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**DOES CENTRAL ASIA EXIST?  
REGIONAL POLITICS AFTER A  
DECADE OF INDEPENDENCE**

**FINAL REPORT**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Does Central Asia exist? Thrust into the international spotlight by recent events in Afghanistan, the identity of the region has never been more important. The current interest in the region due to its proximity to Afghanistan presents an opportunity for greater engagement with the region, but also the danger that it will become seen as little more than a staging ground for events in its southern neighbour.
- The five former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan share common problems of governance, economic development and security. Many of these problems could be addressed on a regional basis, but attempts to construct a regional architecture have thus far been underwhelming. There has, however, been relative enthusiasm for joining Western-led institutions.
- In the area of governance, ethnic and religious politics, widespread corruption and dubious constitutional practices have combined to restrict growth in the region and sow instability. None of the five states has experienced a peaceful change of government and each of the current presidents has tilted in the direction of becoming president-for-life.
- Economic reforms have proceeded fitfully, delayed in part by the increased complications of advanced market reform and in part by the vested interests of those who have profited from the first round of changes. The legacy of Soviet-era infrastructure and the unequal distribution of oil and water should encourage greater regional cooperation, but recent years have seen instead a tightening of borders.
- Central Asia has experienced relative peace (with the exception of Tajikistan's civil war) but little security. The recent fortification of some borders has included the use of mines and occasional cross-border shootings. This has been accompanied by the increasing politicization of the militaries.



- Ultimate responsibility for dealing with these problems lies with the populations of the five states, but outsiders have long played a complicated role in Central Asia, staging ground of the nineteenth century Anglo-Russian 'Great Game'. In particular, the United States, Russia and, more recently, China continue to play significant roles in the region. Local powers, notably Iran and Turkey, are also active.
- Intergovernmental (including regional) organizations also have a role to play. The OSCE and EU have become important actors. The UN, through its long engagement in Tajikistan, has also been a constructive presence.
- Two issues are of primary interest to these external actors: oil and terrorism. Selective engagement in pursuit of these interests has encouraged actions that may undermine long-term stability. Kyrgyzstan, for example, will soon boast a US base, a Russian base and a centre for anti-terrorism under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. It remains one of the most unstable of the five republics. (Drugs follows a close third, linked to terrorism, and there is much scope for actors such as the UN's Drug Control Programme (UNDCP).)
- Regional cooperation seems, to outsiders, a natural step for the states of Central Asia. But the driving force for such cooperation must come from the states themselves. Here, the emergence of civil society initiatives (including those who participated in the conference) gives reason to be hopeful about Central Asia's future.



## INTRODUCTION

Does Central Asia exist? The question of whether the five former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan can sensibly be regarded as a 'region' frequently goes unasked in examinations of the topic. Despite their overlapping history as republics of the Soviet Union, each possesses a distinct culture and has dealt with independence in subtly different ways. A decade later, Central Asia now marks the eastern limit of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) as well as the western extreme of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Thrust into the global spotlight by the US-led actions in Afghanistan, Central Asia's identity has never been more important.

On 4-6 July 2002, representatives and experts from the five Central Asian states, their immediate neighbours, Europe and beyond gathered at the Diplomatic Academy in Vienna to discuss the promises and the problems of Central Asia. Organized jointly by the International Peace Academy, the Diplomatic Academy and the Austrian National Defence Academy, the 32<sup>nd</sup> IPA Vienna Seminar provided a survey of the challenges faced by the five republics, ranging from governance and economic development to peace and security. Though the meeting had been planned before the 11 September 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, DC, the attention given to the region in the aftermath of those attacks demonstrated its importance as a potential source of more than oil and gas. Afghanistan itself, though not normally considered part of Central Asia — or, indeed, any region as such — loomed large in discussion, both for the ongoing operations there under UN and coalition auspices and for the complicated relations it has with its northern neighbours.



What does the future hold for Central Asia, described by one Kyrgyz commentator as a region of ‘tribes, bribes and immortal presidents’?<sup>1</sup> Certainly, the problems of ethnic and religious politics, widespread corruption and political instability are major barriers to sustainable peace and prosperity. Ultimate responsibility for dealing with these problems lies with the respective populations, but outsiders have long played a complicated role in Central Asia, venue for the nineteenth century ‘Great Game’ between Russia and Britain.<sup>2</sup>

This report will draw upon the many contributions made at the seminar, some of which appear in this volume, to examine the first decade of Central Asia’s independence. The report does not represent a consensus view; rather, it builds upon the views that were presented in order to disseminate them to a wider audience. The focus will be on the question of whether and how regional or sub-regional approaches might be appropriate to addressing the problems that the countries jointly and severally face. The report will first consider these problems in the three areas of governance, economic development and peace and security. It will then examine the role of external actors.

The argument throughout is that use of the moniker ‘Central Asia’ is less important than adopting a broad view on issues of common concern. Regional approaches need not include all five republics, but depend upon viewing these issues as not terminating at the somewhat arbitrary (and in places uncertain) borders left after Soviet rule. Outside actors, both states and intergovernmental organizations also have an important role to play in encouraging the development of sustainable local solutions. The current crisis in Afghanistan presents an opportunity for deeper engagement with Central Asia, but it is vital that this be approached with a perspective that looks beyond a short-term military interest in its southern neighbour.

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<sup>1</sup> Presentation at the 32nd International Peace Academy Vienna Seminar (4-6 July 2002).

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Karl Ernest Meyer and Shareen Blair Brysac, *Tournament of Shadows: The Great Game and the Race for Empire in Central Asia* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1999).



