INTRODUCTION

Great Power Stakes in Central Asia

ROBERT LEGVOLD

More than a decade after the fall, the great powers, including Russia, remain adrift when dealing with the immense space that was the Soviet Union. For much of this time, their confusion and indifference went largely unnoticed. If they miscast or obscured the challenges raised by the large floating chunks of a now defunct empire, the oversight seemed less blameworthy, given the remoteness, self-absorption, and weakness of so many of these unexpected new states. Then came September 11, 2001, and, in the mobilization that followed, these distant parts overnight became a key theater in the “twenty-first century’s first global war.” Central Asia, in particular, ceased to be a collection of forgettable “-stans,” and emerged as an integral piece in the war on Al Qaeda and the Taliban. In its wake the United States and other NATO members were suddenly a military presence in three of the five Central Asian states, and everyone, beginning with Moscow and Beijing, understood that the world had changed.

China, Japan, Europe, Russia, and the United States had from the start known that the post-Soviet space would be a more complicated—albeit less intimidating—affair than the Soviet Union, a single, united superpower. They also learned with each passing year that this was disintegrating space. In the opening moments, when the direction of events in Russia and several of the new states remained a blur, some in Russia hoped, and many in the West feared, that Russia by conniving or coercion could put some or all of the parts back together. But that prospect had long faded, and in its place the more powerful reality was fourteen states and the subregions enfolding them drifting far apart. Events in Tajikistan had come to have little importance in Moldova, although both had been battered by internal strife and were still struggling to overcome its effects; Estonia’s national security agenda mattered little to Armenian leaders straining to manage their own. As a region, the Baltic states had their hearts and minds stoutly turned toward Europe; Central Asia gazed
more hesitantly toward East Asia and the South, and only wistfully toward Europe; the states of the Caucasus, whether they liked it or not, were increasingly a part of the maelstrom in the Balkans and the Near East. Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova formed the most complex and consequential region of all, less violent than the Caucasus, less homogeneous than Central Asia, much less successful than the Baltic states, and pulled more than any other in competing directions.

The great powers knew all this. How could they not? But none of them had yet figured out how to deal with the challenge that it represented. Nor had any of them made the effort to connect these many complicated parts, and then to devise a coherent strategy advancing their broad strategic interests in this great hinterland of Europe and Asia. Unwilling to tackle the problem for much of the first decade of post-Soviet independence, each of the major powers ended these years with only bits and pieces of a policy. Most of them had Russia policies of varying quality. But for the rest, interest tended to rise or fall depending on how near the countries were to a major power’s borders. Only Russia—because it abutted all areas—and the United States—because it saw its role as global—did not let geography decide.

Thus, for example, the Europeans concentrated on the European portions of the former Soviet Union—on the Baltic states, Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova—albeit not with any particular coherence or consistency, save for the Nordic states’ commitment to their Baltic neighbors. Gradually they had come to see the Caucasus as loosely linked to their concerns, largely because of the oil and gas scheduled to flow westward. Areas beyond, however, from the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea to the Sea of Okhotsk, seemed largely irrelevant—or did until September 11. None of this space was deemed sufficiently significant to warrant well-focused national policies, let alone a coordinated EU strategy. Likewise, China looked anxiously toward Central Asia, but its interest faded once one moved into the Caucasus and farther west toward Ukraine and the Baltic states. Japan tried to play the good citizen in Central Asia, but only invested serious thought and energy in policy toward Russia. For it, even the Asian portions of the old empire roused but half-hearted attention.

After September 11, however, vague stirrings suggested that the United States and Europe were having second thoughts. Maybe they had a larger stake in regions, such as Central Asia, than originally realized. And the Russians and Chinese recognized that the arrival of U.S. military power in
the post-Soviet space spelled a new, albeit cloudy future. Little, however, indicated that these fragments of change had yet brought the major powers to rethink their approach to the larger post-Soviet space or to focus their agendas on the underlying, core challenge that events in various parts of the former Soviet Union threatened to inflict on the world beyond.

There are but two ways to assess this state of affairs. Either one can think that it is as it should be—that the fragmented and, in most cases, unaspiring policies of the major powers conform to the diverse and, for the most part, diminished challenge that the dissolving space of the former Soviet Union represents, or one can take the opposite view, and regret the failure of the major powers—including Russia, China, and the United States—to appreciate the challenge raised by the highly complex geostrategic architecture of the post-Soviet space, and get on with addressing it.

True, even if one takes the first perspective, in effect denying validity to the very notion of the post-Soviet space, this scarcely implies that the great powers need not develop coherent, well-conceived policies toward each separate subregion. Even if different great powers have differing stakes in different parts of the former Soviet Union, this does not mean that the great powers ought not to have carefully considered policies for areas that do matter to them. The latter view characterizes the approach of several of the contributors to this book.

In my view, however, this is not enough. Diverse and fragmented as the space that once was the Soviet Union has become, it still represents an overarching integral challenge. Dozens of factors make of these different parts a conjoined reality whose combined effect will ultimately affect the larger international setting far more than any one part alone, even one as important as Russia. Four of these factors are particularly important, beginning with the most obvious.

Despite the rapid fraying of ties that accompanied the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the new states remain elaborately, hopelessly, albeit reluctantly bound together. The bonds are not merely pipelines, energy

1 A perspective strongly shared by Sherman Garnett in his concluding chapter in this volume.

grids, entwined defense industries, and bureaucratic links, but, above all, dependency on one another’s markets, external debt, diasporas, and the mutual vulnerability of porous borders. Because these are leftover, often dysfunctional ties, rather than fresh natural forces pushing toward integration, they frequently create frustration and friction between states. The remnants of the Soviet Union hold the post-Soviet space together, but like a thicket of briar trapping small animals, in ways that leave the weaker states wary of their neighbors, particularly Russia, and the Russians weary of their neighbors and ungenerous toward them. At the same time, they are all united in the revolution engulfing their societies as they struggle, some more strenuously, others less so, to build new political and economic systems on the ruins of their common Soviet past. The vulnerabilities, setbacks, and terrors produced within each of these countries by this massive undertaking add to the tensions among all of them.

The second factor that justifies, indeed requires, treating the post-Soviet space from a transcendent perspective is less obvious. Throughout the territory of the former Soviet Union, each of the subregions connects to another—often to the Russian core and usually because of the trouble or potential trouble within the region. Everywhere the sources of instability or unease create hinges linking the security interests of states, even when some want little to do with those from whom they cannot free themselves. Belarus is a hinge in the west. The evolution of its unreconstructed authoritarian regime and the course of its external loyalties impinge simultaneously on the well-being of both Russia and Ukraine, considerably complicating an already intricate bilateral security relationship. Violence in the north Caucasus is another. The ongoing war in Chechnya merges with the frailty of regimes to the south, themselves the victims of armed conflicts, creating both apprehensions and opportunities for Russia and weaving together security in Russia’s south with that of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia.

In Central Asia, there are two “hinges.” The more menacing is the large ethnic Russian population in Kazakhstan, a natural extension of the Siberian expanses, who are a source of permanent anxiety within Kazakhstan’s leadership. The uncertain process by which the Kazakh leadership enfolds this crucial segment in the nation-building enterprise, and Russia’s capacity to help or hinder its efforts, lock the two countries fatefully together. The other and more immediate of the two is the threat of Islamic extremism. While Russia’s Islamists form but ten percent of its entire population, where it is concentrated if radicalized the effects can be
highly destabilizing, as events in the northern Caucasus demonstrate. Russia, therefore, has a direct stake in preventing the growth of radical and violent forms of Islam to the south in Central Asia. The Central Asian states, in turn, have a stake in the military resources Russia can bring to bear in the struggle against Islamic extremism. Even if, as some suspect, Russia merely seeks to exploit the fears of Central Asian regimes to inflate its influence within the region, the issue tethers one part of the post-Soviet space to another.

The third factor that gives shape to the post-Soviet space has been implicit in everything said to this point. It is Russia. Russia casts the largest shadow of any country over the new states of the former Soviet Union, and it casts this shadow everywhere. Russia, in turn, is the only country directly affected by developments in every part of the former Soviet Union. Russia’s inevitable involvement, despite the ebb and flow of its influence, unites the post-Soviet space as no other force. To deal with Russia without taking account of this context is to misconceive the Russian challenge; to deal with any portion of the former Soviet Union without taking account of the Russian factor is to overlook a driving dynamic within that region.

