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The *Afghanistan Regional Forum* series discusses the place of Afghanistan in the wider region and both the local and international preparations for the post-2014 situation. It gives the floor to experts from all over the world, especially from Afghanistan's neighboring countries, Central Asia, China, Pakistan, India, Iran, Russia, and Turkey.

Central Asian Perspectives on Afghanistan After the US Withdrawal

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Washington's announcement that U.S. forces in Afghanistan will desist from combat missions in 2013, leaving the burden of those operations to U.S. special and elite forces and to trained Afghan forces, has caused great turbulence in NATO and throughout Central Asia.¹ As earlier announcements of the U.S. intention to withdraw combat forces after 2014 caused consternation throughout the region, any further shortening of the time frame for U.S. combat operations will likely have an even greater result.² Central Asian governments continue to warn that their security problems will grow in the wake of the U.S. and NATO withdrawal.³ Yet these governments, along with Russia, Iran, China, and Pakistan, also oppose any long-term U.S. strategic presence in Afghanistan or Kyrgyzstan at the base at Manas. Although

Kyrgyzstan intends to ask the U.S. to withdraw from the Manas base after 2014, Central Asian states, including Kyrgyzstan, which also wants to negotiate such a presence despite its desire to close Manas, clearly wish to see some form of continuing U.S. presence.⁴ Notwithstanding, there has not been any authoritative statement of what U.S. policy will be in the region once the troops leave Afghanistan. Certainly, the U.S. Army does not want to revisit the question of committing troops to the region in the event of a major crisis. But at the same time, U.S. officials, for example U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ryan Crocker, state they do not believe there will be a civil war after NATO departs in 2014 and that the Afghan Army is capable of defending the government.⁵

Whatever the reasoning behind Washington's latest policy statement and even though the Afghan government accepts this decision to retain only special forces and advisors after 2014, it means that we are not likely to see any truly sustained rethinking of U.S. strategy in Afghanistan or Central Asia. Indeed, the strategic prognosis now appears to be incredibly cloudy. Making matters worse is the fact that in the same week as this announcement of the U.S. withdrawal a classified NATO report was leaked that shows just how far the rosy scenarios promulgated by U.S. and NATO authorities in 2011 are from the truth.

According to this report, Taliban captives fully believe they are winning the war and that the Taliban is far from being demoralized or vanquished, even as we now enter the apparent final stage of the war. The report abounds with commentaries on collaboration between insurgents and local government officials or security forces as well as accounts of cooperation between the insurgents and the Afghan military that NATO is training and that is supposed to take over the lead mission next year.⁶ The report claims that many Afghans are "bracing themselves for an eventual return of the Taliban."⁷ Despite the Afghan government's public commitment to keep fighting, many officials are reaching out to the insurgents in seeking long-term options should the Taliban prevail. The report shows many examples of tight yet nuanced and even distrustful cooperation between elements of the Pakistani government, notably the ISI (Inter-Services Institution), and the Taliban. It is also apparent that the Taliban maintains its tactical proficiency, financing, cohesion, strength, and motivation despite the genuine blows that it suffered in 2011. Even if the report shows a growing coolness and lack of interest in working with Al-Qaeda, this is hardly a reason for optimism or for justifying the U.S. and NATO's recent decisions. Nor do these conditions augur well for Central Asian security which is already under pressure even without the Afghan problem nearby.⁸

Neither is this NATO report the only intelligence source to paint a much more negative picture of the war. Denmark's Defense Intelligence Service issued a "pessimistic" report on Afghanistan in November 2011, which made clear its expectation that Afghanistan will not, contrary to official

U.S. statements, be able to defend itself without NATO forces and that the Taliban's influence will grow.⁹ A new U.S. intelligence assessment sees a standoff and says security gains are in danger. This national intelligence estimate (NIE) also warns that the Afghan government may not be able to survive a NATO and U.S. withdrawal and raises concerns over the continuing sanctuary provided for the Taliban in Pakistan.¹⁰

Russia's Presidential Representative in Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, told a press conference in May 2011 that the Afghan situation is constantly deteriorating, and a Bulgarian editorial called the NATO operation a fiasco.¹¹ More recently, Russia's Ambassador to Afghanistan, Andrey Avetisyan, publicly voiced his belief that the Afghan armed forces are not ready to replace NATO.¹² Similarly an official of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, writing in the ministry's journal *International Affairs*, openly stated not only his own belief that the Taliban would sooner or later take over Afghanistan, but also that U.S. intelligence reports (which he did not name) concurred that the Afghan government is incapable of ruling the country and would steadily lose influence until it is confined to separate cities.¹³

Many noted U.S. experts like former Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Affairs Bing West, Professor Steven Metz of the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College, and Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington see little reason for optimism. Metz even told an interviewer:

I simply cannot imagine a situation where the Karzai government defeats the Taliban, imposes stability over all of Afghanistan and builds an economy capable of sustaining Afghanistan's population growth (which is one of the highest on earth) and supporting a massive security force (or finding other employment for the hundreds of thousands of members of the police and army).¹⁴

To add to the negativity we are now getting published accounts of the war by U.S. officers that castigate the U.S. military leadership for what they believe are falsely optimistic reports of the situation in Afghanistan.¹⁵

Thus despite continued statements by U.S. military leaders in Afghanistan that the Afghan Army is capable of taking a leading role in providing security after 2014 and in fighting the Taliban, the Afghan public (as well as many foreign governments) seems to have a widespread expectation that the government will fall and that the army will not or cannot fight. Consequently, outside of the U.S. military command, there is widespread expectation of a future civil war and a gathering number of critiques of U.S. strategy that critics feel has been misconceived for a long time.¹⁶

Adding to the cloudiness of the situation is the fact that the U.S. government has entered into negotiations with the Taliban concerning terms of settling the war and the political future of Afghanistan. This does not necessarily mean that all U.S. forces will leave; a final agreement with Afghanistan delineating the status of future U.S.-Afghan relations has stipulated the continuing deployment of special forces and advisors or trainers for the Afghan Army after 2014. Likewise, the U.S. has built five major air bases in Afghanistan that it is unlikely to turn over to Kabul. Yet at the same time, Russia claims that it was told there would be no permanent U.S. military bases in Afghanistan after 2014 and it has reputedly demanded that U.S. forces leave and that the bases be dismantled, further insisting that the NATO ISAF force report to the United Nations.¹⁷ Therefore Russia will undoubtedly (along with China) oppose such a presence even if it does materialize.¹⁸ Fearing the worst is still to come in Afghanistan, Moscow has moved to strengthen its economic and defense instruments of dominance over Central Asia.

Furthermore, any hope of a regional solution for Afghanistan, touted by many officials and analysts here and abroad, was revealed as illusionary at the 2011 Istanbul conference, so dashing hopes of the only other alternative to a permanent NATO presence.

Many both in and outside of Central Asia have stated that a regional solution to the problem is to involve all of the stakeholders and interested parties in Afghanistan and Central Asia. The U.S. hoped the Istanbul Conference in late 2011 would see an emerging policy solution; however it

proved to be a failure and no regional solution appears possible at this time.¹⁹ Indeed, this failure serves only to extend the list of previous failures of efforts to devise a multilateral framework for resolving the situation in Afghanistan as well as the twenty-year failure of regional cooperation programs in Central Asia, not to mention the rivalries among the great powers.²⁰

The subsequent Tokyo conference of July 2012 did not fare much better. Although donors pledged \$16 billion for Afghan aid, it amounts to roughly \$4 billion in annual aid for four years and falls short of the \$6 billion per year Afghanistan's national bank says is needed to foster economic growth through the next decade. Furthermore, "mutual accountability" provisions in the Tokyo Conference agreement could see as much as 20 percent of the aid depending on Afghanistan meeting benchmarks for fighting corruption and implementing other good governance measures, a highly unlikely outcome. Moreover, the benchmarks vary from donor to donor and each country is free to decide whether or not to make its aid contingent on such reforms. This should also be seen in the context of the \$35 billion provided in the period 2001–2010 that largely fell short of optimal return on the investment.²¹ Therefore it is difficult, if not impossible, to discern a coherent U.S. strategy not only to deal with admittedly hideously complex issues involved in the future of Afghanistan, but also for the American future policy toward neighboring Central Asia. Neither is this conclusion solely the opinion of this author.²² What we have instead is an apparent race for the exit ramp from Afghanistan. Yet the stakes for all those involved and for Afghanistan's neighbors could not be greater.

Uzbekistan's President, Islam Karimov, publicly stated in 2010, and repeatedly thereafter, that an unstable and conflict-torn Afghanistan means that the threat to all of Central Asia will remain.²³ Tajikistan's leadership has also made similar repeated statements.²⁴ Though the well-known journalist and regional analyst Ahmed Rashid may have exaggerated that threat's importance somewhat as of 2010, from the standpoint of regional governments this is actually an understatement because they believe their fate is linked with that of Afghanistan.