## 1 COMMON PROBLEMS, COMMON FUTURE?

Regional cooperation typically emerges from shared interests and shared values. The states of Central Asia share some problems, but have thus far been reluctant to embrace regional solutions. Indeed, their membership of international organizations suggests some ambivalence about their place in the world.

The five states are members of a variety of organizations that formed after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), formed in December 1991 as the vehicle of separation and divorce for the Soviet republics, recently announced that it aspired to become an internationally acknowledged, integrated union similar to the European Union (EU).<sup>3</sup> On the basis of past experience, this appears highly improbable in the foreseeable future, though Uzbekistan recently withdrew from the main rival to the CIS, a loose US-sponsored alliance with Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova known, until June 2002, as 'GUUAM'.<sup>4</sup> Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are also members of the Eurasian Economic Community — until June 2001 a mere customs union between the three states plus Russia and Belarus. It, too, appears unlikely to live up to the much-hyped expectations. The same can be said of the CIS's Collective Security Organization, which incorporates the same group together with Armenia.<sup>5</sup> The major exception to this trend is the significant role played by the Russian-dominated CIS Collective Peacekeeping Forces in Tajikistan from September 1993 to 2000, though this was more properly seen as a new name for Russia's continuing military presence in Dushanbe.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See 'CIS Summit a "Watershed" — Kazakh Foreign Minister in TV Interview', BBC Monitoring , 4 March 2002.

<sup>4</sup> See below note 35.

<sup>5</sup> See Vladimir Socor, 'Putin's Power Game: Russia Expands Its Influence', Asian Wall Street Journal, 28 May 2002. Uzbekistan was an original signatory to the treaty but withdrew in 1999.

<sup>6</sup> See below note 42.



The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was established in 1996 as a forum to resolve old Soviet-Chinese border disputes. Seen as a diplomatic innovation for China, the 'Shanghai Five' originally included China, the three Central Asian states bordering it (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) and Russia.<sup>7</sup> Uzbekistan joined the grouping in June 2001, shifting the focus towards non-border issues — notably the threat posed by Islamic fundamentalism and fostered in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.<sup>8</sup> Following the US-led action in Afghanistan, this grouping has received more attention as it has sought to define its role in response to the increasing US presence in the region.<sup>9</sup>

Within the region, the leaders of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have met regularly for consultations over the past twelve years, in 1993 announcing the creation of a Central Asia Union. Re-christened the Central Asian Economic Community (CAEC) and expanded since 1998 to include Tajikistan, it has created a small, permanent bureaucracy, and an inter-state bank to fund development projects. The impact of these institutions to date has been limited, however, and unlikely to be affected by another name change in February 2002 to become the Central Asian Cooperation Organization.<sup>10</sup>

By contrast, there appears to have been relative enthusiasm for joining Western-led institutions. All five states joined the OSCE on 30 January 1992 — over a month before they were formally admitted to the United Nations on 2 March 1992. All except Tajikistan joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's Partnership for Peace (NATO PfP) programme in 1994, with Tajikistan following suit in February 2002. As they were building the CAEC, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan

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<sup>7</sup> Pakistan and India at different points also expressed an interest in joining the SCO, in part to provide a forum for airing their own border disputes with China.

<sup>8</sup> John Daly, "'Shanghai Five' Expands to Combat Islamic Radicals', *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*, 19 July 2001, available at [http://www.janes.com/security/international\\_security/news/jtsm/jtsm010719\\_1\\_n.shtml](http://www.janes.com/security/international_security/news/jtsm/jtsm010719_1_n.shtml).

<sup>9</sup> See Sergei Blagov, 'Shanghai Cooperation Organization Prepares for New Role', *Eurasia Insight*, 29 April 2002, available at <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav042902.shtml>.

<sup>10</sup> See Nikolas Gvosdev, 'Moscow Nights, Eurasian Dreams', *The National Interest* 68, 2002.



and Uzbekistan were also signing Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) with the EU; in the same year that it joined the CAEC, Tajikistan also signed a PCA.

Each of the Central Asian states thus looks westward towards Europe and beyond, but they represent the very easternmost limit of the OSCE. None is (yet) a member of the Council of Europe, which presently extends east only to the Caucasus.<sup>11</sup> It is frequently observed that Russia would provide a natural locus for the region, but history is a barrier to its being embraced by Central Asia — at least for the time being. In any event, Russia also sees its own future as being in the direction of Europe. This situation is comparable to the Balkans. Despite various attempts to encourage a sub-regional approach to economic development with a reconstructed Serbia at the heart, when the opportunity has arisen, relatively stable and wealthy states, such as Slovenia and Croatia, have turned their back on the region and moved towards the greener pastures of the EU and NATO.

It is neither desirable nor realistic to compel countries to form regional arrangements. But some of the problems faced by the Central Asian states suggest that regional or sub-regional approaches — perhaps not involving all five states, or expanding to include other states and intergovernmental organizations — may be useful. This section will consider three sets of problems confronting the Central Asian states: governance, economic development and security.

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<sup>11</sup> Ukraine joined the Council of Europe in November 1995, followed swiftly by the Russian Federation in February 1996. Georgia became a member in April 1999, Armenia and Azerbaijan both joined in January 2001.



