgyzstan, briefly seen as an island of democracy, has violated civil liberties. It was probably unreasonable to expect that a democratic tradition would develop in Central Asia immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Over the longer term, however, the prospects for democracy are quite promising—especially if the West remains engaged on the appropriate level.

Muslims in Central Asian practice Sufism, a form of moderate Islam, that contrasts directly with the much more radical Wahabism, an import from the Arab world. Sufis tend to be alienated by Wahabi practices, such as unshaven beards and the veil. As opposed to the militant Wahabi interpretation of *jihad*, Sufis tend to understand this concept in terms of spiritual self-perfection. Most peoples of Central Asia are not only Sufis, but Hanafi Sunnis, or followers of the teachings of Imam Abu Hanifa. They take a more accommodating attitude toward political power and do not condone rebellion against established authority. This may help explain why political instability has been relatively rare in post-Soviet Central Asia.

Americans training Georgian military.

786th Communications Squadron (Latonia L. Brown)

Thus it is not very surprising that the IMU threat has been exaggerated and that relatively few fundamentalists have been recruited from Uzbekistan, an alleged hotbed of Islamic radicalism.

The simmering hostilities in certain states, and Tajikistan in particular, should be viewed as regional conflicts rather than religious disputes. The Tajik civil war stems from alienation among the Garmis and Ismaelis in Tajikistan, while the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan is a symptom of regional stagnation in the Fergana Valley. Central Asia is not hovering on the brink of an Islamic revolution as some have supposed.

the newly independent states have all achieved positive economic growth

Moreover, moderate Sufi Islam is influenced by over a century of secularism. That era has inculcated respect for Western values in Central Asia, especially regarding science and education. Significantly, the states each have literacy rates of at least 90 percent, well above the dismal level in Afghanistan, but also much higher than Pakistan, Iran, and Egypt where radicalism has flourished. This factor helps explain why, despite predictions of economic meltdown, the newly independent states have all achieved positive economic growth. Their cultural, economic, and political milieu is more amenable to cooperation with the West than a first glance might suggest.

A second problem has been the failure of the United States and NATO to work with Russia to build better relations with Central Asia. This issue has been exacerbated by paranoia in Moscow and tension surrounding wars in Chechnya and especially in the former Yugoslavia. But the West, apparently frustrated but also possessing a certain amount of self-righteous zeal, gradually tended to view that ties to new states were zero-sum: Central Asia would become pro-Western only to the extent that it could be disentangled from a web of dependency centered on Moscow.

That assessment is flawed in various ways. Historically it assumes a black and white view of the influence exerted by Moscow, forgetting that Russia under Boris Yeltsin pulled away from the union with the newly independent states, not the other way around. This was particularly true in Central Asia, where local leaders were loath to dissolve the Soviet empire. Moreover, it is not in the interest of these states from a purely practical standpoint to antagonize Russian minorities into fleeing since they represent an inordinate percentage of their skilled labor. Finally, it assumes Russian hostility to expanding Western influence, deeply underestimating the extent to which both Russians and Central Asians were willing to unite amongst themselves and with outside forces to fight terrorism and Islamic extremism.

In this context it is not unusual that Tajikistan had seemingly been relegated to civil war and Russian domination. Hindsight is always twenty-twenty, but the West overplayed the *great game* and underestimated the stabilizing role of Russia in Tajikistan and elsewhere in Central Asia.

U.S. Air Force (Jerry A. King)

Marine F–18D with Mirages, Kyrgyzstan.

Brave New World

Despite tension in U.S. and NATO policy over Central Asia, the new states appear ready to cooperate in creating a stable environment. To accomplish this, two issues must be addressed.

Prior to September 11, NATO did not sense a major threat, yet it was trumped by ideology. Now it must think more strategically and less ideologically. Indeed, because of the attacks, many have wondered if the Alliance is relevant to the global war on terrorism—despite invoking Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty for the first time, which holds that an attack on one member represents an attack against all. For the Allies, this indicates a need to develop enhanced capabilities, but for the Partnership for Peace it suggests refocusing on more strategically vital regions: the Balkans, Central Asia, and Caucasus. Adherence to democratic norms remains a criterion for membership and thus attention within the program. Article 10 of the founding document does not, however, specify a precise standard for national political structures in considering new members. Moreover, this has not been an issue in the past. Greece and Turkey were welcomed to shore up the southern flank of NATO despite their domestic policies. Even new members face challenges with regard to democratic norms. For example, despite gains in civilian control of the military in Poland, there is an "inability to delimit presidential authority in the area of defense affairs."[7]

The poor democratic standing of the new states has caused them to be marginalized, placing an undue burden on American diplomacy in the present crisis and reducing the potential for NATO to stabilize the region. The GAO report cited above described partners ranging from "mature, free market democracies like Sweden and Finland" to backward authoritarian states such as Uzbekistan. Although Sweden and Finland may deserve admiration, their affiliation with NATO does not rank with the importance of Uzbekistan in combatting terrorism and other security challenges.