The consequences of state failure in any single country are unimaginable. At stake in Afghanistan is not just the future of President Hamid Karzai and the Afghan people yearning for stability, development, and education but also the entire global alliance that is trying to keep Afghanistan together. At stake are the futures of the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the European Union, and of course America's own power and prestige. It is difficult to imagine how NATO could survive as the West's leading alliance if the Taliban are not defeated in Afghanistan or if Bin Laden remains at large indefinitely.²⁵

Yet Europe is clearly tiring of Afghanistan and is ready to leave without completing the mission, continuing the long-term failure of European security organizations to grasp what it takes to stabilize Afghanistan and Central Asia or to commit sufficient resources to that task.²⁶

Coupled with the earlier announcement of our withdrawal by 2014, the most recent NATO and American decisions, with signs of NATO and U.S. troop reductions and the holding of negotiations with the Taliban, have introduced a new dynamic into the Central Asian equation which forces all the Central Asian states to reconsider their options, policies, and relationships with the U.S. and other players in the context of a severely diminished U.S. presence. All interested parties must hedge their bets to some degree on what U.S. policy in Afghanistan and Central Asia will look like—now that an Afghan-U.S. agreement has been signed and the NATO/U.S. forces are preparing to withdraw—and how they will react to the evolving Afghan situation. Furthermore, Afghan President Hamid Karzai cannot hold another term after 2014, so there is no idea who will be ruling in Afghanistan after this date or what kind of state, either politically or territorially, it will be once U.S. forces leave. Still worse, U.S. officials candidly admit the absence of plausible U.S. plans to manage the succession to Karzai since all other alternatives look worse.²⁷

Meanwhile, the chief spokesman for U.S. Central Asian policy, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Robert Blake, has testified before Congress that U.S. policy in Central Asia remains (in terms of programs and relationships) primarily intertwined with the war in Afghani-

stan.²⁸ With the start of U.S. troop withdrawal in 2011 and the European governments' search for an exit, the question posed is: Can or will the United States and/or the West devise a coherent Central Asian strategy based on regional realities rather than external needs and perceptions? Can we fashion a policy that is not bound to the war in Afghanistan but to more enduring regional realities and interests? Previous evidence should incline one to be very skeptical about positive answers to these questions.

The situation in Afghanistan after the U.S. leaves will have a major and most likely negative influence upon the development of Central Asian states' relations not only with Washington but also with Moscow, Beijing, Kabul, New Delhi, Islamabad, and Tehran. Everything seen and heard indicates that the geopolitical rivalry for influence in and over Central Asia among the great powers has, if anything, intensified and will certainly not stop simply because Western troops are departing from the area. A recent assessment by Michael Hunt highlights the complexities of potentially increased international involvement once the U.S. and NATO leave the scene:

Like nature, geopolitics abhors a vacuum. The looming cessation of full Western military engagement will precipitate intensified encroachment of Afghanistan's neighbors on the Afghan polity, economy, society, and, in some cases, the insurgency. Iran, Pakistan, India, China, and Russia have the ability to project influence and power into Afghanistan. Their geographical proximity and political, economic, and cultural linkages with Afghanistan ensure depth and durability in their engagement. Their motivations range from ethnic and cultural affinity to complex interrelationships with external strategic issues such as Kashmir, which acts to drive both Pakistani and Indian policy in Afghanistan.²⁹

Indeed, Central Asian perceptions of Afghanistan's trajectory after the U.S. withdrawal are an important, even potentially crucial, element in the future evolution of Central Asia's international relations and a significant contributory factor to their ties with the other great powers and regional players. This essay duly examines those states' reaction to this U.S. withdrawal and the many potential dangers that could lie ahead both

for Central Asian states, either individually or collectively, or for the U.S. in its relationships and policies in Central Asia.

We should understand that Central Asian governments will not, for the most part, broadcast their perspectives and fears in public. Public recitation of their fears contradicts their political culture and would generally be taken as a sign of weakness and apprehension that invites more attacks on their position. However, we can already infer those apprehensions from the records of high-level meetings between their officials and those of other interested states including the U.S., as well as in media commentaries and in occasional official statements. Moreover, rumors coming out of Central Asia, based on expert conversations of the author and other U.S. experts with Central Asians, suggest that they have gotten the message that the U.S. has no clear strategy for Central Asia either now or in the future and that therefore they will have to fend for themselves accordingly.³⁰

To understand those Central Asian perspectives on the region's future security, the context from which they have already begun to arise must be outlined. It is then possible to proceed and examine the recent record of Central Asian relations with Afghanistan and to examine their perceptions concerning the situation there after the U.S. withdraws from Afghanistan. For Central Asian governments, internal and external security are both fundamentally precarious.³¹ They have long seen themselves and continue to see themselves under more or less constant threat from Islamic fundamentalists and terrorists.³² They believe that the domestic opposition groups in their countries are largely composed of such elements and are somehow linked, ideologically if not in more material ways, to the Taliban and like-minded groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), based in Afghanistan, or international groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir.³³ Consequently, the challenges they perceive go beyond the most obvious should the situation in Afghanistan fall apart and confront them with the specter of terrorist infiltration from that country or of Taliban (and other groups') support for terrorists or insurgents within the region.

Central Asian governments generally understand that these are only some of the threats they would face in the context of a U.S. departure and the collapse of the Karzai regime in Afghanistan. At the same time, local governments also exist within the context of what can only be described as an intensifying inter-state rivalry for influence in Central Asia that comprises the U.S., Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan, India, the EU, international financial institutions (IFIs), and, of course, the various insurgent movements in the region, including Afghanistan. In addition to the great power rivalry is the fact that the local states also see each other as rivals and competitors and have utterly failed to develop collective institutions of security that actually work. This is a conscious choice on their part. Despite the anxiety that led the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to establish forces that could monitor internal trends in Central Asia, pursue a collective internet policy, and even intervene in members' territory in the event of internal destabilization, Uzbekistan has flatly refused to collaborate, and the other Central Asian states are also deliberately dragging their feet about implementing these resolutions.³⁴ Indeed, in mid-2012, Uzbekistan suspended its participation in the CSTO, thereby demonstrating the latter's essential irrelevance to the local situation.³⁵

Meanwhile, Uzbekistan continually threatens Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and frustrates efforts at cooperation with them and in the region more generally. In a sense Central Asia is a region where genuine multipolarity exists among the competitors but that does not necessarily make it a more secure region. Certainly none of the fora established to provide multilateral security cooperation, that is, the CSTO and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), have shown any capacity for doing so and regional cooperation is more often observed in the breach rather than in the occurrence of it. Hence the need for an off-shore balancer, another powerful player to the list of contenders for power and influence, whom Central Asian leaders can balance against other contenders who are much closer and dangerous, namely Russia and China. In the absence of viable mechanisms of regional security cooperation and facing numerous internal and external challenges, Central Asia remains in a constant state of insecurity and its leaders are driven by the need to bal-

ance all the competing elements in these complex equations.

The United States plays this role of an offshore balancer even if its calls for democracy are resented. Its aid, trade, investment, and military presence provides Central Asian states with the means to withstand both domestic and foreign political, economic, and even military challenges and to secure assistance in obtaining the rents needed to pay off their domestic challengers or retainers who must be rewarded to stay loyal.

Perceived Potential Threats to Central Asia

Accordingly, U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan could generate multiple threats and problems for Central Asia. This withdrawal entails not just bringing military forces back home, but also a sharp cut in associated military spending, for example on the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) that supplies those forces and greatly benefits Central Asian businesses and governments, and of all forms of U.S. aid, military and non-military alike. While military assistance appears to have been increasing up until 2012, other forms of aid are apparently declining and under expected conditions of future U.S. budgetary stringency we can expect a decline in military assistance too.³⁶ Indeed, funding for Afghanistan is already being cut.³⁷

With the new decisions announced in February 2012 will come even greater and significant funding cuts for both civil and military programs in Afghanistan. Moreover, it is likely that no amount of available funding could meet the needs hitherto identified in Afghanistan.³⁸ Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has in the past called U.S. aid programs a heartbreaking failure and now the Pentagon has halved the request for funding for the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in the FY 2013 budget, an odd decision since the development of those forces is the condition for the U.S. leaving sooner rather than later.³⁹

Similarly the Majority Staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee found that:

Civilian assistance for all countries in Central Asia was \$186.2 million in FY 2010 and is on a downward trajectory. Peace and security

assistance to the region, which includes funds from the national defense 050 account and smaller amounts from the foreign assistance 150 account, increased from \$70 million in FY 2001 to \$257 million in FY 2010, though it too may actually be declining. Overall, US assistance to the countries of Central Asia is relatively small compared to Afghanistan and Pakistan. In FY 2010, for example, total US assistance to Central Asia, including both the function 150 and 050 accounts, amounted to just under three percent (436.24 million) of what was spent in Afghanistan (\$14.78 billion).⁴⁰

Given the U.S.'s domestic political context, it therefore is also likely that any future funding program for Central Asia will come under very close scrutiny and experience major cuts, especially as the Obama Administration has failed to make a case to Congress or the public why Central Asia is important if we are no longer fighting in Afghanistan. For these reasons, the U.S. withdrawal will have not only military security consequences for Central Asia but economic and political repercussions too.

In other words, once the U.S. withdraws its military footprint from Central Asia, if it deems the area to be strategically important or even vital to its interests then Washington will have to compensate for the military withdrawal by means of a vigorous and well-funded economic and political presence there to secure U.S. interests and uphold the regional balance against forces such as Russia, China, and the Taliban who each seek to undermine the status quo. Whereas prospects for such a policy appear to be remote, if a future Administration and Congress do not deem Central Asia to be a critical area for U.S. policy after 2012 then those appropriations will dry up and trigger far-ranging military, economic, and political consequences. Either way Central Asia will suffer.