	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan
Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)	1991—	1991—	1991—	1991—	1991—
OSCE	1992—	1992—	1992—	1992—	1992—
United Nations	1992—	1992—	1992—	1992—	1992—
Collective Security Organization (previously the Collective Security Treaty) (with Russia, Belarus and Armenia)	1992—	1992—	1992—	x	1992-1999
Central Asian Cooperation Organization (previously the Central Asian Economic Community (CAEC) and before that the Central Asian Union)	1993—	1993—	1998—	x	1993—
NATO PfP	1994—	1994—	2002—	1994—	1994—
EU Partnership and Cooperation Agreements	PCA signed 1995, entered into force 1999	PCA signed 1995, entered into force 1999	x	PCA signed 1998, not yet entered into force	PCA signed 1996, entered into force 1999
Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (with Russia and China)	1996—	1996—	1996—	x	2001—
World Trade Organization (WTO)	observer	1998—	observer	x	observer
G.U.U.A.M. (with Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova)	x	x	x	x	1999-2002
Eurasian Economic Community (EURASEC/EEC) (with Russia and Belarus)	2001—	2001—	2001—	x	x

Table 1: Membership of Selected International Organizations



## 1.1 GOVERNANCE

It is in the area of governance that the charge of ‘tribes, bribes and immortal presidents’ is most relevant. Ethnic and religious politics, widespread corruption and questionable constitutional practices have combined to restrict growth in the region and sow instability.

Nevertheless, some argue that, given these problems and the ‘bad neighbourhood’ in which the five states find themselves, Central Asia has been remarkably stable over the past decade. One reason for the apparent stability may be that Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan continue to be ruled by the same men who held power during Soviet times as leaders of their nations’ communist parties. Tajikistan is the only state in which a change of government has taken place since independence — in the context of a five year civil war. Kyrgyzstan is the only republic ruled by a non-communist, having elected a respected physicist to office soon after declaring independence, though recent events have raised questions about his democratic credentials.

In Kazakhstan, the former first secretary of the Communist Party, Nursultan Nazarbayev, was elected president in December 1991, just two weeks before Kazakhstan declared independence from the Soviet Union. Saparmurat Niyazov, the former head of the Turkmenistan Communist Party, ran unopposed in elections to the newly created post of president in October 1990. Islam Karimov, former Communist Party leader, was elected president of Uzbekistan by the then Supreme Soviet in March 1990, endorsed in a vote when the country’s independence was approved in a popular referendum in December 1991. Tajikistan’s civil conflict will be discussed below;<sup>12</sup> since 1994 it has been

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<sup>12</sup> Following its independence in September 1991, former Communist Party leader Rakhman Nabiyev was elected president of Tajikistan. Following months of protest from an informal coalition of Islamic and other groups, clashes in Dushanbe in May 1992 soon spread beyond the capital, marking the beginning of the civil war. Nabiyev was replaced in November 1992 by another leading Communist Party member, Emomali Rakhmonov. In December, Rakhmonov swiftly commenced operations against the United Tajik



ruled by leading Communist Party member and ethnic-Kulyabi Emomali Rakhmonov.

Askar Akayev, a respected physicist, was elected president of Kyrgyzstan in the country's first direct presidential vote two months after declaring independence in 1991. Three years later, US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott referred to Akayev as the Central Asian Thomas Jefferson. Kyrgyzstan itself was endorsed as a showcase for Central Asian democracy, in the hope of prodding neighbouring dictators into mending their autocratic ways. This 'silk revolution' was soon tarnished, however, by persecution of political opponents, a crackdown on independent mass media, the flourishing of corruption, and President Akayev's decision to run for a constitutionally dubious third term in office.<sup>13</sup>

None of the five states now has presidential elections scheduled until 2005. In December 1999, Turkmenistan's parliament voted unanimously to install President Niyazov as president-for-life, making it the first of the Central Asian republics to abandon even the formalities of democratic process. In February 2001, however, President Niyazov announced that he would leave office no later than 2010, when he will turn 70. He stated that elections should then be held in which younger candidates could contest the presidency.

Many such problems faced in the governance area are specific to each country. Nevertheless, issues of ethnic politics and corruption run across the borders of the former Soviet republics. Greater respect for the rule of law and democratic processes are less obviously regional in nature, but involvement of

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Opposition (UTO), driving tens of thousands into Afghanistan. Civil war as such ended at the start of 1993, with a variety of peacebuilding initiatives subsequently undertaken by Russia, the CIS and the United Nations. On the role of the United Nations in helping resolve the conflict, see below notes 48-50.

<sup>13</sup> See further Chinara Jakypova, 'The Challenge of Good Governance in Central Asian Countries: A Case Study of Kyrgyzstan' (paper presented at IPA Vienna Seminar, 4-6 July 2002).



the OSCE in election monitoring in all of the Central Asian countries except Turkmenistan suggests the possible application of regional approaches.<sup>14</sup>

	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan
Head of State	Nursultan Nazarbayev	Askar Akayev	Emomali Rakhmonov	Saparmurat Niyazov	Islam Karimov
Former position	first secretary of the Communist Party	physicist	leading Communist Party member	head of the Turkmenistan Communist Party	Communist Party leader
Date elected/appointed	1991	1991	1994	1990	1990
Next presidential elections	2006	November or December 2005	2006	2010?	January 2005

Table 2: Heads of State

### 1.1.1 ETHNIC POLITICS

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, each of the Central Asian states was confronted with the question of how to forge a national identity and the character of the state. Falling back on the Leninist concept of nationhood, each state gravitated towards the principle of ethnicity and gave primacy to the titular ethnic group (the Kazakhs in Kazakhstan and so on). Though this trend is relatively consistent, the response to it has varied from country to country. Each has grappled with the question of how to address the rights of minorities — particularly in the areas of language, education and cultural affairs — and their participation in the political and economic life of the state. Debate continues on the appropriate balance, with some governments fearful that accommodating the demands of minorities will encourage the possibility of secession.

<sup>14</sup> See below note 51.



The OSCE's High Commissioner on National Minorities — which is explicitly concerned with conflict prevention — has been a constructive figure in this area, engaging in informal consultations in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. His quiet diplomacy contributed in part to the establishment of Kazakhstan's People's Assembly in 1995.