Finally, the post-Soviet space coheres, alas, because of the maladies flourishing within its boundaries. It is not merely that drugs, contraband, and human trafficking in increasing volume flow across largely nonexistent borders on their way to Asia, Europe, and beyond. The post-Soviet space also contains the largest number of past, present, and potential violent intrastate conflicts of any region in the world. That many of these conflicts—from Tajikistan to Transdniestra—are for the moment quiet tells us little. Because none is settled, were any or several of them to re-ignite or others not yet heard from to erupt, the consequences could be grave. Because, like the Balkans, violence in and between the states of the former Soviet Union carries the risk of embroiling major powers from the outside, beginning with Russia, regional instability in the post-Soviet space continually raises the threat of escalation and so, too, the danger of one conflict ‘bleeding’ into another.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

Were the great powers—including Russia—to embrace this conception of the post-Soviet space, they could choose one of three paths. First, they could insist that, whatever cohesion is attributed to the post-Soviet space,
it is neither practical nor necessary to design a strategy for the larger whole. Better that each government and the European Union deal well with the individual pieces, each of which requires quite distinctive policies. Pursuing one’s separate interests, say, in the Caucasus or toward Belarus is the best one can do. Little purpose is served by focusing on the parallels in other regions or the linkage of problems among regions. The cumulative effect of well-engineered policies toward key countries ought to be enough to meet whatever challenge the larger setting poses.

The other two approaches share a common assumption that the challenge of the post-Soviet space is larger than its various parts taken separately, but then draw sharply different strategic conclusions. The first sees in the woes and weaknesses of these states the risk of a major power coming to dominate the larger Eurasian landmass. The fear traces back to late nineteenth–early twentieth-century geopolitical theories. In its modern version, it surfaces primarily among U.S. commentators wary of a resurgent Russia, although something of same concern may reside in certain Chinese quarters as well. The parallel Russian fear is not of a single power rising dominant over the Eurasian landmass, but of one or more outside powers displacing Russian influence and establishing themselves in a preeminent position within its immediate neighborhood. Russians who worry along these lines think first and most often about the United States, but in Central Asia and even in the Russian Far East China too is a candidate. And in both Central Asia and the Caucasus, the Russians keep a wary eye on Turkey. Here too the events since the September 2001 attacks play a role, about which more is to be said.

The alternative view dreads less another power coming to control the post-Soviet space than the loss of control within this space. That is, the fear is of disorder prevailing within the former Soviet Union. For the foreseeable future, seen from this perspective, the threat to international peace and stability arising in the vast expanse between Asia and Europe stems from the frictions produced by troubled political and economic transitions within these countries, the inability of various governments to head off domestic violence or separatist pressures, and the clash of interests between different states. Rather than a single country exploiting these weaknesses to assert its dominance over others, the greater danger
is that disorder will reign and therein menace the peace of both the post-Soviet region and far beyond.

Those in the United States who subscribe to the first view (for whom European and Japanese counterparts appear few) would subordinate policy to the basic task of creating barriers to the ascendancy of any one power. For this, a transcendent strategy is required, one focused on defending the independence of strategically significant countries across the former Soviet Union. In the abstract this should include countries such as Belarus and Kazakhstan as well as Azerbaijan, the Baltic States, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, but, as a practical matter, the countries featured turn out to be those willing to assert their independence from Russia. Defending their independence involves binding them as closely as possible to Western institutions, including NATO, and, in the case of the Baltic states and Ukraine, incorporating them into NATO.

Second, as part of the same strategic preoccupation, the United States would consciously work to ensure that a would-be hegemonic state fails in its attempts to recruit collaborators. In the case of Russia, the United States would be on guard against partnerships with China and/or Iran that could be exploited by Moscow to put parts of the post-Soviet space under its thumb or to squeeze the United States out. Presumably Russia’s tilt toward the West following the September 11 terrorist attacks has drained this threat of urgency and made hostile Russian collaborations with China or Iran more improbable. Still, those disposed to worry in this fashion tend also to doubt the permanence and depth of Russia’s new partnership with the West.

Conversely, a Russia that was bent on denying the United States (or Turkey, Iran, or conceivably China) a strategic advantage within different parts of the former Soviet Union would concentrate on closing doors to these powers. Russian hopes presumably would be pinned on a strategy pressuring target states to keep their distance from Russia’s rivals. Pursued starkly and aggressively, such a strategy would be difficult to distinguish from one intended to reassert Russian control within these areas; pursued starkly and aggressively by either Russia or the United States, such a strategy seems bound to stimulate a mirror-image response from the other; pursued starkly and aggressively by both Russia and the United States, such a strategy would be the purest invitation to a vastly accelerated strategic rivalry between the two countries in the post-Soviet space. Here too Putin’s Russia by 2002 appeared embarked in a different direc-
tion and the U.S.-Russian relationship seemed less in danger of a competitive rivalry. Absent Putin, however, or should there be an untoward turn in U.S.-Russian relations, the scenario would revive.

Those whose core concern is disorder within the post-Soviet space would lean toward a rather different strategy. Instead of constructing obstacles to the initiatives of competitors, they would concentrate on creating obstacles to the emergence of threatening conditions. For them, the strategic challenge is every bit as daunting, and comes in four forms. First, how broadly to cast the problem. Take the issue of regional instability: should this be seen and addressed as a generic problem stretching across much of the post-Soviet south or is it better dealt with, subregion by subregion or even case by case? Second, how ambitiously can and should the problem be attacked? Does one, as a practical matter, settle for crisis management, worked out when the trouble has already boiled over into violence? Or can one hope to start sooner and, through timely actions, prevent the sources of tumult from leading to bloodshed, even when the evidence on which one must act is ambiguous and public support back home dubious? And, if one takes seriously the task of crisis prevention, how deeply can one hope to cut to the roots of potential trouble? To the immediate causes of ethnic or civic unrest? Or to the more fundamental but also more shapeless socioeconomic conditions where these causes fester?

Third, how broadly cooperative should the strategy be? If all the major powers define the strategic challenge in these terms, in theory an optimal strategy would seek the widest possible measure of cooperation. The only issue then becomes how best to proceed—whether by turning to existing multilateral institutions, creating alternative mechanisms tailored to the post-Soviet space, or simply coordinating national policies. However, if one or more of the major powers do not see eye-to-eye with, or for other reasons are reluctant to cooperate with some or all, then strategy will naturally have to be more hedged. A cooperative approach still might be adopted and pursued in hopes that others will be encouraged to follow, but the odds of success diminish rapidly if some are playing a different game. At some point, a harder and more competitive response becomes logical and necessary.

And, fourth, how well-integrated should the strategy be? That is, if the objective is to avoid the emergence of a strategic competition between two or more of the major powers in the post-Soviet space while
promoting stable economic and political change within the post-Soviet states, then many different policy dimensions need to be coordinated. How to deal with real and potential violent conflicts is one; the way to devise and pursue an agenda with other key players, such as Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan, is another. So too is the approach adopted toward emerging alignments among the post-Soviet states; toward the exploitation of key resources within the post-Soviet space, including in particular oil and gas as well as water; and toward the evolution and management of military relationships with and among the states of the region. Ultimately the dynamic of relations among the great powers within the post-Soviet space depends on (as it also shapes) the dynamic of their interaction outside that space. Hence, the way major powers address security challenges in the arenas bordering the former Soviet Union will have a substantial impact on the development of their relations within the post-Soviet space. Here too the events since September 11, 2001 drive the point home.

Tracking these different dimensions, let alone keeping them in harmony, represents a prodigious challenge for the policymaking community of any country. To repeat my basic point, it is a challenge that major powers are only likely to tackle if they believe the stakes justify the effort. And they are likely to see the stakes in these terms only if they recognize that this immense area—from the Sea of Okhotsk in the east to the Baltic Sea in the west and from the Hindu Kush in the south to the Arctic Circle in the north—presents dangers and opportunities far greater than those raised by any state or subset of states within it.

THINKING ABOUT KAZAKHSTAN AND THE CENTRAL ASIAN CONTEXT

In important respects Central Asia is no different from any other part of the former Soviet Union. In others, it is strikingly different. Like the other post-Soviet states, the Central Asian states face the enormous task of turning former pieces of a vast and deteriorating empire into cohesive, functional countries. Moreover, as is true throughout the post-Soviet space, when the Soviet Union crumbled the disintegration of political institutions, economies, and infrastructure did not end with the arrival of independence, but continued through much of the first decade of their new existence. As in the rest of the former Soviet Union, rather than a fast start toward a new economic future, production and trade in most of
the Central Asian states plummeted. In the first half-decade of independence their economies shrank from 40 to 60 percent of 1989 levels. Kazakhstan did better than war-fractured Tajikistan, whose GDP in 1996 was but 39 percent of its pre-independence level, and better than resource-poor Kyrgyzstan, whose economy shrank by nearly 50 percent in the four years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Still, not only did its economy lose 40 percent of its volume, the decline dragged on longer than in any of the other Central Asian states, reaching its low point only in 1998.