Given the current economic situation and political gridlock in Washington, along with the failure to make the case to Congress or the public concerning Central Asia, it is quite unlikely that the next Administration, regardless of party, will assign the resources needed to achieve these goals in Central Asia. The consequences of this likely shortfall will not be slow to appear. Indeed,

as this author wrote in 2000:

Without such a permanent presence, and it is highly unlikely that the United States can afford or will choose to make such a presence felt, other than through economic investment, Russia will be able to exclude all other rivals and regain hegemony over the area.⁴¹

Today one could add China to this sentence or even substitute it for Russia but otherwise the validity of the above statement remains intact. Furthermore, if one peruses the scholarly and media literature on the war in Afghanistan and the future of that country it quickly becomes clear that few, if any, writers, either here or abroad, have much confidence in Karzai's or any other political figure's ability to maintain power after 2014. Apart from the U.S. government and military, who continue to assert that we are making progress in Afghanistan, there is virtually unanimous global opinion that whatever happens there after 2014 will not be good. For example, Fedor Lukyanov, the editor of *Russia in Global Affairs*, recently wrote that:

After the inevitable departure of American and NATO troops, the country will probably descend into an "everyone against everyone else" civil war, just as it did in 1992-1995 after the fall of the pro-Soviet Najibullah regime. Only this time around, the internecine conflict could spiral into a much more dangerous scale because each of the warring factions will be backed by competing foreign powers, such as Pakistan, India, Iran, China, the United States, Russia, and Central Asian states.⁴²

Indeed, Lukyanov goes on to argue that a new consolidation of Afghanistan under Taliban auspices would actually appear to be less destructive than the outcome described above. Although he suggests that the Taliban could try to channel the disaffection of non-Pushtun Afghans toward Central Asian states to the north, this is a less serious problem and could be held in check by CSTO if it is strengthened into a military-political alliance under Russian leadership as Moscow has tried to do since 2010.⁴³ Thus Lukyanov—and he is by no means alone in doing so—formally makes the connection between potentially negative outcomes in Afghanistan and the desirability of Russia establishing a kind of

protectorate over Central Asia that diminishes the effective independence of these states.

Moscow also tried to bully Central Asian states like Tajikistan into accepting what amounts to a neo-colonial arrangement by which Russian troops would stay in Tajikistan for thirty years at a Russian military base at minimal cost. Otherwise, Moscow thundered that Tajikistan cannot defend itself against Afghan based threats; in other words, it too has little faith in Afghanistan's security once NATO pulls out.⁴⁴ This Russian dominance, when it becomes clear that Moscow has no answer to Afghanistan other than subordinating the Central Asian states, is certainly an unpalatable outcome for Central Asian governments though it might please many in Moscow.

With all this in mind, we may postulate the following threats to Central Asia subsequent to the U.S. withdrawal:

- Obviously the greatest threat is that the Karzai government will fail to secure the country and that the Taliban, supported by its associated terrorist groups, if not the ISI, will relatively quickly triumph and take over Afghanistan. In that case the way will be open for all manner of international Islamic terrorist groups to operate there with impunity, including those aiming to unseat Central Asian regimes. Moreover, they will presumably enjoy governmental support from the new Afghan state if not the ISI in Pakistan as well as mutual cooperation among themselves to expand their activities into neighboring states and forge alliances, either tactical or strategic, with internal opposition forces in Central Asian states or India. In turn this could lead to an upsurge of terrorism or even insurgency in vulnerable Central Asian countries.

- Alternatively Afghanistan will descend into a civil war that simultaneously presents the Central Asian states with the classic security dilemma of the possibility that they may be forced to intervene against their will in Afghanistan, or support some other major power(s)' intervention there. Or they might see the war spill over into their territories which may also become the site of insurgencies. These regimes are fully aware of both these possible

outcomes and dread them.

- A third possibility is one of protracted civil strife or civil war in Afghanistan once the U.S. departs. If this proves to be the case, rather than a relatively rapid collapse of the Karzai regime, then not only are the neighboring states, including India, vulnerable to a Taliban effort to prevail by expanding the front to include them, using affiliated Central Asian terrorist groups as proxies, but Afghanistan will also come under increased foreign pressure from all the interested parties, including Russia, China, India, Pakistan, NGOs, IFIs, among others—and possibly once again NATO and the U.S.

In this scenario, everyone will be in some way extending the past history of the area by which Afghanistan became an object of major international contestation among the great powers, a rivalry that will inevitably pressure Central Asian states to support one or another side in this civil war and deal with great power requests for bases, logistical support, and so on. Tajikistan's example is a harbinger of that trend. Not only will it be vulnerable to heightened threats of terrorism and drug running (especially to raise revenues for continued fighting), but it will also face this intensified foreign pressure, probably mainly from Russia and China, if not India, Pakistan, and Iran too, without the benefit of the U.S. counterbalance that it now enjoys and which allows it to deflect these other pressures.

- Fourth, a rapid Taliban takeover or a long-term civil war also undermines the Central Asian states' security because it will negate the economic gains they have made and are making from investing in Afghanistan and connecting those investments in trade, electricity, and potentially oil and gas with South Asia or the global market. These investments, described below, go back several years but they are also a cornerstone of U.S. policy that has aimed to tie Central Asia or reorient it more closely to South Asia since 2006.⁴⁵ Thus the Indian scholar P. Stobdan wrote that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's visit to Kazakhstan in October 2008:

Reflected a message that Washington's clubbing of the Central Asian states into the Bureau of

South Asian Affairs in 2005 has been brought to an effective conclusion with strong implications for US interests in Asia. Firstly, the motive underlying this new geopolitical thinking was to drive a point that Central Asia has more natural ties to Afghanistan and South Asia rather than Russia or China. Secondly, Washington hoped, by doing so, to embed Afghanistan in a new security framework or even create the basis for a durable Indo-Pak détente. Thirdly, the United States has identified two big potential powers – India and Kazakhstan – to be the linchpins for mitigating the growing Russian and Chinese convergence in Eurasia. The US officials then reiterated that it was not merely a bureaucratic organization but an action based on a strategic change on the ground.⁴⁶

Accordingly, a Taliban victory in Afghanistan will set back by years the objective to strengthen the Central Asian states individually, enhance regional cooperation, especially with their southern neighbors, and thereby block Russo-Chinese-Iranian efforts to subvert their real sovereignty and independence. In the face of Russian and Chinese determination to subordinate Central Asia to themselves both economically and politically, the loss of this U.S.-sponsored series of options would gravely undermine Central Asia economically as well as politically.

In that case for example, a gas pipeline that the U.S. has supported since it was first suggested in the mid-1990s, which would bring gas from Turkmenistan and Afghanistan through the latter to Pakistan and India (the TAPI line), would not be on the table as a viable project in the event of continuing civil strife in Afghanistan or a Taliban victory. Guaranteeing security for this pipeline that could materially improve the participants' economic, energy, and political standing, as well as bring India and Pakistan together, is already problematic by virtue of the war in Afghanistan and the unrest in Pakistani areas like Balochistan. Were the Taliban to win or if the war were to go on for several more years, the possibilities for developing that pipeline and obtaining the requisite investments and technological assistance become even more problematic.

This pipeline could constitute a major option for Turkmenistan as it continues to seek

diversification of its customers; its loss would be a grievous blow to Ashgabat and severely compromise its hopes for economic-political cooperation with South Asia and for escaping dependence upon Moscow and/or Beijing. This would also undermine a key goal of U.S. foreign policy for the region since 2006. Analogous outcomes could be seen in the field of electricity as well where Central Asian states are selling power to Afghanistan and Pakistan and desire to expand those sales. Under such circumstances, these projects will fade away or be replaced by Russian and/or Chinese-led investment projects. Indeed, Moscow already seeks a presence in the TAPI line as Gazprom has publicly signaled its interest in participating there against Ashgabat's preferences. Similarly, in the event of protracted war, the current U.S. project to invigorate the Silk Road as a commercial bridge between East and West will not materialize. If anyone takes it over it will probably be Beijing who will redirect it to its maximum advantage tying Central Asia into a Chinese economic orbit.

- Fifth, even if the Karzai regime or its successor prevails and establishes a secure, peaceful, and developing Afghanistan against all odds, it is likely that Central Asian states, absent the current massive U.S. presence, will come under intensifying Russo-Chinese if not other pressures from external forces. As already noted, Moscow is seeking more military bases in Central Asia. Its military arm, the CSTO, has obtained a mission allowing it to intervene in the domestic affairs of other members, and the Customs Union that is part of the broader design of a Eurasian Economic Community (EURASEC) is visibly a device to undermine the economic sovereignty of Central Asian states and counter Chinese commercial penetration of the area. For example, a study of the impact of the Customs Union on Kyrgyzstan concluded that:

The main conclusion of this section of the study is the need to modify Kyrgyz trade policy, which has been based on trade flows going from China to the CU countries through Kyrgyzstan. All stages of the supply chain from importation to exportation must be changed. According to the opinions of local experts, changes in the trade flows from China to CIS countries could be expected as a result of the CU formation. Such changes would likely increase trade flows via

Central Asia rather than the Far East region of the Russian Federation, due to lesser costs. At the same time, "shadow" re-export flows could be replaced by products produced in Chinese factories newly located in Kyrgyzstan.⁴⁷

Other Kazakh analyses also highlight Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan's inability to compete with Chinese goods and conclude that the Customs Union will reduce China's ability to penetrate their domestic markets, instead forcing them to buy higher priced Russian goods.⁴⁸

This pressure would grow even if things went well in Afghanistan because of the absence of the U.S. as a counterbalance to these Russian and Chinese pressures. India and Pakistan cannot redress that balance and Iran is not trusted by anyone. So even if Central Asia is now a microcosm of multipolarity, a U.S. withdrawal decidedly upsets that equilibrium. If such actions took place in a context of prolonged civil war in Afghanistan or a Taliban victory, then those external pressures upon Central Asia would be even greater than could be expected when the U.S. withdraws from a pacific and developing Afghanistan.