A related question is the status of Islam within the state. This question is now frequently viewed through the lens of security, making compromises across ethnic and religious divides on education and other social issues more difficult.

	Uzbekistan	Kazakhstan	Tajikistan	Kyrgyzstan	Turkmenistan
Population	25m	17m	6.5m	4.7m	4.6m
Ethnic groups	Uzbek 80%, Russian 5.5%, Tajik 5%, Kazakh 3%, Karakalpak 2.5%, Tatar 1.5%, other 2.5% (1996 est.)	Kazakh (Qazaq) 53%, Russian 30%, Ukrainian 3.7%, Uzbek 2.5%, German 2.4%, Uighur 1.4%, other 6.6% (1999 census)	Tajik 65%, Uzbek 25%, Russian 3.5% (declining because of emigration), other 6.6%	Kirghiz 52%, Russian 18%, Uzbek 13%, Ukrainian 2.5%, German 2.4%, other 12%	Turkmen 77%, Uzbek 9.2%, Russian 6.7%, Kazakh 2%, other 5.1% (1995)
Religions	Muslim 88% (mostly Sunnis), Eastern Orthodox 9%, other 3%	Muslim 47%, Russian Orthodox 44%, Protestant 2%, other 7%	Sunni Muslim 80%, Shi'a Muslim 5%	Muslim 75%, Russian Orthodox 20%, other 5%	Muslim 89%, Eastern Orthodox 9%, unknown 2%



Languages	Uzbek 74.3%, Russian 14.2%, Tajik 4.4%, other 7.1%	Kazakh (Qazaq, state language) 40%, Russian (official, used in everyday business) 66%	Tajik (official), Russian widely used in government and business	Kirghiz (Kyrgyz) - official language, Russian - official language	Turkmen 72%, Russian 12%, Uzbek 9%, other 7%
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Table 3: Populations<sup>15</sup>

### 1.1.2 CORRUPTION

A decade of post-communist transition has brought corrupt privatization and weak governments to Central Asia, according to Transparency International, a non-governmental organization. Economies in transition provide many opportunities for corruption, particularly when the state is unable to provide checks and balances, or to enforce property rights and other legal contracts. Kyrgyzstan, which has engaged in partial reforms, is seen as one of the worst offenders in the region.<sup>16</sup> Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, by contrast, are seen as less affected by elite corruption, largely because their transition from communism is the least advanced; corruption thus remains relatively petty and administrative in form.<sup>17</sup> Kazakhstan's oil resources present both an opportunity to finance economic development and a source of potential corruption; allegations in mid-2000 that US oil companies had channelled millions of dollars to top Kazakh officials have not led to any charges being filed, but may undermine prospects for investment.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Source: CIA Factbook ([www.cia.gov](http://www.cia.gov)).

<sup>16</sup> Transparency International, Global Corruption Report 2001 (2001), available at <http://www.transparency.org>, p. 113.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. ; *Newsweek* (US), 10 and 24 July 2000.



This pessimistic picture is supported by many commentators, though there is debate on the prevalence of corruption and its origins. When considering the roots of corruption, internal and external factors are cited. Internally, Soviet rule had long established a political culture of authoritarianism and nepotism; its collapse removed the few constraints and vastly increased the opportunities for local corruption. Moreover, unlike some Third World countries, the absence of a 'liberation' struggle prior to the USSR's collapse left the newly independent states largely without an alternative political philosophy. Although there was a history of struggle against Russian colonialism, none of the current elite draw their legitimacy from that struggle.<sup>19</sup> The death of ideology has, in some cases, been replaced by increasingly naked kleptocracy.

This situation has not been helped by the actions of Western states seeking access to the region's natural resources. Indeed, Western states have assisted in perpetuating the elites, preaching the sometimes contradictory gospels of market economy and democracy, on the one hand, and security and access to energy, on the other. This trend has only strengthened with the new strategic importance of the region as Afghanistan's northern neighbour, with security trumping democracy and, at times, human rights.

### 1.1.3 PERSONAL POLITICS

A third source of instability in the area of governance is the largely personal — rather than institutional — basis for the exercise of state power. This goes beyond the fact that each of the five presidents has tilted in the direction of becoming president-for-life.

Most Central Asian societies are structured around the extended family, with broader networks of alliances organized around patron-client relationships

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<sup>19</sup> The President of Tajikistan, however, has drawn much of his popular legitimacy from his role in the peace process.



(often referred to as 'clans'). These patronage networks survived under Soviet rule, providing a mechanism for conflict resolution. In the newly independent states, these traditions have been used by political leaders to secure their political base and maintain stability. At the same time, however, this has fostered an environment in which state power is commonly exercised on a personal or informal basis, rather than through institutions or according to the rule of law. Important debates are conducted and decisions made behind closed doors, rather than by building a public constituency through open debate. At its most egregious, this has led to 'state capture', an advanced form of corruption where individuals, groups or firms are so powerful that they can influence the formation of laws, rules and decrees, purchase legislation, or gain control of the media or other key institutions.<sup>20</sup> This results in state agencies regulating business in accordance with private rather than public interests, distorting business activity and deterring investment.

In addition to cultivating corruption, these patronage networks are typically rooted in families from a particular region. By grounding domestic politics on a regional affiliation, this may in turn foment tensions between regions, or between the centre and the periphery.

As indicated earlier, none of the Central Asian states has experienced a peaceful change of government. With no presidential elections scheduled until 2005, it remains to be seen whether the present incumbents will attempt to establish the basis for a peaceful and democratic succession. In the meantime, political repression, corruption and uncertainty will continue to limit the economic and political development of the five states at considerable human cost.