Stressing the status of Central Asia does not eclipse the relevance of enhancing democracy. Indeed the Partnership for Peace can be a powerful tool in achieving that objective. A situation in which enhanced engagement encourages transparency and civilian control and in turn spurs deeper cooperation seems realizable. This suggests

a second flaw in the program: failure of imagination. Attempts to divide Russia from Central Asia have been counterproductive, raising the prospects of a new great game. Washington must avoid the temptation to capitalize on regional tension. Instead the multilateral approach outlined by Franks as early as September 2000 is most appropriate: "There are a number of countries [which] are engaged with Uzbekistan. . . . Russia will be among the countries to offer that cooperation. . . . Central Command is here for coordination and cooperation, not for competition."[8] The vision for the PFP program must make a priority of integrating Russia and the new states into a Eurasian security architecture. Measures adopted in Rome in May 2002 to energize the NATO/Russia Joint Council by including Moscow in decisions on certain issues is a positive first step. But there is an imperative to reach beyond kind words, to foster cooperation in the realm of action, for example with large-scale joint exercises.

After the next phase of NATO enlargement at the Prague summit in autumn 2002, the more radical step of admitting Russia and even the newly independent states of Central Asia as members should be carefully studied. Indeed, the Secretary of State has indicated with respect to Russia that "Nothing is beyond consideration these days."[9] Such a restructuring of Eurasian security might be in the interest of the United States in a variety of ways. First, it may bring stability to Central Asia once and for all. Next, it would ensure Western access to energy resources in the region, limiting dependence on the Persian Gulf. Third, it would expand the number of pro-Western secularized Islamic states, demonstrating the feasibility of this approach. Fourth, it could enhance U.S. leverage versus revisionist states like Iran and China, which have benefitted from Russian ambiguity and the power vacuum in Central Asia. Finally, a contingent offer of membership, perhaps a decade in the future, would give these states incentives to improve their human rights records.

The charge that the Alliance could be diluted and rendered ineffective cannot be dismissed; but changes in procedures—such as moving from consensus to majority—would prevent members from vetoing action. Moreover, many concede that since the chaotic decisionmaking surrounding the Kosovo War that "a larger but slightly looser NATO makes more sense than ever."[10] Like it or not, the North Atlantic Alliance has become primarily a political institution. Its relevance is not derived from aggregated military strength, but rather from symbolic coalitions of like-minded states seeking to project force to uphold peace and stability in various regions.

Both the Clinton and Bush administrations deserve credit for forging working relationships with the newly independent states. These relations formed the basis for operations in Afghanistan. Now the United States can restructure Eurasian security to meet regional and national interests. To achieve this end, Washington must encourage a steady upgrade in PFP relationships with Russia and the nations of Central Asia to integrate these states into a sturdy security architecture. America must embrace countries willing to stand shoulder to shoulder with the Alliance on the front lines of the global war on terrorism. **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] Kenley Butler, "U.S. Military Cooperation with the Central Asian States," on the Web site of the Center for Nonproliferation Studies at http://cns.miis.edu/research/wtc01/uscamil.htm, p. 2.

[2] "CENTCOM Commander Franks Press Conference in Uzbekistan," September 27, 2000, on the Department of State Web site at http://usinfo.state.gov/topical/pol/arms/stories/00100308.htm, p. 3.

[3] C.J. Chivers, "Long Before War, Green Berets Built Military Ties to Uzbekistan," *The New York Times,* October 25, 2001, p. 1.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Yaroslav Razumov, "The Genuine Significance of the CENTRASBAT 2000 Exercises Is Yet To Be Discussed," on *Eurasianet* at http://www.eurasianet.org/org/resource/kazakhstan/hypermail/200009/0051.html.

[6] Islam Karimov quoted in Osman Yavuzalp, "On the Front Line," *NATO Review,* vol. 49 (Winter 2001–02), p. 24.

[7] Jeffrey Simon, "Poland Prepares for the Alliance," *Joint Force Quarterly,* no. 25 (Summer 2000), p. 43.

[8] "CENTCOM Commander Franks Press Conference," p. 4.

[9] "Seismic Change in U.S.-Russian Ties, Says Powell," reported by *Deutsche Presse-Agentur* on the web at http://www.europeaninternet.com/russia/news.php3?id=692065.

[10] Timothy Garton Ash, "A New War Reshapes Old Alliances," *The New York Times,* October 12, 2001, p. A25.