- Sixth is the danger that Pakistan will attempt to use its connections with Afghan terrorist groups to promote its interests in a quiescent Afghanistan and a supposedly "secure hinterland," an aspiration that is still widespread among many Pakistani top military and intelligence leaders and organizations. Pakistan's designs on Afghanistan not only place it in conflict with India as an extension of their already long-running conflicts, but they also open up the possibility of inciting more conflict in Afghanistan itself and forcing Central Asian states "to lean to one side" regarding South Asia. If they lean to India it is hardly beyond Pakistani capabilities, given Pakistan's contacts with terrorist groups, to incite unrest in Central Asia. Since India has now opted to do more in order to support Afghanistan and has done so at U.S. urging, an Indo-Pakistani clash in Afghanistan, given Pakistan's all weather friendship with China and improving Russo-Pakistani ties, could become another surrogate for great power rivalry here.⁴⁹

- Seventh, if an armed coup seizes part or all of the country to predetermine the succession to Karzai, this would probably end Congress', if not the Administration's, willingness to continue subsidizing that new Afghan government. A coup by Tajik officers would likely trigger a counter-coup by Pushtun officers and possibly vice versa; and a coup that ousts Pushtuns from control would probably lead them to defect to the Taliban, resulting in an essentially bifurcated country along ethnic lines in a condition of civil war.⁵⁰

- Eighth, a negotiated settlement leading to Taliban control of Afghanistan either de facto or de jure—as some, like Anatol Lieven of Kings College London, recommend—will be widely regarded as a U.S. defeat, and will undermine confidence in American policy throughout Central and South Asia. Such an outcome would probably inspire further risk-taking by other enemies of the U.S. or by local powers like Pakistan who have political ambitions in the area.⁵¹ Moreover, it will also lead to a massacre of Afghans who have supported NATO and the U.S. and could reignite a civil war in Afghanistan.

Central Asian Involvement With Afghanistan

Central Asian governments have developed extensive and growing economic ties with Afghanistan since 2001. This was already visible by 2009 as was those states' threat perception of what could happen should the Taliban win. Indeed their perception of the situation in Afghanistan and what they might do to remedy it represent a classic collective action problem. The problem for the U.S. and NATO is how to get these states, each of whom sees that situation as threatening to them, to act collectively, cohesively, and purposefully to stabilize the situation there and in Central Asia when powerful inertial trends work against any form of regional cooperation.

Many observers are skeptical of any significant regional cooperation taking place unless the U.S. puts real muscle behind it and this skepticism is well-founded despite the many multilateral initiatives of the past decade. Indeed, most of these initiatives have either failed or enjoyed at most limited success. Thus it may well be the case

that whatever regional engagement with Afghanistan we have exemplifies the tendency to portray self-interested bilateral actions as embodiments of multilateralism, or to firm U.S. pressure which, in any case, is expected to decline after 2014 if not before.⁵²

Beyond the war itself, the consequences of thirty years of violence on their doorstep has created other, possibly more immediate, if not urgent, problems for Central Asian states. And this set of problems plus their own internal preoccupations which are still more urgent, inhibit collective, not to say purposeful, action regarding the war in Afghanistan.

The drug trade remains out of control in Afghanistan, and, in the view of the Russian and Central Asian governments, NATO is not doing enough to counter it. As a result their countries have become both transshipment routes and also victims of the narcotics plague. This not only creates large public health problems but also magnifies the already enormous problem of official corruption and criminalization of these states. The fact that they still see NATO as not doing what they and Russia want, or at least what they publicly profess they want it to do, in stopping this trade can only inhibit meaningful collective action.⁵³ In fact, Moscow regularly accuses the United States and NATO of failing to do enough to stop the drug trade and has advocated collective action with Central Asian states to fight it.

However, in Central Asia the Tajik government lives off the revenues provided by the drug trade and associated forms of corruption and criminality and is therefore hardly in a position to suppress it.⁵⁴ Indeed, after government officials and their children had been caught with 'big batches' of drugs the Tajik government had to concede that: "Almost every group involved in drug trafficking has people from law enforcement agencies who provide protection for these criminal activities, thus becoming criminals themselves."⁵⁵ Similarly, in Kyrgyzstan, officials admit that over 80 gangs are involved in smuggling drugs through its territory.⁵⁶

Second, other attempts to foster collective cooperation have foundered on the fact that Central Asian states focus primarily not on Afghanistan

but on domestic security. This focus also inhibits collective responses to the war there.

Third, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are failing states since they cannot provide for their own security and must outsource it to foreign governments who place their bases on their territory.⁵⁷ Rather than contribute to foreign security operations, they depend on foreigners providing for their security; contributions that go beyond letting their territory be used for bases or for supply lines like the NDN are quite unlikely. They can only contribute in limited bilateral fashion with Afghanistan or through the medium of international institutions and programs that use their territory as a kind of bridgehead to Afghanistan.

Fourth, there is, in fact, little tradition of genuine regionalism or collective action. Security organizations or assistance programs in Central Asia are initiated, if not imposed, by foreigners, and these organizations and programs—the NDN, CSTO, and SCO—all represent “virtual regionalism,” not the genuine article. This regionalism is entered into to preserve the domestic status quo or to secure material and political benefits from key foreign states as much as out of any other motive.⁵⁸ As a result there is little genuine interest or history of regional cooperation. In fact there are profound rivalries. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan contend for leadership in the region, the former through economic leverage and the latter by throwing its weight around and trying to bully its neighbors. Indeed, Uzbekistan’s proclivities in that direction go back years as we have seen above with reference to its policies toward neighboring Tajikistan.⁵⁹

Therefore we should not expect regional cooperation on a large scale unless we use the NDN or some alternative form of U.S. initiative to initiate it.⁶⁰ In other words, absent sustained U.S. pressure and resources and, all things being equal, whatever Central Asian governments may perceive in Afghanistan, they are unlikely of their own accord to do much to improve the situation. A recent analysis by George Gavrilis underscores that every regional multilateral initiative of the past decade has failed, including those convened to discuss the drug trade which might be considered a multilateral scourge.

The genuine regional accomplishments of the past decade in fact have actually little to do with multilateralism. Thus Uzbekistan provided electricity to Afghanistan well before 2001, and the free trade agreement between Pakistan and Afghanistan came about due to the late Richard Holbrooke’s arm-twisting; since Pakistan continues to aid the Taliban, however, the longevity of this agreement “cannot be taken for granted.”⁶¹ As he points out, none of Afghanistan’s neighbors truly espouse multilateralism. Turkmenistan may have secretly donated food and clothes to the Taliban in return for their moving further into the Afghan interior and away from the border with Turkmenistan in 2007.⁶² Iran has sought tighter cooperation against narcotics with Kabul but received little follow up from either Afghanistan or Pakistan. China’s investments are directed to the huge copper mines in Aynak where U.S. troops provide free security. Gavrilis adds, “those are the better cases.”⁶³ Pakistan and Tajikistan, meanwhile, are both invested in Afghanistan’s failure. For its part, Pakistan’s policies are well known.

And Tajikistan’s ability to collect lucrative international development aid is greatly owed to its proximity to dysfunctional Afghanistan. Tajik officials regularly present international donors with long lists of “win-win” cross-border development plans that, they insist, must be built on their side of the border. This means that Afghanistan accrues no benefits until much later, if at all. So even as Afghanistan’s neighbors eagerly talk up solving common problems such as the drug trade, extremism, and poverty together, they have each found ways to live with and even profit from Afghanistan’s debilitated state.⁶⁴

Indeed, it is already clear what the motives of the Central Asian states were as of 2009 from a report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies on the NDN:

The current fulcrum of the NDN is Uzbekistan, and it is worth pausing for a moment to consider what Uzbek president Karimov seeks to obtain from this new arrangement. Uzbekistan’s foreign alignments have tended toward unhappy endings in recent years—cooperation with the United States foundered after the “color revolutions” in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan and the violence in Andijon; an alliance with Russia appeared to sour soon after it cli-

maxed in a November 2007 mutual defense treaty. If past practice is a guide, Karimov hopes to gain from his renewed cooperation with the United States some international legitimacy for his much-pilloried regime, a counterweight to Russia and its dreams of a privileged zone of influence on post-Soviet soil, and recognition of his nation's regional heft, which Kazakhstan, with its oil-fueled prosperity and adroit multi-vector diplomacy, has significantly obscured in recent years. Through all his maneuvering, Karimov has made it abundantly clear that he is no one's stooge and that he will make no concession that could, in his eyes, threaten the system he has spent nearly two decades building. None of this precludes cooperation on the NDN, but all of it places limits on an accompanying U.S.-Uzbek rapprochement. Clearly enunciated expectations, both in public statements and private talks, will help to prevent misunderstandings, but they will not be a panacea in a relationship that is likely to require constant care and frequent adjustment.⁶⁵

Tajikistan clearly wants strong U.S. aid support for its water and hydroelectric policies, as well as an assurance of Washington's commitment to destroy the Taliban or at least prevent the war from spreading.⁶⁶ Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, being more distant from the fighting, have articulated less clearly what they want from the U.S. but they clearly want it to succeed. Yet their contributions remain minor if not negligible. The gap between those for whom this war is urgent and those much further away is also visible in their contributions to the cause.

At the same time there are several projects, mainly from Tajikistan to Afghanistan, to address the region's crippling problems of deficiencies in infrastructure, transport of all kinds, and electricity.⁶⁷ Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov has proposed a 6+3 formula for a negotiated settlement of Afghanistan by means of an international conference involving all the great powers, the combatants, and neighbors like Uzbekistan but it is unclear whether this will succeed in becoming a reality.⁶⁸ For example, a conference concerning Afghanistan's neighbors in 2008 outlined the following projects:

1. A 670-meter truck bridge over the Panj River completed in 2007 by Indian engineers, which linked Afghanistan and Tajikistan for the first

time. The bridge cost \$38 million and was financed by the United States and Norway. Some smaller bridges also have been constructed at crossings in the upper part of the river.