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<sup>20</sup> Joel S. Hellman, Geraint Jones, and Daniel Kaufmann, *Seize the State, Seize the Day: State Capture, Corruption and Influence in Transition Economies* (World Bank, World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 2444, September 2000), available at <<http://http://www.worldbank.org/wbi/governance>>.



## 1.2 ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

It is easier to start economic reforms than to bring them to their conclusion. This appears to be one lesson from the past decade of transition in the Central Asian region. A second is that the potential for regional cooperation between the former Soviet republics is most obvious in the area of economic development, but that economics is seen as driven by security and politics. This is a common enough view, but Central Asia is notable for the prevailing view that economics, security and politics are all zero-sum games.

### 1.2.1 PARTIAL REFORMS

As some EU-applicant states have discovered, it is easier to begin the transition to a market economy than to complete it. This is partly because the challenges become more complex, but also because those who profit from the first rounds of reform may have a significant vested interest in preventing further change. On this basis, one might argue that it is better not to pursue market reform at all. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have undergone the least change and yet enjoy relative stability and, as seen earlier, comparatively benign levels of corruption. But the cost is high — in terms of the loss of foreign investment, the consequences of a less liberalized society and the impact on the country's long-term economic prospects. At present, only Kyrgyzstan is a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the only state to subscribe to WTO standards for uniform tariffs and an open, predictable trade regime.

Each Central Asian state suffers from an increasing gap between its richest and its poorest citizens. The social welfare deficit to which this has given rise is sometimes made up for by traditional mechanisms, such as the role of mahallas (local communities) in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the

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<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., 'Uzbekistan Country Assessment', in UNDP, *Overcoming Human Poverty: UNDP Poverty Report 2000* (UNDP, 2000), available at <<http://www.undp.org/povertyreport>>.



combination of poverty and increasing inequality sows the seeds of social instability.

### 1.2.2 INCENTIVES FOR COOPERATION

One of the major incentives for regional cooperation in economic development is the legacy of Soviet-era infrastructure. Under Soviet rule, borders between the republics were of greater administrative than practical significance. Transportation and energy links paid little or no attention to borders; routes between two cities in one republic might require following a highway that transits another.

A decade after independence, the borders between the five states are hardening. From 1997, Turkmenistan began requiring visas for entry from its neighbours' citizens. Uzbekistan also introduced a visa regime after terrorist attacks in the capital in 1999, reinforcing its borders in some places with mines. Demarcation commissions are working to finalize the Uzbek-Kazakh and Kazakh-Kyrgyz borders. Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are redesigning their highway systems to take account of the new regard for borders; Kazakhstan has begun a similar but more complicated process of extricating its highway and rail systems from a long and winding border with Russia.<sup>22</sup>

The energy sector is being similarly redeveloped along national lines, despite the obvious need for continued trade in oil and gas between hydrocarbon-rich Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan and net importers Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. As prices have risen, so have debts. This has contributed to the efforts to shore up national-based markets. It has also led to heightened tensions when failure to pay results in the cutting off of service. In February 2002, for example, Kazakhstan's state-owned electricity company (KEGOC) cut its

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<sup>22</sup> See generally International Crisis Group, Central Asia: Border Disputes and Conflict Potential (ICG Asia Report No. 33, Osh/Brussels, 4 April 2002), available at <<http://www.crisisweb.org>>.



connections with both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan eventually reached an agreement for repayment, but the Kyrgyz Prime Minister responded by threatening to cut off water supplies from Southern Kazakhstan.<sup>23</sup>

In the wake of 11 September, some governments have expressed renewed interest in regional cooperation on security,<sup>24</sup> but closer economic relations are complicated by the zero-sum nature of Central Asian political economy and historic tensions and rivalries between the republics. There are, however, no good national responses to the energy, water, trade, transport and environmental issues that each country faces. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are importers of energy and the weakest countries in the region economically, but they are also upstream from their three neighbours, each of which consumes large amounts of water for their growing agricultural sectors and populations.<sup>25</sup>

As we have seen, the five states appear to be angling more towards Europe than one another. It is reportedly easier for a Kyrgyz to get an Austrian visa than one to visit neighbouring Uzbekistan. Some wonder, therefore, whether external actors might be able to encourage the enlightened interests of the five states, much as the EU has done in relation to countries aspiring to membership. It is dangerous to draw simplistic comparisons between, say, Central Asia and Central Europe. But at least in areas such as best practices (for example, the perils of multiple exchange rates) there is the possibility of a constructive exchange of views.

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<sup>23</sup> See Martha Brill Olcott, 'The Absence of a Regional Response to Shared Problems in Central Asia' (paper presented at IPA Vienna Seminar, 4-6 July 2002).

<sup>24</sup> Notably, the United States has sought to encourage greater cooperation in tightening control of the Fergana Valley. See 'Tension in Central Asia: Inside the Valley of Fear', *Economist*, 8 November 2001.

<sup>25</sup> See International Crisis Group, *Central Asia: Water and Conflict* (ICG Asia Report No. 34, Osh/Brussels, 30 May 2002), available at <<http://www.crisisweb.org>>.