Behind this basic measure of economic dislocation, evidence of its human cost accumulated, the kind that implies the risk of social and political unrest. Real wages dropped to 50 to 65 percent of their sorry Soviet levels; unemployment soared, particularly among the young, where in some sections of Central Asia, including some parts of Kazakhstan, it reached 35 percent. And nearly everywhere, particularly in Kazakhstan, the gap between a thin layer of the suddenly very wealthy and a large impoverished substrate grew explosively. By the end of the 1990s the percentage of the population below official poverty levels ranged from 50 percent in Kazakhstan to 80 percent in Tajikistan. In all of these countries, as elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, economic disarray accompanied a thorough disintegration of public-service infrastructure—health care, police protection, transportation, and education, to name but a few. The social safety net disappeared. Both as a cause and an effect of the decomposition, government itself grew weak and parasitical—accelerated by the corruption spreading throughout its ranks.

As Kazakhstan and its Central Asian neighbors completed their first decade of independence and entered the new century, they, like the rest of their former sister republics, remained trapped in the punishing throes of uncertain political and economic transformations. But, unlike other parts of the former Soviet Union, they as a group seemed to be abandoning democratic aspirations and drifting toward the semi-authoritarian forms familiar in much of the Third World. While in several cases, including Kazakhstan, economic reform continued to edge forward, how long.

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4 The exception was the slow-to-reform economy of Uzbekistan, whose low point in 1995 was 83 percent of 1989 levels. The figures are from European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Transition Report 1999, November 9, 1999, from Table 3.1, p. 63 and Annex 3.1, p. 73.
this would continue if social justice issues mounted and the regimes chose repression over representation in response, grew cloudier.

Thus, the fundamental starting point for the policies of the major powers in Central Asia must be the “no-man’s-land” in which these states find themselves as they battle to create nation-states where none existed before, fashion workable political orders, and simultaneously put new economic systems in place. The struggle to create a new post-Soviet political and economic order does not distinguish Kazakhstan from, say, Ukraine, Georgia, or, for that matter Russia, but the added burden of doing this while inventing the nation-state does. Even Kazakhstan’s great oil wealth scarcely alters this core reality. In the end, the task facing the country is larger than that confronting economically underdeveloped oil-exporting countries such as Nigeria and Indonesia. Their challenge is to convert oil wealth into economic modernity and, in the process, to transcend the rentier capitalism that has grown up around oil; Kazakhstan, even before struggling with those problems, must first create a functioning economic system.

This is the wrenching backdrop to every other dimension of the international politics of the region. Take the dangers inherent in contested borders, including Kazakhstan’s southern border with Uzbekistan. Not a single Central Asia state enjoys settled, untroubled borders with its neighbors. Uzbekistan, the only Central Asian state to touch all four of the others, has uncontested borders with none. Its unilateral attempts in 2000 to demarcate a part of the border with Kazakhstan nearly produced violence, and was followed by a strong protest from the Kazakh government; its moves along the frontier with Kyrgyzstan in late summer 2001 inflamed relations already tense from discord over water, gas, and debt. Disputed borders reflect deeper sources of tension within the region, for they slice critical transportation routes linking parts of the same country, wall ethnic groups from their kin across the border, and award valuable—or, as in the case of water—essential resources to one state rather than another.

Were they historical borders or easily defended or inconsequential,

5 If the announcement by Nazarbaev and Karimov at the close of their November 16, 2001 summit that they had reached a fundamental agreement on the border dispute turns out to be a genuine breakthrough, it will signal an important event in the evolving Uzbek-Kazakh relationship, to which we will return later.
their significance would be less. They are, however, for the most part the creative whim of Stalin, nearly indefensible, and caught up in turmoil surrounding the struggle to make nation-states of crumbly material. Weak states straining to maintain the public’s loyalty and tempted to seize on distractions from the population’s suffering, all too readily fall back on claims and pretensions that threaten the equally encumbered state next door. The simple growth and use of nationalism, combined with popular grievances over a neighboring state’s border policies or perceived mistreatment of co-ethnics, transform frontier issues into large and ominous stakes. Behind the disagreements over where the border should be between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and how it should be managed looms the shadowy Kazakh conviction that in the grand days of the Great Horde Tashkent was its capital. To which the Uzbeks even sooner juxtapose their sense of a right to rule over critical swatches of Kazakhstan (as well as of its three other neighbors) based on earlier periods of their conquering glory.

The potential friction inherent in nebulous frontiers when intensified by the harsh transformation through which these societies are passing is but one important manifestation of the problem. Drugs are another. Again, weak borders, weak states, and impoverished populations combine to create a threat radiating far beyond the region itself. The fact that annually 120 tons of heroin equivalent pass through Central Asia on the way to Europe, supplying nearly half the heroin consumed in Western Europe, a volume roughly twenty times the scale of a half-decade ago, reflects the deadly effect of this combination. With a post-Taliban Afghanistan very much back in the opium-growing business, the problem will surely grow.

The same combination was at work when armed Islamic militants infiltrated across vulnerable mountain borders from villages and training camps in Afghanistan and Tajikistan with the intent of radicalizing the

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One might take heart from the argument of Pauline Jones Luong that the basic framework of politics in three key Central Asian states is and will likely remain regional, not ethnic nor religious, divisions. (See her book, *Institutional Change and Political Continuity in Post-Soviet Central Asia*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Still, how deeper sociopolitical trends may affect the arena within which high politics currently unfolds eludes easy prediction.

The problem of weak borders–weak states does not distinguish the Central Asian countries from other parts of the post-Soviet space. The noxious items and forces that flow across porous borders may not always be the same, but the generic problem is. However, what does set the Central Asian region apart is the concatenation of threatening circumstances that converge around this problem. It is not merely that disputed borders, disputed resources (such as water), disputed historical claims, and disputed policies toward minorities are of a piece, or that ineffectual borders produce magnified effects because of the broader and more basic weaknesses of which they are a part. It is that, beyond the monumental economic and political stresses plaguing all post-Soviet states, the uncertainties in Central Asia are considerably augmented by the unknowable direction that deep sociocultural factors, such as Islam, may give political trends, once they finally escape the bounds within which they have long been held. In Central Asia, even more than in the Caucasus or the European portions of the former Soviet Union, these factors make far more unpredictable the inevitable passing of the leftover Soviet elites who

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now dominate the political scene. If either the evolution deep within the political culture of one or more of these countries or the arrival in power of new political leaders with agendas different from their predecessors’ should occur unevenly, affecting some Central Asian states more than others, the dynamics within Central Asia or between it and the world outside could change dramatically.

Finally, oil. Central Asia, of course, is not the only part of the former Soviet Union blessed with large quantities of oil and gas. Nor are Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan the only oil- and gas-producing countries dependent on pipelines beyond their landlocked borders as a means of reaching world markets. But the impact of these resources on both the domestic and international politics of the region is likely to be more complex than elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, although, one hopes, not as volatile as in the Caucasus, where oil and armed conflict mix precariously.

In the first instance, as is true of much of the oil-producing world, in none of the Central Asian states can one be sure that energy wealth will not turn into an obstacle rather than an impetus to sustainable economic growth, let alone to the flourishing of democracy. While Kazakh officials are conscious of the danger and have made a special effort to study Norway, the ideal case, little in the early phases suggest that they yet know how to do as well. Nor has the general welfare benefited, other than a thin stratum close to the regime, few of them with clean hands.

Second, because Kazakhstan, as projected over the next twenty years, has from eight to ten times the oil potential of the next-largest Central Asia oil producer, and Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan dominate among the gas producers, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are virtually without either, the gap between haves and have-nots threatens to create sharp distinctions within the region. Whether this will add to the already considerable impediments to economic cooperation and integration in the region or even be used as a stick by the haves against the have-nots, as at times it already has been, or, on the contrary, will lay the ground for accommodation, also remains highly unpredictable.

Third, when it comes to the outside world’s stake in the region’s oil

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and gas, again, cross-cutting tendencies are potentially very great. For the moment, the tilt is toward Europe. Kazakhstan and even Turkmenistan remain tightly bound to the Caspian Basin oil complex, which in turn faces westward. In the longer run, however, an increasingly energy-hungry Asia, led by China, will become an equally interested participant. It may be, given the role of private consortia in the discovery and extraction of petroleum, that the process of enlarging the number of states eager to produce and not merely buy Central Asian oil and gas can be largely cooperative. But it is worth noting that Central Asia is the first substantial energy-rich region in the world in which the industrialized states of the West are not the only major external powers with heavy stakes in the region’s wealth.

Transporting, even more than acquiring, oil and gas creates complicated and sometimes conflicting interests among the major powers or between them and the states of the region. In general, because pipelines are valuable to the states whose territory they cross, inevitably there is a competition among the have-nots to host them. Their eagerness, in turn, gives leverage to those who decide where the pipeline will be laid. One sees this at work among Georgia, Armenia, Ukraine, Belarus, Poland, and Uzbekistan in their relations with exporters and importers, particularly Russia at one end and Western Europe at the other.