2. A \$500 million project to build a 1,300-megawatt, high-transmission power line from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan through Afghanistan across the Khyber Pass to Peshawar, Pakistan, by 2013. It will be funded by a consortium of the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, and the Islamic Development Bank.

3. A rail transit corridor, which Russia has offered to facilitate, linking Europe to Afghanistan by building a long-planned railway that connects Termez, Uzbekistan, with Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan, via a bridge over the Amu Darya River. China has also proposed building its own railroad from Afghanistan to Xinjiang via Central Asia (route undetermined) to transport copper ore from Afghan mines that it is developing.

4. Plans for a \$2 billion Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project were revived in April 2008 when India agreed to join the consortium and share the gas equally with Pakistan. The thousand-mile pipeline would supply 90 million cubic meters of natural gas to South Asia daily from the gas fields in Turkmenistan.⁶⁹

However, a subsequent finding in late 2009 noted that most of the projects conceived for Afghanistan, particularly in transport and energy, remain incomplete or on the drawing board only—the TAPI pipeline is one example.⁷⁰ Furthermore, an examination of these projects reveals that while they may be situated in Central Asia, the ideas for them and their financing originate elsewhere.

Subsequent Projects and Trends 2010–12

More recent reports of economic and energy cooperation between Central Asian states and Afghanistan show an emphasis on projects involving transportation and infrastructure projects for the provision of electric power from Central Asia to Afghanistan. In many ways these projects typify the realities surrounding the issue of Central Asian cooperation with Afghanistan. While there are several instances of bilateral projects, par-

ticularly involving Tajik electric power being shipped to Afghanistan and even Pakistan, or other countries' projects with Afghanistan, large-scale cooperation has yet to be attained. And even though Central Asia raised the possibility of exchanging the foreign debts of local countries for assistance to Afghanistan, nothing came of that initiative.⁷¹

Further, these projects reflect not only the understanding of all parties that infrastructural projects must precede any major expansion of investment and trade, but also are in some degree a result of U.S. support for efforts to help Central Asian governments reorient their trade away from an exclusively or preponderantly Russian direction to South and even East Asia. This initiative goes back to the 2006 administrative reshuffling at the State Department. At the same time Russia has reacted by increasing its efforts to insert itself into regional energy deals with Afghanistan. Just as Gazprom now supports the projected TAPI line and wants to be included in it, Moscow also seeks to participate in Tajik programs to export power to South Asia (CASA-1000).

Looking at individual countries, we can see the lack of region-wide actions and, instead, the predominance of projects originating in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan that border Afghanistan. Although Kazakhstan is supplying a significant amount of the projects being distributed along the NDN and proclaims its readiness to support Afghanistan, it has not significantly participated in any of the projects described below.⁷²

Uzbekistan's activities are even more indicative of the problems that impede regional cooperation since it is a major obstacle to such cooperation. Although it was sending power to Afghanistan by 2007 if not earlier, in late 2009 Uzbekistan launched its own electric power line to Afghanistan bypassing Tajikistan, no doubt to prevent it from gaining access to the line. This line also allowed it to withdraw from the unified energy system of Central Asia. As a result, by early 2010 Uzbekistan was sending 2.3 Kilowatt hours daily to Mazar-i-Sharif and Kabul.⁷³ Similarly, Uzbek firms have built 11 bridges from Mazar-i-Sharif to Kabul. More recently, Uzbek national railway company has opened a railroad line from Hei-

raton (Hayaratan) on its side of the border to Mazar-i-Sharif from which it hopes to earn about \$32 million annually. This railroad was supported by the U.S. and the Asian Development Bank and there are discussions about extending it to Herat in Western Afghanistan, making it part of what one analyst has called "Afghanistan's railroad frenzy," as a number of railroads connecting Afghanistan with Central Asia, Iran, and China are now being built.⁷⁴

Dushanbe's contributions appear to be concentrated in the power generating sector. Already in 2008 Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan signed accords with both Pakistan and Afghanistan to begin construction on a 1,300 megawatt power importing project from the Central Asian states to the South Asian ones. The Asian Development Bank, World Bank, and Islamic Development Bank would provide the financing for the project, with 1,000 megawatts going to Pakistan and 300 to Afghanistan.⁷⁵ By 2010, although the project still existed only on paper, Russia signaled its intention to join the project, clearly to prevent Tajikistan from reorienting its economic and energy programs away from Moscow and also in order to reassert its presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁷⁶ The project opened in late 2011 even as severe power rationing gripped Tajikistan, indicating the priority attached to it and the fact that the Tajik government believes its consumers cannot afford to pay for the electricity while Afghans can.⁷⁷

Evidently a major reason for the delay, and perhaps for the dire situation in Tajikistan, is Uzbekistan's unrelenting efforts to block true regional cooperation with Afghanistan and to suppress Tajikistan's power-generating and hydropower activities. Apparently,

Uzbek energy officials presented Afghan authorities a choice – if Tajik electric power capacities were to begin being delivered by the new LEP (the Tajik electric power transmission line), Uzbekistan would refuse to export its electricity to Afghanistan during the current winter period. For this reason, Afghan officials demanded guarantees that Tajik electric power would be delivered to them the year round. Officially Dushanbe would not agree to this.⁷⁸

Since year-round exports mean that Tajiks cannot access their already relatively scarce electricity,

Uzbekistan once again successfully pursued beggar-thy-neighbor policies that in this case caused hardship to Tajiks which would have otherwise been passed on to Afghans who would have been deprived of electric power. While electric power is probably the main vehicle for Tajikistan to escape from poverty (of course getting a government devoted to the national welfare rather than drug running and corruption would be helpful too) these kinds of cases show how its promise is being held back.⁷⁹ Under the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that Afghan officials complain that despite promises and projects, donor assistance is no more than 15–20 percent effective in solving problems (an observation that should cause us to look askance at the promises made in Istanbul, Tokyo, etc.). In spite of the projects and communiqués, for example from the Russian-led summit with Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan in September 2011, or invitations to Central Asian states to join the Pakistan-Afghanistan transit trade agreement (APTTA), regional cooperation to help Afghanistan still remains for the most part a dream not a reality.⁸⁰

For these reasons we must be wary about expecting much in the way of concerted action and assistance from Central Asia beyond what is currently the case. Whereas leaders like former Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev might state, even with full conviction, that “all the main challenges and security threats to Central Asia” come from Afghanistan, adding “[t]herefore, Kyrgyzstan is interested in providing security and stability in this country, and it will continue to offer its endeavor for rebuilding Afghanistan – along with the international community,”⁸¹ they, in fact, remain limited in what they can afford to do, in what they think they need to do first, and in their unwillingness to cooperate meaningfully with each other. Their threat perceptions remain inwardly focused rather than on Afghanistan, as indicated by Bakiyev’s own behavior in centralizing power.

The real threats of Islamist or terrorist takeovers are largely confined to a scenario of a succession crisis which is possible in each of these states, since nowhere is the succession formula a matter of legitimacy or authoritative law. Mark Katz has noted that in all those states a prolonged succession struggle could lead to Islamist takeovers or

attempted coups, either on their own or in alliance with a disaffected member of the elite who needs help to validate his claim to power. If such a coup looks like it might succeed, elite support might quickly gravitate to it.⁸² Moreover, Uzbekistan continues to be a major obstacle to any progress in regional cooperation. Therefore, any breakthrough must overcome the problem posed by Uzbek unilateralism.

Central Asian Perceptions

Undoubtedly the Central Asian states, individually as well as collectively—that is, within their multilateral security structures like the CSTO and SCO—regard the U.S. withdrawal with unfeigned alarm.

In Kazakhstan, for example, we already see hints of the possibility that the Kazakh government may offer the Aktau air base to the U.S. even as Kyrgyzstan, which is under strong Russian and Chinese pressure to remove the U.S. from Manas, announces the U.S. withdrawal from that base in 2014.⁸³ Additionally, since Aktau is also a seaport on the Caspian it could become a “multi-nodal” base as well as something that would correspond to Kazakh desires to make it into a transcontinental logistics hub.⁸⁴ Also in 2011, Kazakhstan became fully sensitized to the threat of terror and political upheaval. Once it announced it would send a largely symbolic contingent of troops to Afghanistan, terrorist incidents broke out in the west of the country in the spring of 2011, and, at the end of the year, there was a big upsurge in labor militancy in Zhanaozen.