	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan	Turkmenistan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan
GDP	\$18.8bn	\$7.7bn	\$4.4bn	\$1.3bn	\$991m
Debt (external)	\$6.7bn	\$4.2bn	\$2.5bn	\$1.4bn	\$940m
GNI per capita	\$1,260	\$360	\$750	\$270	\$180
Population living in poverty (ADB)	32% (2000)	22% (1996)	48% (1993- 94)	55% (1999)	83% (1999)
Aid per capita	\$12.7	\$7.5	\$6.1	\$43.8	\$23.1
Life expectancy	63	64	61	63	64
Adult literacy (male/female) (ADB)	96%/99% (1990)	99%/99% (1999)	100%/100% (1995)	98%/99% (1999)	99%/99% (1999)
Natural resources	major deposits of petroleum, natural gas, coal, iron ore, manganese, chrome ore, nickel, cobalt, copper, molybdenum, lead, zinc, bauxite, gold, uranium	natural gas, petroleum, coal, gold, uranium, silver, copper, lead and zinc, tungsten, molybdenum	petroleum, natural gas, coal, sulfur, salt	abundant hydropower; significant deposits of gold and rare earth metals; locally exploitable coal, oil and natural gas; other deposits of nepheline, mercury, bismuth, lead and zinc	hydropower, some petroleum, uranium, mercury, brown coal, lead, zinc, antimony, tungsten, silver, gold

Table 4: Selected Economic Indicators<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Sources CIA Factbook ([www.cia.gov](http://www.cia.gov)), World Bank ([www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org)), Asian Development Bank ([www.adb.org](http://www.adb.org)).



## 1.2 PEACE, BUT NO SECURITY

With the exception of the civil war in Tajikistan, Central Asia has been relatively peaceful over the past decade. The absence of war, however, should not be confused with security. There has been an increased fortification of borders in recent years, including the use of mines and occasional cross-border shootings. The potential for greater instability remains, particularly given the respective energy and water needs of the various countries.<sup>27</sup> Other concerns include the rise of Islamic fundamentalism through the region, criminal networks and cross-border minority issues. Strengthening regional security arrangements would help reduce the likelihood of an international conflict, but a greater source of instability in the short term is likely to be internal.

Of particular concern is what has been described as the 'Latin Americanization' of the military. Soviet rule established a long tradition of the military being subordinate to the political leadership, but there are signs now that the region's militaries are beginning to require 'independence', solicit foreign support and carve out their own role in the political system. This has been exacerbated by the increasing tendency to see internal stability as a military problem, the linkage sometimes being made between perceived internal weaknesses within a society and potential vulnerability to external threats. Governments have been unwilling or unable to deal with the internal divisions underlying this instability.

Kyrgyzstan is a key example of this, with the potential for great instability if current trends continue. The past decade has seen growing expectations of greater democracy and freedom even as living standards, especially in the south of the country, have been declining. More recently, a controversial agreement to cede disputed territory to China has led to significant opposition to the government, at a time when President Akayev's authority was already in question

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<sup>27</sup> International Crisis Group, *Water and Conflict* .



following his constitutionally dubious third term in office.<sup>28</sup> Protests in March 2002 against the jailing of a popular local deputy who had criticised the land deal were violently suppressed, leaving six protesters dead. A recent law granted an amnesty to the police officers accused of the deaths, spurring further protests.<sup>29</sup>

In security, as in other areas, the Central Asian states have been wary of embracing regional solutions. The most active regional security arrangement, the Collective Security Organization, is a largely Russian creature, leading some inside the region and elsewhere to draw comparisons with the Warsaw Pact arrangements of the Cold War.<sup>30</sup> Recent moves to establish a military base under its auspices in Kyrgyzstan were seen in large part as a response to the increased US presence in the region.<sup>31</sup> This aspect of the regional dynamics in Central Asia will be examined in the next section, which turns to the interests and positions of external actors.

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<sup>28</sup> See International Crisis Group, *Border Disputes*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>29</sup> Sultan Jumagulov, 'Kyrgyzstan: Anti-Government Anger Grows', IWPR's Reporting Central Asia, No. 132, 26 July 2002; Sultan Jumagulov and Kubat Otorbaev, 'Kyrgyzstan: Dialogue Breakthrough', IWPR's Reporting Central Asia, No. 130, Part II, 19 July 2002.

<sup>30</sup> See Socor, 'Putin's Power Game'.

<sup>31</sup> Kubat Otorbaev, 'Kyrgyzstan: Concerns over New CIS Base', IWPR's Reporting Central Asia, No. 129, Part I, 12 July 2002.



## 2 THE NEW GREAT GAME

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, commentators frequently likened the emerging US-Russian competition in Central Asia to the 'Great Game' of nineteenth century Anglo-Russian rivalry. This suggested a coherence of US and Russian interests in the region that was not supported by their actions, however, and often ignored the importance of China as a regional 'player'. Events since September 2001 have greatly increased the importance of the region to these and other states, but it is no clearer what long-term objectives might be realistically pursued in the region. This section will consider, first, the role of 'Great Powers' in the region; it will then turn to the role of intergovernmental (including regional) organizations.

### 2.1 GREAT POWERS

While the Great Game analogy with the current interests of the United States, Russia and China is misleading, there are indeed two 'games' in Central Asia: oil and terrorism. The selective engagement of external actors in pursuit of their respective interests has, at times, encouraged actions that may undermine the long-term stability of the individual countries and the region more generally. Kyrgyzstan, for example, will soon boast a US base, a Russian base and a centre for anti-terrorism under the SCO. It remains fundamentally unstable.<sup>32</sup>

Understandably, the vast majority of international attention given to the region since September 2001 has been in terms of its relation to Afghanistan. But this ignores the fact that many problems facing Afghanistan also face the Central Asian states — specifically, the troika of drugs, terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism. Though not identical in manifestation, these problems share a common heritage: at least part of their emergence may be traced to acts carried

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<sup>32</sup> See above notes 28-29.



out or tolerated according to Cold War conceptions of security, defined at the geo-strategic level. Regimes that produced or fostered Islamic fundamentalism, terrorism and tolerated or engaged in narco-trafficking were supported in the interests of the broader aims of the US-Soviet confrontation.<sup>33</sup> The end of the Cold War made it possible to expand this conception of security to embrace domestic sources of insecurity, but the past decade suggests that this opportunity has not been embraced. Now, the 11 September attacks have forced a retreat back into a narrower definition of security, with the danger that the international community will, once again, look to regime stability as the way to deal with threats to security. Some analysts warn that this might be comparable to the Western engagement in the Middle East in the 1940s and 1950s, propping up regimes such as those in Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran that favour stability (and access to oil) over the long-term interests of the populations.