Gas, because it does not flow into an international pool but necessarily to markets serviced by pipelines, stimulates a second kind of competition—that over markets. Russian, Azerbaijani, and Turkmenistani competition for the Turkish and more broadly the European market illustrates the point, but, in the longer run, the same competition, with Uzbekistan added, is likely to emerge over Asian markets, beginning with China.10

Most importantly, however, because the selection of pipeline routes confers political muscle on those who decide, governments tend naturally to use it, even when commercial criteria would dictate otherwise. The U.S. government has made no secret of its determination to prevent for political reasons Central Asian gas and oil from flowing through Iran, notwithstanding the commercial advantages that attract states in the region to a southern route. So too did the Clinton administration sup-

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10 On the competition for the Turkish market, see ibid., p. 18 and Lena Jonson, “Russia and Central Asia,” in Allison and Jonson, *Central Asian Security*, pp. 103–104.
port the east-west Aktau-Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, in part in order to reduce Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan’s dependence on Russia, an objective most often and openly expressed by Clinton’s secretary of energy, Bill Richardson. The Russian government, in turn, has played pipeline politics for a variety of purposes—not the least of which is to offset perceived U.S. policy objectives. The more complex the options for routing the pipelines become and the larger number of state actors who can influence the outcome grows, the more potential exists for energy to increase, not attenuate, tension. In this sense, however, the politics surrounding the transport of oil and gas only amplify, they do not cause, political trends. In a generally competitive environment, they will intensify the competition; in a cooperative environment, they have the potential of adding an important area of cooperation.

THE GREAT POWERS

Kazakhstan shares a characteristic with Ukraine, Georgia, and Belarus. It is a pivot point between Russia and the world beyond, including the outer concentric circles of the former Soviet Union. The interplay between Russia and these states and, in turn, the options opened for these states by the United States, Europe, China, and Japan will decisively influence the way Russia and the entire post-Soviet space fit into and affect the international order. Like Georgia, but unlike Ukraine and Belarus, however, Kazakhstan’s influence is first filtered through the region of which it is a part. Ukraine’s role is direct and critical, in shaping both Russia’s relationship with the West and trends within the Commonwealth of Independent States. Belarus’s impact, although often underestimated, is also direct and critical. Belarus has been described as both the “hole in the donut” in the European security equation and a “pivot” in a series of overlapping security relationships, beginning with the Russian-Belarusian-Ukrainian triangle and extending through the Central European security nexus.

11 As he did even after he was out of office in his op-ed piece, “Crazy for Kazakhstan,” Washington Times, July 30, 2001.
13 Sherman W. Garnett and Robert Legvold, eds., Belarus at the Crossroads,
Kazakhstan’s importance, in contrast, begins with the place of Central Asia in the larger scheme of things. The authors in this volume offer various depictions of Central Asia’s geostrategic significance. Neil MacFarlane describes the region as “a buffer or meeting place for South Asia, East Asia, the Middle East, and Russia.” Rather than a buffer, however, he seems to see it more as a dynamic “meeting place,” perhaps dangerously so. For, as he writes, it is here that the “destabilizing processes linking Islam and ethnicity” from Afghanistan to China flow together, and here that Russia, China, and the Western states locate a potential new wellspring of Islamic extremism. A buffer may exist, but, as he says, it is Kazakhstan, rich and comparatively stable, standing between Russia and China on the one hand, and the tumult in southern Central Asia and Afghanistan on the other.

Xing Guangcheng represents Central Asia as a “bridge” between East and West. As he has written elsewhere, however, by West he means primarily Eurasia. The linkage is more than geographical but also “political and cultural.” More important, he suggests, “if there were turbulence around that bridge, the future of political and economic cooperation in the whole Eurasian continent would be seriously affected.” In his chapter in this volume, he adds a further characterization, one with still greater urgency for China. In effect, a Central Asia comprised of independent states forms a crucial strategic hinterland for the “northwest provinces” of China. If unstable, Central Asia becomes a threat to a large and crucial part of China. On the other hand, if reliable strategic ballast—his word is “balance”—for north-west China, then, given Central Asia’s natural wealth, it becomes a potential stimulus to the economic “development and prosperity” of a vital but vulnerable part of China.

As for Kazakhstan, he again evokes the metaphor of a bridge, but this time portraying Kazakhstan and China together as a bridge linking the “Asian and European continents” (and China as an egress to the Pacific for Kazakhstan). At a more essential level, however, he seems to envisage Kazakhstan’s significance as simply a large and important microcosm of

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15 Ibid.
the region. Unlike MacFarlane, he does not assign Kazakhstan a separate and different geostrategic role from that of Central Asia in general. On the contrary, at one point he stresses that Kazakhstan must be “a reliable rear” for the stability of northwestern China, not a *platsdarm* for “mutinous preparations” in this area.

Vitaly Naumkin, writing about Russia, not surprisingly turns the relationship on its head. Kazakhstan becomes the central geostrategic focus and Central Asia, a subordinate concern. Thinking about Central Asia in dispassionate geostrategic terms does not come easily to Russia. Rather than a new arena where the interests of various states converge and sometimes collide or a sphere where previously separated subcontinents now intersect, Central Asia for Russia, to infer from Naumkin’s account, exists as a raw and worrisome flank. It is a vortex from which bad things may come: instability, terrorism, drugs, and the unwanted intrusion of external powers. Kazakhstan stands as the critical looming intermediary: On the one hand, as Naumkin stresses, it is Russia’s “gateway” to Central Asia; on the other hand, notwithstanding the tangible weaknesses of its borders, in a larger sense it is also a key barrier against the movement northward of the dangers from the south.

Kazakhstan, however, is much more than a portal to Central Asia. It occupies a central place in the overall scheme of Russian foreign policy. As Naumkin writes, it plays a decisive role in determining the future of the Commonwealth of Independent States, including institutions, such as the new Eurasian Economic Community, uniting Russia with Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan in an upgraded customs union. It provides Russia its longest border—longer than that with China—and thus what happens within its immense space has an instant and direct impact on Russia. Almost as much as Ukraine it is an extension of the Russian domestic scene: The two economies and infrastructures remain tightly bound together; the resource dependencies between the two countries are great; and the Russian diaspora in Kazakhstan is second in number only to Ukraine and potentially far more volatile. Russia, in fact, is so involved with Kazakhstan in so many different domains that it is difficult for Russian leaders to think about the country in a larger external

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16 While Putin has accepted the “intrusion” of the United States and the West into Central Asia in the wake of the September 11 events, it is clear that Russia would not welcome an overly ambitious U.S. role in the region.
context. Although Naumkin does not say so, as with Belarus, Kazakhstan becomes an extension of Russia’s most intimate fears, not an independent piece in the larger scheme of Central Asian or, more broadly, Asian security.

In my chapter on U.S. policy, Central Asia’s geostrategic significance is conceived differently. The region should be seen not merely as a crossroads, or a hinterland, or a bridge, but as part of a vast new strategic arena capable in its own right of influencing the international system. The collapse of the Soviet Union has reconstituted Inner Asia, an enormous sphere that extends from Russia’s southern Siberian lowlands through the Chinese frontier provinces to Afghanistan, with Central Asia at its heart. Because Inner Asia directly incorporates Russia and China, it automatically and greatly magnifies the stakes involved, whether from instances of regional instability, the development of energy resources, or the strategic interaction of great powers in and beyond Central Asia. Inner Asia becomes an integral and crucial part of the international system, transforming Central Asia from a remote quarter that happens to have oil, a vulnerability to drug trafficking, and Islamic extremism into a critical link shaping the way this part of the world affects politics much farther afield.

Of the contributors to this volume, the one who has the least to say about the geostrategic significance of Central Asia or of Kazakhstan is Tomohiko Uyama. This does not mean that the Japanese are utterly indifferent to the subject; another prominent Japanese author whose view Uyama largely shares has described Central Asia as a new cluster of states surrounded by major Eurasian powers whose relations could be affected by tensions in the region. Japan, he writes, would not want developments in Central Asia to jeopardize its desire to “develop stable and hopefully friendly relations with Russia, China, Turkey, and Iran.”¹⁷ Uyama’s lack of emphasis on this theme, however, does seem to reflect a general disinclination on the part of the Japanese to couch the challenge of Central Asia or Kazakhstan in strategic terms.

These, for the most part, however, are the formulations of the analysts writing in this book, and they represent more their notions of how Central Asia—and within it, Kazakhstan—should be seen than well-
articulated strategic visions on the part of governments in the states about which they are writing. These states, however, do have implicit strategic visions, and they are conveyed by the interests that each pursues.

In the first instance the five major powers (treating Europe as one for the moment) divide into two groups: the three who see their interests in the region as multiple, diverse, and substantial (China, Russia, and the United States) and the two who, at least until September 11, defined their interests as limited and secondary (Europe and Japan). In both cases, however, interests fall into three categories: economic, political, and security. This is the banal analytical point; the more subtle dimension comes from what each category includes.