Although nobody has proved a conclusive link to terrorists and the announcement of support for NATO in Afghanistan, support was dramatically cut back after the terrorist incidents of the spring and summer. Regime officials are now sensitized to those threats that they had earlier denied or downplayed.⁸⁵ Now both experts and officials publicly express their concern that terrorism might grow once the U.S. and NATO withdraw from Afghanistan, a concern that has led to new repressive legislation against Islamic observance there.⁸⁶ Therefore it is not surprising that Kazakhstan now says it pays great attention to settling the Afghan problem, especially as a new “northern route” for drug trafficking has emerged

by which Afghan heroin goes to Russia and Europe through Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan.⁸⁷ Similarly, Russian experts like Andrei Grozin also express public anxiety about the future of Kazakhstan's stability given both the labor strife in Zhanaozen and the terrorist activity of 2011.⁸⁸

Even though Kyrgyzstan wants the U.S. out of Manas by 2014 and has reiterated that desire several times, its fears concerning the future after the U.S. departure as well as the latter's withdrawal from Afghanistan are no different. Indeed, like Kazakhstan it also wants to take advantage of the withdrawal for its economic benefit. In its case, Kyrgyzstan wants \$2 billion of its huge foreign debt written off in return for its aid to Afghanistan.⁸⁹ But unlike Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states, its government seeks to deny that Al-Qaida is training Kyrgyz citizens in Afghanistan, while Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, not to mention Russia and the CSTO, as well as lower-ranking and local officials, repeatedly charge that Al-Qaida is doing just that.⁹⁰ However, upon leaving office in 2011, President Roza Otunbayeva publicly warned about the possibility of an economic collapse in Afghanistan once foreign forces withdrew.⁹¹

Uzbekistan has voiced similar fears but like the other states it too sees immense potential economic gains from what has become a mutually beneficial partnership with the United States due to the NDN and the war in Afghanistan. Not only is it concerned for its security if and when NATO and U.S. forces leave Afghanistan, but it also worries that Moscow will block its efforts to pursue both an independent and quasi-hegemonic role in Central Asia and that it will be deprived of the substantial economic benefits accrued by virtue of its participation in the NDN. Indeed, Uzbekistan allegedly offered the U.S. use of the Termez air base, not only to facilitate the NDN and the revenue and goodwill it thereby garners, but also to signal its unhappiness with Moscow.⁹² There can be no doubt that Tashkent sees the NDN as a lifeline to help its struggling economy, but, in addition, Uzbek support for Washington, which has steadily grown since 2008, also helps to deflect the United States from making severe criticisms of its truly awful human rights record.⁹³ Adding to the strangeness of Uzbekistan's policies

that detract from cooperation in the face of allegedly heightened threats is the fact that many reports have surfaced in the last two years claiming that the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, a known terrorist group supported by the Taliban and Al-Qaida, is regrouping in Afghanistan.⁹⁴

Nonetheless, Uzbekistan clearly fears what will happen when the U.S. leaves the vicinity. In January 2012, President Karimov clearly stated that this withdrawal would bring about "an increased threat of the expansion of terrorist and extremist activities." Moreover, that this would also lead to "increased tension and confrontation in this vast region as well as to the creation of a permanent source of instability here."⁹⁵ Karimov's remarks also drew attention to the ensuing need to thwart Islamism and reform Uzbekistan's army, suggesting he fears both an Islamist offensive and a Russian political drive to subordinate him. He thus seeks to tie Washington to his country to resist both dangers. Karimov here also linked socio-economic threats to stability with new forms of warfare that in his opinion were increasing the threats to Central Asia as a whole.⁹⁶

Yet, the Uzbek government refuses to join any of the multilateral cooperation programs that have been proposed, even as it proposed a 6+3 initiative of neighboring countries and great powers to help stabilize Afghanistan which typically omitted the latter from membership.⁹⁷

Tajikistan, Afghanistan's nearest Central Asian neighbor, shares the same fears of the consequences of the U.S. withdrawal—and with good reason. Given the many reports of terrorist infiltration into Central Asia it knows itself to be right in the path of such a threat.⁹⁸ Accordingly, Tajikistan has sought a NATO commitment to defend it, obtained U.S. funding for the training of its border guards, and at the same time calls on the CIS as a whole to be "more active" on Afghanistan, agreeing also with Russia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan on the need to seek stronger security services for Afghanistan, including the establishment of an anti-drug center even as its leadership is quite enmeshed in that trade.⁹⁹

Not surprisingly, Tajik officials also regularly warn about what might happen when NATO leaves Afghanistan. One official has already

claimed that Afghan armed groups have seized over 35,000 hectares of Tajik land in the south.¹⁰⁰ Some foreign observers also believe that the recent upsurge of attacks in northern Afghanistan caused more instability in Tajikistan even as Pakistan's attacks on militants there forced some to return home. They see these groups potentially joining with homegrown insurgents and Islamists (as well as probable rivals for the government's trade in drugs and other monopolies) and as having the potential to foment a large-scale insurgency in Tajikistan.¹⁰¹

In 2009–10 the Tajik government made overtures to the U.S. for a base in Tajikistan. Dushanbe's motives were the same as other Central Asian states: namely, security against cross-border threats by terrorists and the accruing of economic-financial benefits. Tajik government officials believe that U.S. training assistance allowed their forces to repulse such an incursion or invasion in 2009 and would therefore be desirable in the future, especially as Tajikistan expects more such actions in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. Beyond what both pundits and officials believe, it would be economically in Tajikistan's interest to have such a base.¹⁰² U.S. diplomats reported that Tajikistan sought a base because the latter viewed Uzbekistan, its major rival, as keeping all NDN-related business to itself. Tajikistan wanted more traffic through its country, more infrastructure to support that traffic, and the U.S. to purchase Tajik goods for its forces in Afghanistan. Thus, the establishment of a base, in its eyes, would serve both as a bulwark against Afghan instability and as a cash cow.¹⁰³

However, Tajikistan also sees U.S. support as a counter against excessive Russian power and presence at its military base, and it is therefore happily playing the Central Asian game of a multi-vector, or what others might call an omnibalancing, policy. Thus, it claims not only to be at risk, but apparently would even welcome a U.S. base after 2014 including aid. This posture would explain recent statements concerning expectations that the U.S. will pledge more aid to Tajikistan after 2014, as well as Congressional statements to the effect that the U.S. sees Tajikistan as a replacement for Kyrgyzstan's base at Manas once it closes in 2014.¹⁰⁴ Of course, the major obstacle here is Russia's stout resistance to any

further U.S. bases in Central Asia and its power to harm Tajikistan if it allowed one.¹⁰⁵ Consequently, any potential base has never gotten past the discussion stage.

Every invocation to the West about the dire threat that could issue from Afghanistan is balanced with equally dire warnings about Islamists in Tajikistan, with whom the government has been fighting for several years, and a host of other insurgents real and/or imagined.¹⁰⁶ Yet, at the same time, they do not want to reveal their weakness by letting the assumption that the country is in danger of falling apart (which many observers believe to be the case) go unchallenged. Thus, we also find Tajik pundits and officials denying that the country cannot defend itself against the linked terrorist and criminal incursions already recorded.¹⁰⁷

At the collective level, most notably in the CSTO, Russian leaders constantly invoke the potential threat from Afghanistan, although, presumably, other members share that assessment. Throughout 2011–12, CSTO leaders have continually stated their view of the likely threat from Afghanistan once NATO and the U.S. withdraws and that combating it is their highest priority.¹⁰⁸ Yet here again rivalries and mutual distrust corrode any effort at collective action to do anything meaningful about the developing Afghan situation.

Despite the announcement of the U.S. withdrawal by 2014, at the 2011 CSTO summit in Astana not one Central Asian state insisted on the speedy formation of its rapid-reaction collective forces (KSOR) force by the end of the year. Clearly they all realize, especially Uzbekistan who has refused to participate in or allow it to intervene in domestic crises, that its main purpose is to ensure Russian hegemony; so while they all approved the formation of KSOR, they have retarded its practical application and development. Russian sources argue that they learned from the Kyrgyz crises of 2010, where the CSTO was conspicuously absent and unable to do anything (and Uzbekistan would have blocked it if it had tried), that they will have to defend themselves. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, therefore, have placed their forces largely in border areas. Furthermore, the mutual distrust among Central Asian states, notably Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, renders all hopes of genuine co-

operation infeasible. This was the situation before Uzbekistan suspended its membership in the CSTO. Accordingly, the CSTO is both impotent and unready insofar as Afghanistan is concerned.¹⁰⁹

Thus, a review of these countries' individual and collective postures reveals certain commonalities. They all profess greater danger from a post-American situation in Afghanistan but are either unable and/or unwilling to do anything much about it with Afghanistan or to collaborate among themselves to avert those dangers. These dangers are not just external Afghan-based terrorist groups or support for homegrown groups that almost certainly exist (though nobody knows to what degree they do or what level of strength they have).

What they most seem to want is continuing large infusions of foreign aid, trade, and investment, both to strengthen themselves domestically and in order to balance against Russia and China. Yet they want the American presence to be neither intrusive nor obtrusive even though "distant water cannot quench nearby fire." Thus it is not surprising that some commentators believe that rhetoric aside, Central Asian governments actually underestimate the real threat posed by the situation in Afghanistan, especially once NATO and the U.S. leave.¹¹⁰ Naturally, this posture generates problems for the U.S. as it attempts to leave behind a secure Afghanistan and Central Asia under the framework of a strategic policy concept.

