

“Developing Priorities for U.S. Policy Toward South-Central Asia”

This memorandum summarizes the findings and recommendations of the second meeting of CPA’s Potential Conflict Roundtable Series, titled “Developing Priorities for U.S. Policy Toward South-Central Asia.” On January 25, 2007, twenty-two experts—from the Council, U.S. government, nongovernmental organizations, academia, and the private sector—analyzed the indigenous and external sources of tension in the South-Central Asia region and assessed the risk of social unrest, state collapse, and/or violent conflict there.¹ The goal of the meeting was to identify and explore options for addressing the region’s critical issues, because only by connecting early warnings of instability to early responses can preventive initiatives make a real difference.

Critical Issues

Participants discussed at least six interrelated sources of instability in the region:

Uzbekistan

Although each Central Asian state faces near-term social and political challenges that threaten to ignite violent conflict, participants agreed that Uzbekistan, with the region’s largest population (an estimated 27.3 million in 2006) and military force, is the fulcrum of stability and instability in the region.

Increasing frustration with the Islam Karimov government’s inability to tackle the country’s dire social and economic conditions—and its brutal repression of human and political rights in the name of protecting the state from Islamic groups—has created a vocal regional diaspora critical of the regime, mobilized a secret underground of alternative political groups, and provided a fertile breeding ground for social unrest and support for extremist groups. The potential for a bloody civil conflict in the struggle to replace or succeed the current leadership is real. Such an outcome would certainly influence the security and stability of surrounding states. Violent regime change in Tashkent could spark the same in other capitals in the region, or provoke severe measures by other regimes fearing such. The Ferghana Valley—the densely populated and volatile region spanning southern Kyrgyzstan, northern Tajikistan, and eastern Uzbekistan—would be highly vulnerable to political unrest, inter-ethnic clashes and pogroms, and mass population movements.

Poor Governance and Underdevelopment

Poor governance, economic mismanagement, and underdevelopment—the root causes of the region’s instability—extends beyond Uzbekistan. Throughout the region, state institutions are corroded by corruption, political power is centralized in the executive and a small group of elites, and political groups, civil society, media, and minorities are subject to repression by the authorities. States are failing to produce and deliver public goods such as basic health care and education, eroding already low standards of living.

¹ Defined as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

State efforts aimed at strengthening control over national economies and protecting national security are impeding effective social and economic development. Corruption of the border and customs systems inhibit trade and cross-border travel. Middlemen exact bribes, depriving farmers of better prices for their agricultural product, especially for cotton. Meanwhile, prices are outrageously high in major cities like Tashkent.

Incentives for small business development and foreign direct investment have been halfhearted or corrupt, and in general require a degree of regional cooperation yet to materialize in Central Asia. Regional cooperation is inhibited by resource competition (i.e., natural gas, up/downstream water issues), interethnic tensions, and individual political ambitions.

Without economic growth, government leaders responsive to public needs, and peaceful outlets for expressing dissatisfaction, the large pool of unemployed youth in each of the republics remains susceptible to criminal activities and religious extremism.

Developments in Afghanistan

The problems of former Soviet Central Asia cannot be treated separately from those of Afghanistan. Because these countries are on the doorstep of Afghanistan, where there is an ongoing insurgency against the young state and a post-Taliban surge in poppy production, they are a lucrative throughway for narcotics and arms trafficking.

The widening and deepening drugs and arms pipeline undermines political stability in the region. Proceeds provide direct resources for fighting and opportunities for corruption, further weakening fragile democratic and economic institutions and infrastructure. The public health consequences of the expanding drug trade will present even greater challenges for development. Tajikistan in particular may be on the verge of becoming a narcostate, with a significant portion of the economy coming from drug-related activity.

Political and Religious Extremism and Terrorism

The rise of radical extremism in Central Asia is directly related to post-Soviet authoritarian governments' oppression of the peaceful pursuit of Islam, economic hardship, and lack of democratic reforms. Extremism remains most severe in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, where Islam is most prominent and where suppression of religious freedom by authoritarian regimes have led citizens to explore radical Islam as a way to achieve religious freedom and express discontent.