ECONOMIC STAKE

Russia, as one might expect, has the most extensive and complex set of economic interests. They extend considerably beyond the traditional forms of trade and investment, and, indeed, beyond the critical subcategory of energy. Indeed, to look only at gross trade statistics, bilateral trade between Russia and the Central Asia states, far from flourishing, essentially collapsed with independence. By 1996 trade was 10 percent of 1991 levels, except for Kazakhstan, with whom the totals were 31 percent.\(^\text{18}\) From there it spiraled downward over the next two years. Even with Kazakhstan, by 1998, it was but 17 percent of 1991 levels. The decline reflected plummeting general economic activity in all of these states, the sharp cut in Russian trade subsidies, and the effect of protectionist measures introduced by many of the governments. Indeed, over this period Russian trade dependency on all of the former Soviet republics shrank by half in the five years from 1992 to 1997 (from 44 percent of overall trade to 22 percent), only a small portion of which was with Central Asia.

What both sets of statistics conceal, however, is a more complicated picture with decidedly different implications. For example, notwithstanding the overall slide in trade, ultimately all of the Central Asia states, with the exception of Uzbekistan, still depend on their former Soviet trading ties for 50 percent or more of their total trade, the largest share of which

is with Russia. And, by the end of the decade, a lack of hard currency was forcing Uzbekistan to turn back to the CIS for a substantial portion of key imports (from 26 percent in 1999 to 37 percent in 2000) and to CIS markets for Uzbek exports (from 25 percent to 34 percent). The next year Uzbekistan’s overall trade dependency on the CIS remained just under 36 percent.

In this universe, Kazakhstan is of disproportionate importance for Russia and vice versa. Russia’s trade with Kazakhstan is on average from twice the volume of Russian trade with Uzbekistan to ten to twelve times the volume with each of the other Central Asian states. Trade with Russia exceeds Kazakhstan’s trade with any combination of countries—the European Union, Asia, or North America—and constitutes more than 90 percent of its trade with the CIS. As important as scale, however, are specific aspects of the economic relationship. Naumkin, for example, notes that Russia’s nuclear power industry “could not function” without the import of Kazakh tantalum, beryllium, and uranium, while Russia remains the crucial source of Kazakh arms and military supplies.

Indeed, because during the Soviet period Kazakhstan, along with Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine, was the location for the bulk of Soviet defense production, Russia has a large stake in preserving links between military production facilities in the two countries. The ability of Kazakh military suppliers to compete with Russian arms exporters on what are seen, says Naumkin, as “dumping terms” has also been a new source of tension. This is only one of the many ways in which Kazakhstan’s economic relations with Russia are more complex than with the other major powers. Others, as Naumkin notes, are the role that local leaders and regions play in the trade, and the intricate, abrasive, and thus far largely unsuccessful effort of the Russia’s financial-industrial groups to get a foothold in the Kazakh economy.

Viewed from a Kazakh perspective, the economic connection with Russia not only is key, but likely to grow more so in the future. Bulat Sultanov and Leila Muzaparova, in their chapter, echo Naumkin’s themes, noting that in the defense sphere 70 percent of the production of Kazakhstan’s 13 military-industrial enterprises goes to Russia. As

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Kazakhstan builds and re-equip a new national defense force, they suggest, Russia will be well-placed to be a primary supplier. Moreover, they write, the growing economic dynamism in both Russia and Kazakhstan, combined with a realization on the part of both leaderships that the unraveling of old Soviet ties went too far, promises to give new momentum to the economic relationship.

Kazakhstan’s other giant neighbor, China, also has a potentially substantial economic stake in Central Asia, involving much more than energy alone. And, like Russia, it is skewed to feature Kazakhstan. In contrast to the collapse of Russian trade with Central Asia over the first decade of independence, China’s two-way trade with the region has burgeoned, from $459.35 million in 1992 to $872.41 million in 1997 to $1.2 billion in 1999. Of the 1999 trade total, $1.14 billion was with Kazakhstan. (By comparison the total for Uzbekistan scarcely exceeded $40 million.)

Aside from these general trends, however, to judge from Xing Guangcheng’s analysis, two other considerations give special importance to the economic dimension of China’s evolving relationship with the region and in particular with Kazakhstan. First, there are the doubtless inflated notions of great transportation corridors connecting China and all of East Asia with Europe, a network of highways, railroads, and airports, stretching across Central Asia in two directions. The more ambitious of the two, the “Asian-European Continental Bridge,” as Xing Guangcheng notes, crosses five Chinese provinces, Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, Poland, and Germany, until it finally reaches the Dutch coast. The other more closely retraces parts of the medieval Silk Route, passing through Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, and out through Turkey.

Apart from the obvious issue of how real the prospects are that either, let alone both, will ever be constructed, there is another more subtle aspect. Were the northern route someday completed, it would be a powerful influence helping to integrate the economic interests of China, Kazakhstan, and Russia. On the other hand, were it to come to pass that the southern route took shape first, particularly if as a Chinese priority, the effect would be quite different. Then it would compete with the

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dreams of Russians who want Russia to become the economic bridge between Europe and Asia. Serving as the overland link between these two economically powerful regions represents for them far more than potential economic advantage; it is meant to resolve the most acute problem that the Russian elite feels—Russia’s exclusion from both Europe and Asia.

The second consideration giving special importance to China’s economic relationship with Central Asia cuts to the heart of Chinese concerns. Xing Guangcheng argues that in the twenty-first century China’s entire economic development strategy must shift westward. For political as much as for economic reasons, China’s future depends on accelerating growth in the country’s backward west, a necessity not lost on the political leadership. For this, writes Xing, China will have an increasing interest in fostering economic ties with Central Asia, particularly with Kazakhstan. If so, Russia will no longer be the only country with a broad and pressing stake in economic relations with Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan, in turn, assigns great importance to its economic relations with China, but in Sultanov and Muzaparova’s analysis this is forward-looking. As they say, if China becomes a major market for Kazakh products, a way for Kazakhstan to gain access to the East Asian economies, and a major investor in the Kazakh economy, and if China chooses to make Kazakhstan a crucial trading “bridge” to Europe, it will emerge as a vital partner. But, for now, Russia remains the fulcrum of Kazakhstan’s international economic involvements.

Sultanov and Muzaparova note that China’s economic stake in Central Asia has changed over the first decade. No longer is it “purely economic,” as they say it was at the outset. Now it mixes “geopolitical interests” with economic objectives, which helps to explain the more recent emphasis on economic ties with Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Whether this makes the Kazakhs uneasy is not made entirely clear; what has been clear for some time, however, is that Astana views warily China’s plans for diverting the upstream flow of the Ili and Irtysh rivers, water vital to the Kazakh economy. Sultanov and Muzaparova stress the diplomatic reassurances offered by Chinese officials on the subject, but the discussions begun between the two countries in 1999 drag on at this writing, and were the Chinese, in the end, to insist on having it their way, considerable damage would be done to the relationship.

Russia’s and potentially China’s economic stakes in Kazakhstan stand
in marked contrast to the other major powers. Japan, Tomohiko Uyama bluntly states, has few or no fundamental economic interests in the region. Contrary to the view of various outsiders, economic factors do not account for what desultory interest Japan has in Central Asia. As Uyama notes, most of Japan’s trade with Central Asia in 2000 was with Kazakhstan ($158 million), less than two-tenths of one percent of Japanese external trade. Japanese direct foreign investment has not been attracted to the region, including Kazakhstan, because markets there seem too small and partners too unreliable. Even Kazakh oil and Turkmenistani gas do not significantly change things, Uyama claims, for the Japanese majors are tertiary players, the projected supplies scarcely dent Japan’s overwhelming dependency on Middle East oil, and the pipelines run in the wrong direction.

Sultanov and Muzaparova offer a surprisingly more generous conception of Japan’s economic commitment to Kazakhstan. Without gainsaying the low level of Japanese trade and investment in their country, they choose instead to focus on Tokyo’s development assistance program, which, while small by Japanese standards, constitutes the largest foreign aid program in Kazakhstan. They also make much of Japan’s participation in oil exploration efforts, treating it as a harbinger of a large-scale, longer-term Japanese stake in Kazakh energy resources; indeed, they even suggest that Japanese oil companies may already be shifting their attention from Russia to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.

Trade between the fifteen states of the European Union and Central Asia amounts to no more than one-half of one percent of the EU’s total external trade; Britain and Germany account for more than half of it. But in contrast to Japan, European enterprises are interested in the Central Asian market, and, as Neil MacFarlane details, Europe’s key aid agencies have developed an active program in the region, particularly in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The Europeans also regard the Caspian region, and within it Kazakhstan, as an important new source of oil and gas, and British, French, and Italian companies have taken a leading role in the consortia developing the largest prospective fields, including Kazakhstan’s recent finds in the offshore Kashagan area. Here, again, our Kazakh authors celebrate the European role more than the facts would seem to justify, suggesting the degree to which they would like to see the Europeans present and active in the region.