Lessons for U.S. Policy

As of fall 2012, Washington has been facing difficult dilemmas in Central Asia and Afghanistan. President Karzai has demanded that the U.S. wind up its mission by the end of 2013 and confine itself to urban areas, foregoing rural patrols and combat operations that have been the key to any successes in the last several years. These episodes also contribute to the decline in relations between Washington and Kabul at a time when ties with Pakistan have also seriously deteriorated.¹¹¹ Even as the U.S. seeks to withdraw from Afghanistan, it finds it will need Central Asian and Russian assistance in dismantling its massive operational infrastructure in Afghanistan, and indeed, agreed with Russia over acquiring an air

base at Ulyanovsk for that purpose.¹¹²

However, as we have seen, the obstacles to achieving a concerted Central Asian response to Afghanistan will continue to obstruct any U.S. policy initiatives there that go beyond bilateral relations with individual governments. Moreover, Russia will block anything it sees as a U.S. initiative to stay in Afghanistan after 2014, although Washington clearly would like to be invited to stay in the region after the formal withdrawal. Thus Russia has even blocked Central Asian support for a U.S. counter-narcotics program (CACI) that would bring together Central Asian governments in concerted action to combat narcotics. Worse still, the U.S. officials professed their genuine surprise at this Russian action, hardly a sign that we thought seriously about Moscow's interests and policies here.¹¹³

This CACI program was to bypass the CSTO, which is of dubious value here given its corruption and the sources of weakness described above, and create counter-narcotics centers and task forces in all five Central Asian countries. Thus it contradicts Moscow's long-standing demand that NATO recognize the CSTO as an active partner in counter-narcotics—which it will not do because that would undermine the sovereignty of Central Asian states and gain nothing from a corruption standpoint. The fact that Russian officials are equally complicit in this trade is, of course, never admitted.¹¹⁴ Therefore, and hardly surprisingly, Russian officials complained that:

Why create something new if [CSTO] structures are already in force in these countries? Why does [the United States] insist on bilateral dialogues with the Central Asian republics, demonstratively ignoring Russia's interests in the region?" Another unnamed Russian official, also quoted by *Kommersant*, called the U.S. plan "a new tool of infiltration into Central Asia [and] a method of strengthening the military-political influence of the United States in the region."¹¹⁵

Russia's position should come as no surprise. Moreover, "With Vladimir Putin's probable return to the Russian presidency in a few months, we are likely to see more such 'old thinking' in Moscow in the coming years."¹¹⁶ This prophecy, as we all know, has already come true with Putin's return in May. On the one hand, Moscow insists that the

ISAF forces and the U.S. stabilize Afghanistan in accordance with their UN mandate and should not otherwise leave. On the other hand, it opposes any discussion with Afghanistan about U.S. bases after 2014 because that supposedly usurps the Security Council's mandate even though such bases might plainly be necessary.

At the same time, Russia professes not to understand why the U.S. is discussing bases in Central Asia with local governments, and that this does not help stabilize security in Central Asia. However, it will not collaborate with any of these governments to overcome the drug problem lest the U.S. entrench itself in Central Asia. All this amounts to a nonproductive and contradictory policy that merely accuses the U.S. of failing to overcome the expected chaos in Afghanistan after 2014. This hardly offers the basis for a real policy that answers real regional security needs.¹¹⁷

Nonetheless U.S. officials, in defiance of all logic and reality which ambassadors and embassies know well, continue to assert that Washington wants to cooperate with Moscow in Central Asia and looks to boost cooperation with Moscow there.¹¹⁸ Since neither Moscow nor Beijing believes this and both regularly claim that the U.S. and NATO military presence in Central Asia threatens regional stability and their security, continuing to make such professions in public, and presumably in private, is either bizarre or disingenuous. The only surprise is why U.S. officials continue to be surprised by Moscow's long-standing position.¹¹⁹

U.S. officials' surprise that Russia would block initiatives that materially improve its huge drug problem in order to sustain an imperial and exclusionary presence suggests that we do not understand that for Moscow and Beijing Central Asia is not a win-win solution. They want the United States out of there as soon as possible, and if Washington-based officials believe their public rhetoric about there being no great game and that our policies aim at a win-win effort in Central Asia, then they have failed to grasp what is at stake and what is possible in Central Asia. In the U.S. surprise one can see some of the fundamental sources of the problems Washington now faces in Central Asia.

While until 2010 there was no discernible U.S. strategy for Central Asia, Administration officials claim that this has changed and that there is a clear policy.¹²⁰ On December 15, 2009, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State George Krol testified to the Senate that:

Mr. Chairman, in conclusion, this Administration does not consider Central Asia a forgotten backwater, peripheral to U.S. interests. The region is at the fulcrum of key U.S. security, economic and political interests. It demands attention and respect and our most diligent efforts. The Obama Administration is committed to that very approach.¹²¹

As foreign commentators indeed recognized at the time, such language concerning Central Asia is unprecedented in U.S. diplomacy.¹²² However, it is clear that the U.S. decided to act because officials now see "an alarming fragility" in Central Asia and because they know that if they do not act Russia and China will replace the U.S. as a major foreign presence there. Since Russian policy in particular is based on the exclusion of U.S. influence from Central Asia, policymakers clearly moved to ensconce the U.S. presence on the basis of bilateral accords with Central Asian governments.

Thus the Special Envoy of the United States Secretary of State for Eurasian Energy, Richard Morningstar, stated that Central Asian gas supplies to China subtract from gas destined for Europe and create problems for European gas supply which concerns the United States.¹²³ Moreover, the comprehensive scope of China's investments in Central Asia are also a harbinger of its intention to be a major player there at both Moscow's and Washington's expense, even if the Chinese media seeks to downplay the negative impact of this on Russia.¹²⁴ Given Russo-Chinese ambitions to oust the U.S. from Central Asia and the region's fragility during the war in Afghanistan, Washington evidently felt impelled to strike back with an equally comprehensive strategy and policy. For example, it has initiated, for the first time, a regular high-level foreign policy dialogue at the ministerial level with each of the Central Asian states.¹²⁵

As a result, observers now see the emergence of a more multi-branch and ramified U.S. strategy in Central Asia. Richard Weitz at the Hudson Institute argues that the strategy rests on three pillars: the NDN, the New Silk road project (which is discussed in detail below), and the Central Asia Counter-narcotics Initiative that Russia blocked (see above).¹²⁶ However, other observers, not least in Moscow and Beijing, see a concerted effort, as advertised by the Pentagon and U.S. government, to build a ring of military installations and facilities across Central Asia.¹²⁷ Hence Moscow and Beijing's unremitting campaign to oust U.S. bases and influence from Central Asia and to squelch key policies like the Counter-narcotics Initiative. Therefore, issues surrounding U.S. bases and other related security issues are now combined in the rivalry among the great powers in Central Asia.

In 2009, Russia sought to exploit Bishkek's perceived dependence upon it as tensions between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan rose by opening a base at Osh in Southern Kyrgyzstan. This angered Uzbekistan which promptly gravitated, as is its wont, back to the U.S. because of its mounting suspicion of Russian aims. However, Russia also failed to satisfy the Kyrgyz government that wanted the base at Batken, not Osh, where it would be closer to Uzbekistan. Instead the U.S. offered to build a training center at Batken. Bishkek-based political analyst Mars Sariyev suspects that once the facility is built, U.S. instructors will be drafted in to teach Kyrgyz regular and/or special forces, a move which clearly looks like a defeat for Moscow.¹²⁸ The center at Batken is not the only sign of a new U.S. strategy to check Russian influence in Central Asia. President Islam Karimov recently expressed "firm allegiance on behalf of Uzbekistan" to further develop ties with Washington to bring about lasting peace and stability in Afghanistan. For its part, the U.S. also wants to improve the bilateral relationship.¹²⁹

President Karimov's action plan of January 2010 to put bilateral ties on a more productive and serious footing, as well as the 2010 tour of Central Asia by U.S. Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, demonstrate the U.S.-Uzbekistan rapprochement. The aforementioned action plan states that Uzbekistan will "insist on high-level participation in the political consultations from the American side

– experts from the State Department, National Security Council, and other US government agencies," though as of writing no specific plans have yet been announced.¹³⁰ Holbrooke stressed that he regarded the real security threat in Central Asia as coming from Al-Qaida rather than the Taliban and indicated his desire to strengthen cooperation with Uzbekistan over security.¹³¹ Although Holbrooke did not obtain a base in Uzbekistan, he may not have sought one; discussions with the Kyrgyz government over Batken and renewing the lease at Manas may have sufficed for U.S. purposes. Furthermore, he also expressed U.S. desires to improve relations with Tajikistan because of its centrality to conflict resolution in Afghanistan, and he discussed both water and energy issues with the Tajik government. This was the first public evidence of U.S. interest in the contentious water issues responsible for Uzbekistan's rift with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Meanwhile, Kazakhstan also indicated a desire to upgrade ties with the U.S. and has already started to engage in the foreign minister dialogues alluded to above.¹³²

Even though policymakers now talk of sustaining a long-term engagement with the region, both the requirements of sound policymaking and of Central Asia need more than talk.¹³³ Neither is it clear that the U.S. fully understands what is at stake in Central Asia or the nature of its own involvement there, nor the need for coherent policy support in material terms for its own policy initiatives there. Given the impending U.S. military withdrawal it is not clear that Washington, confronted by wrenching fiscal stresses, either has the vision or the means to develop or implement a coherent post-Afghanistan Central Asian strategy. A vacuum could well develop there with regard to the U.S. position that will inevitably be filled by other actors. Certainly there is no clear sign yet of what will replace the U.S. military presence after 2014. Given the widespread expectation of post-2014 chaos in Afghanistan, every regional actor is hedging its bets for the future and preparing for the worst, a trend that most likely means intensified competition among the great, regional, and local powers for influence in Central Asia.