### 2.1.1 UNITED STATES

The commonly voiced theory that current US interests in anti-terrorism directly support its longer-term oil interests probably overstates the overlap between the issues. In particular, some argue, US anti-terrorism activities are played out mainly in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, where the US has bases, while the greatest oil and gas resources are found in Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. Within Afghanistan, the US is most frequently criticized for having no political strategy, only a military one.<sup>34</sup> There is a danger, then, that Central Asia more generally will be seen only as a staging ground for events in Afghanistan, with the countries whose support is needed being bought off as quickly and as cheaply as possible.

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<sup>33</sup> See, e.g., Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, trans. Carol Volk (London: I.B. Taurus, 1994), pp. 130-31.

<sup>34</sup> See Simon Chesterman, 'Walking Softly in Afghanistan: The Future of UN State-Building', *Survival* 44: 3, 2002.



During the Clinton administration, the United States sought to achieve stability in the region by relying on multilateral institutions such as NATO's PfP and the Central Asian Economic Community. Money was channelled to members of the 'GUAM' (later 'GUUAM') group, which was seen by many as a US-backed attempt to reduce Russian power in the region, especially as exercised through the CIS. Within Central Asia, however, only Uzbekistan was a member, providing the extra 'U' from 1999 until it withdrew in June 2002.<sup>35</sup>

In any event, these policies were not pursued vigorously. At the time, some critics argued instead for a *realpolitik* approach that would promote Uzbekistan as a regional hegemon. It is arguable that this vision has now become reality, largely due to the US need for Uzbek bases and transit links to conduct its operations in Afghanistan. Closer relations with Uzbekistan have been criticised by human rights groups,<sup>36</sup> but also on the grounds that support for its wartime ally may ultimately worsen the underlying problems that the war on terror is supposed to address.<sup>37</sup>

Subsequent events suggest a more complicated agenda. On 10 July 2002, the United States and Kazakhstan signed a memorandum of understanding that allows US aircraft engaged in anti-terrorist activities to make 'emergency landings' in Almaty. The US had secured more extensive agreements with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan from the beginning of its operations, and an agreement on the use of Kazakh airspace from December 2001. The deal sparked fears within Kazakhstan of a more substantial military presence, but its

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<sup>35</sup> Sergei Blagov, 'Uzbekistan Abandons Regional Bloc', Inter Press Service, 18 June 2002.

<sup>36</sup> Human Rights Watch Press Release, 'Uzbekistan: US Cautioned on New Ally' (4 October 2001), available at <<http://www.hrw.org/press/2001/10/uzbek1004.htm>>.

<sup>37</sup> Pauline Jones Luong and Erika Weinthal, 'New Friends, New Fears in Central Asia', *Foreign Affairs* 82: 2, 2002.



timing in particular led to speculation that the United States was motivated by interests other than the operations then slowing down in Afghanistan.<sup>38</sup>

## 2.1.2 RUSSIA

Russia's relations with Central Asia have a paradox at their heart. On the one hand, the weakness of the various Central Asian regimes has made them susceptible to Russia's continuing (albeit diminished) influence in the 1990s. On the other, that weakness has prevented these states from acting as an effective barrier between Russia and the Islamic fundamentalism emanating from southwest Asia. As a result, any significant financial or security assistance extended by the United States to Central Asia undermines Russia's Eurasian sphere of influence — even though it may enhance Russia's own security.<sup>39</sup>

Some argue that Russia's interests in the region are more sentimental than vital, and that these are diminishing as the remaining ethnically Russian population within Central Asia emigrates 'home'. There are economic interests, focused on the natural resources of the region — Russia remains the dominant trade partner of all five countries for the time being<sup>40</sup> — but these are peripheral when compared to Russia's new western focus.

This view presumes, however, that fairly recent trends in Russian foreign policy mark a paradigm shift in its interests towards European and trans-Atlantic institutions. When President Putin came to power, his first international visit was to Uzbekistan; his second to Turkmenistan. There is also some evidence of a continuing interest in maintaining a military presence in the region — if only to offset the growing US one. This is seen as the driving force behind the choice of

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<sup>38</sup> Gaukhar Beketova and Cholpan Ibysheva, 'Kazakhstan: US Military Deal', IWPR's Reporting Central Asia, No. 130, Part I, 19 July 2002.

<sup>39</sup> Gvosdev, 'Moscow Nights, Eurasian Dreams'.

<sup>40</sup> See Olcott, 'Regional Response'. The economies of Russia and the former Soviet republics are, however, steadily drifting apart. See Boris Rumer, 'The Powers in Central Asia', *Survival* 44: 3, 2002, p. 60.



Kyrgyzstan as the location for a new military airbase for the coalition of CIS armed forces that have signed onto the Collective Security Organization.<sup>41</sup> In Tajikistan, the Russian Army's 201st Motorized Rifle Division remained after independence and was regarded by the United States as only nominally operating under the CIS peacekeeping mandate it assumed from 1993-2000 to deal with the Tajik civil war.<sup>42</sup> It remains in Dushanbe.<sup>43</sup> The importance of the region to Russia is likely to grow, especially when the Baltic states finally join NATO.