Energy, it turns out, is what gives Europe and the United States their
dominant, indeed, overriding economic stake in Central Asia. And this automatically puts Kazakhstan in the forefront. The tale is in the character and distribution of direct foreign investment. From 1993 through 1999, the Central Asian states received $9.4 billion in direct foreign investment, of which $7.3 billion went to Kazakhstan. In 2001 direct foreign investment in Kazakhstan totaled $3.5 billion, 80 percent of which was in the oil and gas industry. The largest investors were predictably the United States with $1.6 billion, Canada with $414 million, Britain with $381 million, and Italy with $311 million. (Russia’s share was $133 million.)

On the other hand, the United States offers no real market for Central Asia exports. It does not take Uzbek cotton, 50 percent of Uzbek exports; the Europeans do. It does not buy Kyrgyz gold, more than 70 percent of Kyrgyz exports; Germany does. It now shows up among exporters to Kazakhstan and the other Central Asian states, at around 10 percent of their imports, again, much of it energy-related.

Over time these proportions will change. Three-quarters of foreign investment will not continue to come from Europe and the United States. China too has a major stake in Kazakh oil, and Xing Guangcheng outlines the many different dimensions of China’s budding involvement in moving oil and gas eastward, including the $9.5 billion deal in 1997 giving China development rights to the Aktubinsk and Ukhensky oil basins. He makes clear that China regards access to Central Asian oil and gas a matter of “energy security,” the same phrase U.S. officials use, however when placed in the larger context of Xing Guangcheng’s nervous discussion of Central Asia’s importance in a development strategy for northwest China, it has a deeper resonance. It may also be worth noting that he treats the quest for energy in Central Asia as competitive and Western oil companies as the competition.

This is for the longer run. In the short term more heat has been generated around plans for transporting the energy to market. Here the key protagonist has been the United States. It has taken the lead in promoting, indeed, exhorting, the creation of major east-west lines—including the celebrated Baku-Ceyhan pipeline with its proposed point of origin on the Kazakh side of the Caspian Sea. This it has done above all, as U.S.

policymakers have made plain, to preclude the construction of new north-south pipelines joining Iran to the grid. But during the Clinton years, it also sought to liberate Russia’s oil-rich neighbors from Moscow’s stranglehold on oil and gas transit.

Russia, it will come as no surprise, viewed this effort with mistrust and at times open hostility. Its displeasure, however, never reached a crescendo, because two other considerations intervened: First, major Russian oil companies were eager to be part of the action in the large Caspian Basin oil and gas projects, and thus are not particularly agitated by official U.S. pipeline policies. Second, while pushing hard for construction of the Baku-Ceyhan line, the U.S. government was also a primary supporter of the alternative Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) that runs through Russia. By 2002, as the Russian company LUKoil toyed with the possibility of buying into the Baku-Ceyhan project, the Russian government seemed to relax its opposition.

Still, as Naumkin’s understated analysis indicates, Russia is scarcely ready to cede to the United States or the West the role of arbiter for Caspian and Central Asian energy flows. As he says, the most substantial means that Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan have for getting their oil to market is the Tengis-Novorossisk route, and Moscow intends to keep it that way. Moreover, one assumes that for some of the same reasons Putin has vigorously pushed a formal program of economic cooperation with Kazakhstan extending to the year 2007. According to Naumkin, by it the two countries propose creating eight financial-industrial groups (in metallurgy and machine building), eight transnational oil and coal companies, and more than 100 other joint enterprises. Surely it was also a principal reason that in 1998 Russia conceded key issues to Kazakhstan allowing the two countries to align their position on the exploitation of Caspian Sea oil and gas.

These realities are not lost on the Kazakhs. If anything, they see a still stronger and more coherent linkage between economics and strategic design. Sultanov and Muzaparova, however, draw a clear distinction between Russia, China, and the United States, on the one hand, and Europe and Japan, on the other. The first three emerge from their analysis as jealous of their competitive position in Central Asia and motivated by a variety of political aims to which economic considerations are often subordinated. The other two come off as more inclined to judge and respond to economic opportunity in the region purely in economic
terms. Presumably that helps to explain the chapter’s highly favorable assessment of Japan and Europe’s involvement in Kazakhstan.

POLITICAL STAKES

Unlike the economic stakes motivating the major powers in Central Asia, which diverge in their basic character only to re-converge around energy, their political stakes, with one exception, not only differ greatly, they exist on entirely different planes. The exception is stability within the region. For the moment, all the great powers, beginning with the two closest to the region, share a common and genuine desire to avoid political instability in and among the Central Asian states.

Beyond this important point of departure, however, their political agendas have little else in common. The United States, for example, has made the promotion of democratic reform a key objective, arguing that progress toward a modern, open society is essential to successful economic reform, and, in turn, that successful economic reform will ease the way to further democratization. Simultaneous progress on both fronts, U.S. officials maintain, will furthermore enhance stability within these societies and increase the opportunities open to U.S. investment. When a country like Kazakhstan begins to slide from the path of liberal democratic reform, the United States expresses its disapproval and prods the leadership to find its way back, a response further separating U.S. policy from that of Russia and China, and, as Uyama points out, Japan as well.

Here too, however, September 11 and shifting U.S. priorities in the region have changed matters. The need to secure military facilities in Central Asia during and after the Afghan war has led the Bush administration to mute criticism of domestic policies in Uzbekistan and by extension in Kazakhstan. Yet, while immediate and overt U.S. pressure subsided, the issue itself has not disappeared. Sooner or later it is bound to resurface as an obtrusive dimension of U.S. relations with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and the others.

Russia starts with a very different problem. The Russian government’s preoccupation is not with the nature of the Kazakh political system, but with what happens to the Russian diaspora within that system. Naumkin lays heavy stress on the issue, because, from a Russian perspective, discrimination against the Russian population—or the perception of it—not only stirs angry sentiments within political circles back in Russia, but
explains the distressingly high rate of emigration from Kazakhstan. As Naumkin summarizes the statistics, from 1992 to 1998 more than 100,000 Russians a year picked up and left, constituting for these years more than 42 percent of the émigré inflow into Russia, twice the percentage from Ukraine, a country with three times as many Russians.

Russia’s heavy-handed approach to the problem, however, including its early insistence on dual citizenship and the various attempts to force the hand of the Kazakh leadership, as Naumkin acknowledges, became a source of tension and remains a highly sensitive issue. In this respect the friction generated in Russian-Kazakh relations around the minority issue rather resembles that in U.S.-Kazakh relations stemming from U.S. criticism of human rights and electoral abuses.

Sultanov and Muzaparova have little to say about the strains created by the United States’ dim view of political trends within Kazakhstan, but they do comment on Russian concerns. Russia, they contend, is caught between two contradictory pulls on the diaspora issue. On the one hand, because of Russia’s slumping demographics, many in the leadership welcome the added numbers from the flow of immigrants out of Kazakhstan; on the other hand, Russia can scarcely afford to provide for them—at least, not in large numbers. The dilemma, however, Sultanov and Muzaparova observe in understated fashion, does not prevent the Russian “political elite” from constantly harping on the theme as well as using it for leverage to “pressure” Kazakhstan.

While the Kazakhs tend, at least in public, to skip over U.S. importuning, the annoyance it raises within Nazarbaev’s entourage is not something Russia and China fail to exploit to their own benefit. Neither of them approves, let alone embraces, the U.S. and European stress on holding Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states to a democratic standard. But, more than this, each also not-so-subtly reminds the Kazakh leadership that it is the United States, not they, that makes the fuss. True, neither are the other major powers united on the issue. Uyama points out how little enthusiasm Japan has for preaching democracy to the Central Asians. This is so, he argues, in part, because Japanese policymakers doubt that the effort pays off, and, more interestingly, because the Japanese tend to sympathize with those who are, as they were after World War II, on the receiving end of outside political tutoring.

The Europeans appear to be somewhere in the middle. The issue scarcely figures in MacFarlane’s chapter. This is not because, as he makes
clear, the Europeans do not support the effort to promote democratic forms in the region. They do, and not the least because the European institutions of which the Central Asian states are members, such as the OSCE and Council of Europe, will be weakened if these countries are permitted to flout their standards. But they are inclined to leave the task of prodding these governments to the institutions formally charged with the task, such as the OSCE’s Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. When individual governments raise the matter with Central Asia leaders, as the Germans have, they do so unobtrusively and behind the scenes. Moreover, as MacFarlane suggests, their tendency to make less of these matters with the Central Asians than with, say, regimes to the west, including the Baltic states, betrays once again European priorities within the post-Soviet space.