Indeed, arguably the U.S. presence is the most important stabilizing factor in the region and not only against the threats posed by the Taliban, Al-

Qaida, and other affiliated terrorist groups. Of its own accord the U.S. presence balances Russia and China's efforts at either economic or military domination by virtue of the large infusion into the region of U.S. logistic support, through the NDN, that materially aids employment, investment, and infrastructural development, along with military training for local governments. Likewise the U.S. and ISAF presence obviously protects the entire region against the incursion of the Taliban and affiliated criminal, drug-running, and insurgent terrorist groups. Third, as external observers, for example China, understand, the U.S. presence provides a huge enlargement of political, economic, and military space for actors like India, which still lags behind in Central Asia as a competitor for influence, to aspire to a role equal to that of China or Russia in the future. Absent that U.S. role it is likely that in spite of Russian support, China and Pakistan would succeed in checking any Indian ability to project meaningful economic or military power into the region or obtain genuine influence or contracts for energy supplies. Certainly China has far outpaced India to date throughout the region despite New Delhi's undeniable rising wealth and power.¹³⁴

Only quite recently have U.S. policymakers or former policymakers like Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Evan Feigenbaum been willing to concede that many U.S. objectives have failed to materialize.¹³⁵ This realization also finds expression in high-level U.S. think tank reports (in which Feigenbaum was involved) that represent a consensus view among experts. For instance, the recent Project 2049 study flatly expressed the opinion that the U.S. is failing to realize its regional objectives in Central Asia.¹³⁶ Thus, the thinking of both policymakers and experts on Central Asia has often been characterized by dashed hopes and defective analysis.

Meanwhile, the chief spokesman for U.S. Central Asian policy, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Robert Blake, testified before Congress that U.S. policy in Central Asia is (in terms of programs and relationships) primarily bound up with the war in Afghanistan.¹³⁷ Yet since U.S. troops began leaving in 2011 and are supposed to be out of Afghanistan by 2014, except for a small training and advisory mission, and given the fact that European governments

have essentially long been looking for the exit, the following question poses itself: Can or will the United States and/or the West devise a coherent Central Asian strategy based on regional realities rather than external needs and perceptions? Previous evidence should incline us in all frankness to be very skeptical about this happening.

The current fate of the Silk Road initiative proclaimed by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2011 and Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Robert Blake also epitomizes the problems facing the United States. For several years, many well-informed observers of Central Asia have been advocating a policy involving infrastructure, trade, and transport that would, in a coherent and coordinated fashion, reintegrate Afghanistan with its Central (and South) Asian neighbors. U.S. analysts S. Frederick Starr, Andrew Kuchins, Reuel Hanks, and Gregory Gleason, including this author among others, and Uzbek scholars like Vladimir Paramonov and Alexei Stokov, have all argued for a serious "Silk Road" policy, as they have called it, that would restore this long-lost regional integration. This would have the aims of stabilizing Afghanistan both economically and geopolitically, strengthening Central Asia against great power threats to its real independence and tying it more to South Asia rather than to Russia or China or Iran, and providing an economic basis for Afghanistan to recover from and even possibly terminate the war with a coherent and established economic base going forward.¹³⁸ Some of the key projects involve completing the Afghan Ring Road, establishing durable rail links between Afghanistan and all its neighbors, completing the TAPI pipeline, and creating a regional electricity market by establishing transmission lines between Central and South Asia.¹³⁹

Undoubtedly completion of these projects would represent a giant step forward for the entire region as well as a measurable advance in regional economic integration and development, and not least, in the realization of a grand vision of U.S. strategy going back to about 2006. Although some of these projects are moving forward, they are not doing so in an integrated fashion and the whole idea of the New Silk Road proclaimed by Clinton and Blake is foundering. In the mining sector, much could be done if Afghanistan were

secure and stable. But in fact it is neither secure nor stable and for mining to generate widespread economic development those conditions are a requirement. Otherwise recent analysis shows that the entire sector now comprises less than one percent of Afghan GDP.¹⁴⁰

As for the actual Silk Road, it too presupposes conditions not yet in existence such as peace and stability. Furthermore, a 2011 study showed that many projects are still lacking a cost-benefit analysis or plan, with many requiring major improvements in governance, legal reforms, reduced corruption, and levels of security and stability that do not exist and are unlikely to exist soon. In many cases, it is not clear whether outside investors, workers, and countries do not in fact benefit more than the Afghans. The figures touted for job creation in these projects are highly dubious and will not go far enough to create enough jobs for Afghanistan to meet population growth. Nor are the claims made for these projects regarding growth in per capita income sustained by solid analysis. Lastly these projects' rates of return would only be viable under optimal market-based conditions and the claims made for them fail to reckon with corruption, violence, lack of state capacity, and so on.¹⁴¹ So while the projects that will comprise the Silk Road exist, the talk of such a "Road" amounts to rhetoric and not actual policy.

To be sure, some of the obstacles are external. Russia's successful blockade of the U.S. Counter-narcotics Initiative indicates that it can and will block regional cooperation that it deems antagonistic to its interests and that it has the power to induce if not compel other states to follow it. Moscow is also busily consolidating its own vision of a Eurasian customs union to which both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have given their assent. Whatever effect it has on Kazakhstan, it certainly aims to prevent Bishkek and other states from joining an American-led scheme and/or attempts to minimize Chinese commercial penetration of Central Asia. China, too, can be counted on to use its growing presence in Central Asian economies—it is, for example, at the center of these states' efforts to raise money on international markets—to block this scheme that it sees as benefiting Washington and not it.¹⁴²

Beyond this the obstacles are both local ones in Central Asia and in Washington. We have already seen that the obstacles to regional cooperation and integration in Central Asia from within are enormous and that projects of benefit to both these states and Afghanistan have often been the victims of such rivalries and obstructions. For the Silk Road policy to succeed the United States would not only have to provide enormous amounts of aid and, even more, private sector investment, but also use its formidable convening powers to bring these states together. It is clear that otherwise they will not do so of their own accord. The many opportunities for predatory and corrupt economic behavior at customs and border installations preclude a genuine free-trade zone, as do the interests of those who benefit from the status quo and who are in power to preserve such.¹⁴³ As a result, for example, it currently takes 71 days to export an item from Uzbekistan and 92 days to import one.¹⁴⁴ However, to date, the U.S. has not truly pushed regional integration efforts hard enough to make a serious dent in the predatory practices of local governments.

Similarly, the requisite private or public investments have not been forthcoming. Even those projects that are currently in train will not be completed before the U.S. withdraws and the capital needed to complete them is diminishing. Experts estimate, moreover, that millions of young men will enter Central Asian labor forces even as jobs deriving from the U.S. presence there decline.¹⁴⁵ Non-military funding for the region in FY 2010 was \$186.2 million, which was hardly enough to spur the project on the scale that it needs to survive. Furthermore, such funding will steadily decline as we withdraw, the U.S. budget also continuing to be severely affected by the need to reduce spending. When this author queried State Department officials in December 2011 about the future of funding and the spending needed to make the Silk Road into something more than a rhetorical contrivance, all he heard was a shamefaced silence. Similarly, while the majority staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee published a report strongly advising support for the project in late 2011, there has been no word from the White House or the government supporting that endeavor.¹⁴⁶ Indeed, the president has not bothered to say a word in pub-

lic about supporting the Silk Road project despite the obvious priority of Afghanistan.

Under the circumstances it is unlikely that these silences have escaped the attention of Central Asian governments, who are likely to conclude that the project, however well-intentioned, is just not sufficiently serious. While Uzbekistan strongly supports its connection to Washington, its rewards appear to be increased military assistance, greater bilateral investment and trade, and reliance for the evacuation of our Afghan infrastructure, which are hardly monuments to the Silk Road.¹⁴⁷

Concluding remarks

The failures to date concerning the Silk Road drive home a critical lesson about U.S. policy in Central Asia; namely, one should not think that this can be done cheaply. The lessons of Afghanistan and Central Asia are clear: If the United States seeks a policy position in Central Asia commensurate with the requirements of victory in Afghanistan then it will have to pay for it by investing the resources necessary to do the job. It will also have to inject those resources over a long period of time into Central Asia. If the U.S. wants to promote regional integration and cooperation, as it says it does, it will have to initiate the process itself and not wait for others to do so. Moreover, it must do so on the scale required to sustain such programs over time.

The NDN is an impressive logistical accomplishment, but the key to lasting stability and cooperation among states in Central Asia is to convert the NDN into the foundation of a broader long-term relationship based on shared economic and political interests among the parties. Otherwise U.S. regional credibility will steadily diminish and Central Asia will remain intrinsically vulnerable to threats like those emanating from Afghanistan and from within. Similarly it will remain the object of outside designs rather than a self-standing region. We cannot pretend that a geopolitical struggle is not occurring in this increasingly critical region of the world. Since “power projection activities are an input into the world order,” Russian, European, Chinese, and American force deployments into Central Asia and the Caucasus and economic-political actions to gain access, influ-

ence, and power there represent potentially competitive and profound attempts at engendering a long-term restructuring of the regional strategic order.¹⁴⁸

This Administration and its successors must decide whether or not Central Asia is truly important to U.S. interests and policies, and if so, what the threats to those interests are and how they may be countered effectively. Then and only then, can we afford in the future to deploy the enormous resources, both tangible and intangible, at our disposal to advance those interests. However, if our rhetoric points one way and our actions in another direction, nobody will be fooled except our own policymakers and analysts. If Central Asia is what Ambassador Krol says it is then the U.S. must stay in the “Great Game” and be prepared to invest its resources accordingly and do so for a long time, because, otherwise, it cannot achieve its goals or help the region find its way to autonomous interstate cooperation based on these shared interests that alone make cooperation possible.

Moreover, as America’s unwillingness to make the investments in the Central Asian states that they call for becomes obvious, not only will the ambivalent policies and perceptions of Central Asia toward Afghanistan become more dismissive of that country, but they will find it ever more difficult to find a basis for cooperation amongst themselves to meet the undoubted threats that they and many others believe are inevitable. In such a case, their fate might come to resemble that which Benjamin Franklin warned his colleagues of at the Constitutional Convention in 1787: that is, if we do not hang together then we shall most assuredly hang separately.

The opinions expressed here are those of the author only and do not represent the Central Asia Program.

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