The crackdown against Islamists, however, appears counterproductive. Radical Islamists continue to destabilize the region and undermine the global war on terror. Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan activity reportedly resurfaced in 2006 in the Kyrgyzstani and Tajikistani regions of the Ferghana Valley, very close to Uzbekistan. Continued public dissatisfaction with the Rakhmon regime has contributed to the growth of more radical Islamic groups that seek the end of secularism in the Tajikistani politics.

External Actors

Outside intervention and competition in Central Asia has exacerbated the region's problems. Competition among powerful states—primarily the United States, Russia, and China—for access to Central Asian oil and gas reserves complicate efforts to address the issues of corruption, transparency, and authoritarian governance.

The U.S. military presence in the region has stimulated anti-Western and pro-radical Islamist sentiments, as has increased foreign assistance to Central Asian states in the wake of September 11, 2001. Regional leaders appear to have interpreted these decisions as willingness by the West to abandon its pro-democracy agenda and support their regimes in exchange for short-term policy goals, such as assistance in the fight against terror. The consequential strengthening of authoritarianism is spurring dissatisfaction among Central Asian populations—not merely with their own leadership, but also with the Western countries that are criticized for propping up the oppressive regimes.

Participants concluded that the following factors will determine whether tensions in the region escalate:

- Whether Uzbek President Karimov, or leaders in any of the republics, makes a rash decision in the face public opposition;
- Whether leadership change in Uzbekistan comes from the death of President Karimov or a palace coup. Will change result in a power struggle among elites? A social uprising à la Abdijan?
- Whether lack of security in Afghanistan will continue to provide space and opportunity for illicit activities and terrorist organization to flourish;
- Whether a terrorist attack or demonstrations provoke state military action or spark international intervention.

Options for Preventing Regional Instability and Conflict

A genuine preventive strategy will integrate measures to confront the immediate threats to stability (political transition in Uzbekistan, antigovernment demonstrations, state failure, terrorist attacks) with those to address the underlying risk factors (poor economic conditions, government corruption, political repression). Participants identified several, practical early-response options to address tensions in the region. The U.S. government should:

- *Develop contingency plans for both violent and nonviolent change of leadership in Uzbekistan.* The United States needs to be organized for the consequences and opportunities that may result from a change of leadership in Tashkent for which the Uzbek public is unprepared. The U.S. government should have a vision for the types of changes that they hope will materialize in Uzbekistan after Karimov and should be familiar with Uzbekistan's elites, civil society players, and religious and cultural leaders. Trust-building within and among these groups—as well as between these groups and U.S. leaders—is sorely needed.

- *Dialogue with China and Russia.* China, Russia, and the United States should begin to discuss post-Karimov Uzbekistan immediately. Longer term, mitigating tensions in the region requires cooperation among the three powers. Dialogue should encompass mutual interests such as regional stability, energy security, and public health.
- *Assess the risks to regional stability of current nature U.S. involvement in the region.* The United States should carefully evaluate whether the current nature of foreign assistance to and military presence in the region is doing more harm than good. Has the U.S. government become too closely allied with increasingly fragile regimes with significant homegrown opposition? How deep is resentment toward the United States? Is there adequate oversight for international donor community funding and U.S. foreign assistance, or is this support exacerbating governance and economic problems in the region?
- *Expand cultural and educational exchange programs.* The United States remains the most popular exchange destination for Central Asian youth, and cultural and educational exchange programs seem to be extremely successful in fostering understanding. Such programming should be expanded so as to reap future rewards.
- *Corral expertise.* The U.S. government needs to augment its portfolio of historical, political, linguistic, and cultural expertise of the peoples and states of Central Asia.

Recommended Readings

Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*

Barnett R. Rubin, *Calming the Ferghana Valley*