One other consideration dominates Russia’s political agenda with Kazakhstan, namely Kazakhstan’s role in shaping the architecture that governs relations among the post-Soviet states. More than any other country, Kazakhstan has been a consistent and ambitious advocate of institutionalized links within the post-Soviet space. Russian leaders have known from the start that any chance of fashioning an integrated economic or security entity from even a rump of the former Soviet Union depends on Kazakh support. Naumkin is frank in identifying the general reasons that so little progress accompanied the original customs union among Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, but it is also clear from his analysis that, if either the newly negotiated Eurasian Economic Community (EvrAzES) or the even newer Agreement on Collective Security is to fare better, Nursultan Nazarbaev’s leadership will be important. No doubt this explains why, in contrast to past Russian practice, Nazarbaev was chosen as the EvrAzES’s first chairman.

None of the other major powers openly objects to Russia’s hopes of binding, with Kazakhstan’s collaboration, a core of post-Soviet states into a more cohesive grouping. Indeed, for most of them it is either a seemingly irrelevant concern (Japan) or entirely acceptable, as long as it does not get in the way of other collaborations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (China). It may be guessed that the United States would have a certain wariness of any effort that aided Russia to impose its will on its weaker neighbors or that required an accommodation with Belarus’ anti-reform regime, but Washington apparently has no formal position on any of the new institutions. During the years of the
In June 2002, the Uzbek government announced its intention to withdraw from GUUAM in order to focus on bilateral relations with Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova. The Bush administration too has affirmed its readiness to push for Kazakhstan’s entry into the WTO. (Kyrgyzstan is already a member.) But nothing suggests that this administration will be any more attentive to collaborations within the region than its predecessor.

For now, however, the institutional configuration in Central Asia has no shape. A tangle of half-formed groupings exists, overlapping in some instances, truly effective in virtually none. At the regional level, the Central Asian states, minus Turkmenistan, have created the Central Asian Economic Community and the Central Asian Battalion. Within the broader CIS, three of the four Central Asian states are part of the new Eurasian Economic Community and a new security partnership; the other, Uzbekistan, had joined GUUAM, the collaboration that brings together Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova. All four, however, with Russia and China make up the increasingly active Shanghai Cooperation Organization. At the same time, all five Central Asian states participate, with Iran, Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, and Azerbaijan, in the Economic Cooperation Organization. While little suggests that any of these structures will anytime soon emerge as a decisive factor in the international politics of Central Asia, neither is there any indication that any of the great powers, other than Russia, cares much one way or the other. Even less suggests that they would bestir themselves to attempt to shape the outcome.

SECURITY STAKES

In no sphere are the contrasts in great power interests more fundamental than that of security. For Russia and increasingly for China, Central Asia, and in particular Kazakhstan, has an immediate and deeply felt relevance to national security. For Europe, the United States, and Japan, the region’s security relevance has been far more remote and fuzzy—until September 11. It remains to be seen, however, how lasting the United

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22 In June 2002, the Uzbek government announced its intention to withdraw from GUUAM in order to focus on bilateral relations with Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova.
States’ new interest will be, in Central Asia as “the strategic rear of the global war on terrorism,” to use Sultanov and Muzaparova’s phrase.

Even less clear is whether Japan and Europe’s views will change. Given the region’s insignificance as a direct security concern, for most of the last decade neither made it much of an issue in their policies. Japan continues to treat the security relevance of Central Asia in remote and abstract terms. As Uyama notes, Japan understands the “indivisibility” of international security, and as a global power it recognizes its “responsibility for stability in all regions of the world,” but this formula makes Central Asia no more consequential for Japanese security than, say, Central America or southern Africa. Although Japan was quick to lend political support to the war against Al Qaeda and the Taliban and readily contributed financial assistance to the rebuilding effort in Afghanistan, Uyama offers little evidence that the drama surrounding these events has led Japanese politicians to rethink the strategic significance of Central Asia as part of a larger Asian security picture.

The Europeans, one infers from MacFarlane’s analysis, also saw little compelling reason to worry about Central Asia’s potential impact on European security, except for “non-traditional” security threats, such as drugs and perhaps at some point the spillover of terrorism should Islamic extremism grow within the region. He takes as proof the low priority the OSCE had assigned to the region, the absence of any serious discussion of security issues in the policy documents of either European agencies or individual governments, and the tendency of the Europeans to subordinate policy in Central Asia to their Russian policies.

The Europeans more than the Japanese appear to have been shaken by the implications of the terrorist attacks on the United States in September 2001, and MacFarlane suggests that, as a result, Central Asia seems more convincing as a security issue. But he also is doubtful that the shift will endure, particularly if the crisis fades without spreading to Central Asia. As he says, in that event “strategic attention, and the commitment of resources, are likely to shift south further still, in the effort to deal with the challenges of humanitarian action and economic and political reconstruction in Afghanistan itself.”

Even if the Europeans continue to see mega-terrorism as a new and urgent part of their security agenda, they are likely to frame this as a global problem with many locales. For them, therefore, Central Asia will remain only a secondary piece in the larger problem. In any event,
Central Asia’s importance in the larger scheme of global terrorism will almost surely not impel the Europeans to turn their minds to the more complicated and ramified way that Central Asia fits into the Inner Asian security nexus. Nor will it in all likelihood alter another feature of the European approach noted by MacFarlane: While “the West European states prefer and pursue cooperative security structures designed to reduce the threat of war and to promote a security environment conducive to democratization and liberalization,” they tend to give what meaning they can to this amorphous guideline by putting good relations with Russia at the top of the list.

Although U.S. policymakers from the start used more urgent language, implying that what happened in Central Asia would bear on general peace and stability, and therefore on U.S. security, rarely did they spell out the ways in which this might be true. Rather, they more often stressed the importance of assuring the independence of key Central Asian states, something that had more to do with broad U.S. geostrategic stakes than core security concerns. And when they spoke of the threat posed by instability in the region they had in mind the perils this might pose for uninterrupted energy exports, again not a direct security issue, considering the United States’ near-term lack of dependency on Caspian region oil.

The war in Afghanistan in autumn 2001 put U.S. security interests in Central Asia in a very different light. Not that the United States had ignored the issue of terrorism earlier. From 1997 on it had begun cooperating with Uzbek agencies in tracking terrorist activity and by 1999 was providing Tashkent with financial assistance to promote the effort. September 11, however, utterly transformed the magnitude and contours of U.S. concern over terrorism. The active war front now opened in South Asia created needs in Central Asia that the United States had never before contemplated, as newly refurbished military bases in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan and the deployment of U.S. air units and armed forces made Central Asia overnight part of the United States’ global security structure. Simultaneously, their arrival also made the United States part of the security configuration within Central Asia. Whether either turn of events would lead American policymakers to think through the broader implications of the linkage between these two dimensions, however, remained to be seen.

For Russia the picture was always different. No part of the world has
posed a larger near-term threat to Russian security than the southern reaches of the former Soviet Union, including Central Asia. Against that threat Kazakhstan represents a key bulwark, unless it were itself to grow unstable and become part of the threat. If the security problem for Russia in the west starts from the reality of shrunken strategic frontiers, reducing the space between its core and NATO, the counterpart problem to the south is the absence any of strategic frontiers at all. Russia has no reliable line that it can fortify against the effects of violence and instability in Central Asia; no clear parapet behind which to defend itself from escalating tension in the region, including tensions likely to draw in outside powers. It has tried to deal with the problem of a weak or missing southern strategic frontier by piecing together what its military leadership knows is a weak substitute. This has included efforts to aid others as far south as possible to tighten control over their borders; to persuade Central Asian governments to treat their and Russian air space as common and best defended by the Russian air force; to fashion some kind of collective security arrangement; to maintain a military presence in the region; and to play an active military role in managing the conflict in Tajikistan and, more recently, in combating Islamic terrorism. One does not have to study this list long to realize that, unless Kazakhstan favors most of these initiatives, Russia will not get far with any of them.

The Afghan war and the sudden appearance of U.S. military forces in this part of the world radically reordered this picture. On the one hand, by crushing the Taliban regime, the United States greatly reduced the security threat emanating from Afghanistan, and Russians, including Vitaly Naumkin, are the first to acknowledge the point. Looked at from this perspective the arrival of U.S. military power in the region has enhanced Russian security. Naumkin even argues that the Putin government welcomed the chance to transfer to the West some of the “the onerous, expensive, and overwhelming burden of protecting its CIS partners from terrorism.”

Looked at from another more traditional perspective, however—a perspective common to most of the national security elite—the thought that U.S. military forces might be in Central Asia to stay does not sit well. Russian officials rarely miss an opportunity to stress that, once military operations in Afghanistan end, the Americans have no reason to remain. As Naumkin admits, both Russian politicians and, interestingly, “business elites,” although more worried about the threat of terrorism than ever
before, also fear that Russia’s diminished security role will lead Central Asian regimes to rely more on the West in “both economic and military spheres.” Quickly, therefore, security concerns merge with broader geostrategic calculations, a subject to which we will turn in a moment.

Chinese security concerns parallel Russia’s original concerns, only in a more precise form. China, as emerges clearly from Xing Guangcheng’s chapter, worries that Central Asia—Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, in particular—will become a staging area for Uighur nationalist groups agitating for an independent Xinjiang. Given China’s ongoing sensitivity over centrifugal forces in its borderlands, China reacts sharply to the thought of Central Asia serving as a staging area for separatist movements in China. Chinese leaders have spent a good deal of time entreating their Kazakh and Kyrgyz counterparts on the subject. Xing Guangcheng puts the threat in rather dramatic terms. With the collapse of Soviet power, two strains of Uighur nationalism have come together, one present in Central Asia during the Soviet period, but repressed, and another that survived in Turkey but without the possibility of operating in the Soviet Union. That has changed, and the two, he writes, have joined and are actively promoting the idea of an “Eastern Turkoman Republic” incorporating Xinjiang.

For both China and Russia, however, the ultimate and decisive dimension of the post-September 11 changes arises at the geostrategic level. Much of what Russian leaders have long considered the most fundamental threat in Central Asia has now come to pass, but with confusing implications. Until September 11, no development seemed more unsettling than the prospect of another major power creating a military bridgehead in the region, particularly in Kazakhstan. As Naumkin says, for Russia “the unacceptable scenario” would be a Kazakhstan transformed into “an object of domination by any third forces.” While not even the edgiest Russian would suggest that the latter has happened, a crucial threshold has been crossed. In a single stroke, the United States has established a military presence in what turns out to be the new strategic axis of the region, Uzbekistan. Naumkin argues that, despite first impressions, the war against terrorism has not “decisively” shifted the balance from Kazakhstan to Uzbekistan in the “furtive contest for leadership” in Central Asia. But it soon became clear to all, including Moscow, that Karimov saw the new relationship with the United States as not merely strengthening his freedom of maneuver, but as enhancing his country’s status and influence.
Still, the United States has entered the region with the conspicuous sanction of the Russian leadership; not the least because Putin and his colleagues chose to seize on the events of September 11 to recast the basic character of the U.S.-Russian relationship. The logic of the new course then compels its defenders to treat the American arrival in an entirely different light. If only saying so made it so. The trouble is that many within the Russian political elite viscerally object to U.S. soldiers being deployed within what used to be the Soviet Union, whatever the gloss put on it. Thus it remains far from clear that, in the to-and-fro of politics within Russia, the positive interpretation of the moment may not swiftly dissolve, particularly if the general relationship loses momentum. Indeed, Naumkin, who supports Putin’s choice, nervously notes how swiftly doubts arose among Russian political circles when the Bush administration three months after the attack on the World Trade Center announced its decision to withdraw from the ABM treaty, evoking for many the renewed threat of U.S. “unilateralism.” On the other hand, if Russia and Kazakhstan continue in their new Western alignment, then, asks Naumkin, what may be the consequences for their relationship with China?

China, having long lived with Soviet hegemony over Central Asia and even today accepting Russia’s continuing dominance in the region, never phrased the basic security threat as one of an ascendant power in Central Asia. But it has worried about third countries entering the region, particularly if they, like Turkey or Iran, are seen as candidates for stirring up nationalist or separatist pressures within China. China, according to Xing Guangcheng, also casts a wary eye on the early signs of emerging strategic rivalries within the region, beginning with what before September 11 looked like an intensifying U.S.-Russian competition. Neither, however, is China likely to be happy about growing cooperation between the two countries, and even less to the degree that it interprets U.S. policy—and now military presence—as part of a containment strategy directed against China.

All of the great powers have what might be called geostrategic calculations relevant to the region, with the arguable exception of Japan. In essential respects, as described by MacFarlane, Europe’s parallels that of China. Like China, the Europeans regard the risk of some or all the great powers engaging in competition in Central Asia as something much to be avoided, believing that relations among all the major powers can and
should be cooperative, or in game-theory terms “positive-sum.” Again, like China, they start from “substantial sensitivity to the role of Russia” in the region and, particularly in Kazakhstan, they too regard their key relationship in the region to be with Russia. And they too approach this relationship positively, arguing for Russia’s inclusion rather than containment. By implication, neither key European governments nor MacFarlane view this as necessarily the attitude of earlier U.S. administrations. Doubtless, therefore, the mending of U.S.-Russian relations and the equanimity with which Moscow reacted to U.S. military activity in Central Asia pleases them.

Xing Guangcheng appears less reassured. As noted, he has earlier openly accused the United States of pursuing policies in Central Asia not only intended to check Russian influence, but also “to contain China’s strategic plans and as part of this to exert influence on Xinjiang.” He went on to describe a series of U.S. initiatives promoting military cooperation with the Central Asian states, the purpose of which “is to threaten China’s security.” September 11 altered this picture in an important respect, because, as Xing notes, the convergence in U.S. and Chinese positions on Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and global terrorism created positive grounds for improving the bilateral relationship. But the deeper misgivings remains. As he quietly underscores, China does not wish to see U.S. military power preserved in Central Asia after the Afghan mission is completed. In effect, the Chinese, even sooner than the Russians, are inclined to see the new military deployments as not simply a bad idea in principle but as a direct threat to their national security.

U.S. policymakers have all along denied these suspicions. Strobe Talbott, the undersecretary of state in the Clinton administration, went out of his way in a 1997 speech entitled “A Farewell to Flashman” (an allusion to Rudyard Kipling’s character), to condemn as historically anachronistic and contrary to U.S. interest a renewal of the nineteenth-century “Great Game.” Yet many aspects of U.S. policy suggested that during the Clinton years some in the policymaking community did see the game as “mixed”—that is, while at one level senior policymakers sought genuinely cooperative relations with Russia (and China) in developing and transporting oil and gas, in countering the drug trade, and in containing regional instability, at another level they mistrusted Russia’s

motives, or at least its actions. Their effort to promote alternative pipelines, to develop a bilateral relationship with Uzbekistan, and to foster programs of military cooperation with the Central Asian states including Kazakhstan, were undertaken with one eye on Moscow. Little in their comments or actions, however, justified the suspicions contained in Xing Guangcheng’s chapter.

The Bush administration began with neither a clear idea of how it should recalibrate, if at all, the geopolitical conception underlying U.S. policy in Central Asia, nor any manifest sensitivity to the strategic elbowing beginning between the United States and Russia, and certainly not with any notion of the intense suspicion with which Beijing viewed U.S. policy in Central Asia. In the wake of September 11, it simply skipped over these issues. Rather than stand back and size up the larger trends at work within Inner Asia, it thrust itself into Central Asia as a function of the war it was fighting to the south.

In doing so, the Administration deeply affected the dynamic along three critical axes. First, the United States’ new dramatic but incidental military involvement in Central Asia added a Central Asian dimension to the U.S.-China relationship. Whether Washington fully appreciated it or not, the two countries were now no longer engaged only in East Asia; the new American role and the old Chinese concern created an Inner Asian front in the relationship. Second, Central Asia became a far more salient factor in the evolution of U.S.-Russian relations. The interaction of the two within the region would have a good deal to do with whether the post-September 11 détente deepened or ran aground. And, in turn, this outcome would decisively affect international politics within the region.

Developments on these first two axes were closely linked to trends on a third. The arrival of the United States and de facto NATO in Central Asia drew them far more deeply into the politics of the region. At the same time, it altered those politics. Not merely did it give new strategic significance to Uzbekistan and thereby affect the balance of power within the region, it enlarged Uzbekistan’s freedom of maneuver vis-à-vis Russia (and China). More than that, it potentially altered the comparative momentum of two different and, in some respects, competitive integrative processes affecting Central Asia. One is made up of Central Asian states alone. The other is a customs union comprising three Central Asian states plus Russia and Belarus. The first, upgraded to the Organization of Central-Asian Cooperation (OTsAS) in December 2001, is dominated by
Uzbekistan. The second, the Eurasian Economic Community (EvrAzES), does not have Uzbekistan as a member. Naumkin, for one, senses that, as part of the overall change in the Central Asian context, momentum now belongs to the OTsAS.

The geopolitical setting in Central Asia was always more complicated and portentous than the major powers—even Russia and China—appeared to recognize. But the dynamic opened along these three axes raises the stakes considerably, all the more since the outcome along none of them is predictable. On the contrary, very different outcomes are possible, with very different implications for much more than Central Asia alone. The reader is now invited to explore in the chapters that follow how well-prepared the major powers are to understand and deal with these and the other complex dimensions of the challenge raised by Kazakhstan and its Central Asian neighbors.