### 2.1.3 CHINA

Central Asian states increasingly need to balance Russian and Chinese interests. In Kyrgyzstan, attempts to settle outstanding border disputes with China have themselves been a source of internal instability.<sup>44</sup> China is likely to become a major trading partner of the future, but lacks the infrastructure — roads, railways and pipelines — connecting it to Central Asia for it to compete with Russia. Much of this is now under construction as part of China's Western Development Programme. Until recently, these competing interests were mediated through the SCO. The growing US presence in the region has upset

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<sup>41</sup> See Otorbaev, 'Concerns over New CIS Base'.

<sup>42</sup> See, e.g., US Department of State, Tajikistan: Country Reports on Human Rights Practices (2000), available at <<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2000/eur/840.htm>>. These forces had the following mandate: (a) to assist in the normalization of the situation on the Tajik-Afghan border with a view to stabilizing the overall situation in Tajikistan and creating conditions conducive to progress in the dialogue between all interested parties on ways of achieving a political settlement of the conflict; and (b) to assist in the delivery, protection and distribution of emergency and other humanitarian aid, create conditions for the safe return of refugees to their places of permanent residence and guard the infrastructure and other vitally important facilities required for the foregoing purpose.

<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, it is generally acknowledged that Russia played an important role in the conclusion of the Tajik civil war, hosting several of the most important rounds of negotiations, including the first one and the final two. See further the special edition of *Accord in March 2001*, Kamoludin Abdullaev and Catherine Barnes, eds., *Politics of Compromise: The Tajikistan Peace Process, Accord 10* (London: Conciliation Resources, 2001).

<sup>44</sup> See above notes 28-29.



this balance, evidenced in part by Uzbekistan's apparent turn towards the United States and away from the SCO.<sup>45</sup>

#### 2.1.4 OTHER STATES

Numerous other states have significant economic, political and cultural interests in the region. Turkey, which in June 2002 assumed command of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Kabul,<sup>46</sup> has strong economic and cultural ties to the region, particularly Turkmenistan. Iran also has interests in the energy sector — not least because an opening up of Afghanistan may hurt its influence and provide an alternative route for the extraction of oil and gas from Turkmenistan. India (and, to a lesser extent, Pakistan), somewhat like China, represents a possible future trading partner but presently lacks the infrastructure to capitalize on this.

## 2.2 INTERGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

As seen earlier, there is no shortage of international (including regional) organizations in Central Asia. The proliferation of bodies — even without including the regular name-changes of some of the post-Cold War ones — has not, however, led to greater integration.<sup>47</sup> Given the success of the United Nations' engagement in helping resolve Tajikistan's civil war, and the obvious aspirations of most of the Central Asian states towards the Western-led institutions, it is possible that these organizations may suggest a more constructive and sustainable mode of international engagement than the interests of the Great Powers.

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<sup>45</sup> Rumer, 'Central Asia', p. 64.

<sup>46</sup> See, e.g., Bulent Ecevit, 'Reconstruction and Nation-Building', *International Herald Tribune*, 31 July 2002.

<sup>47</sup> See above notes 3-11.



### 2.2.1 THE UNITED NATIONS

The United Nations' involvement in Tajikistan has been a case study in virtually all the forms of UN engagement in a conflict and post-conflict situation. In the period from 1992 to 2000, this comprised a fact-finding mission, a goodwill mission, a political presence, peacemaking activities both within and beyond the region, peacekeeping and post-conflict peace-building.<sup>48</sup>

The various UN initiatives, culminating in the UN Mission of Observers in Tajikistan (UNMOT) are now regarded as having been broadly successful, despite the limited resources available. This success is attributed to three key factors that contrast interestingly with the ongoing operation in Afghanistan. First, the parties involved soon recognized that no military solution was available to their problems and involved the UN at an early stage in the conflict. Secondly, there was only one interlocutor for the peace process — crucially, Russia and Iran removed the danger of 'forum-shopping' by agreeing that they would not interfere with the UN's role.<sup>49</sup> Thirdly, neighbouring states played a constructive role in the various forms of engagement. It is unclear that any of these factors are present to secure a durable peace in Afghanistan.<sup>50</sup>

### 2.2.2 EUROPEAN UNION

The EU has emphasized its awareness of the growing importance of Central Asia and of the need to strengthen its relations with the region. It continues to face difficulties in realizing this commitment, though it has increased technical assistance to the region and continues to engage in political dialogue.

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<sup>48</sup> See further Saodat Alimova, 'Conflict Resolution and Peace-Building in Tajikistan: A Case Study of UN Intervention' (paper presented at IPA Vienna Seminar, 4-6 July 2002).

<sup>49</sup> See Vladimir Goryayev, 'Architecture of International Involvement in the Tajik Peace Process', in Kamoludin Abdullaev and Catherine Barnes, eds., *Politics of Compromise: The Tajikistan Peace Process, Accord 10* (London: Conciliation Resources, 2001).

<sup>50</sup> See further Chesterman, 'Walking Softly in Afghanistan'.



Interest on the part of the Central Asian states is reflected in the conclusion of Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) with the EU.

### 2.2.3 OSCE

All five Central Asian states joined the OSCE on 30 January 1992, over a month before they entered the United Nations. The first OSCE presence in the region was in the context of Tajikistan's civil war. An OSCE Mission to Tajikistan was established in December 1993 and began work in February 1994. Since the peace agreement in 1997, it has assisted in implementation of the protocols dealing with political issues, return of refugees and military issues. Following the parliamentary elections in February 2000, its mandate has shifted to post-conflict rehabilitation.

Soon after the Mission to Tajikistan was established, the OSCE Liaison Office in Central Asia was created in Tashkent, Uzbekistan in 1995. In 1998, the OSCE also established Centres in Almaty (Kazakhstan), Ashgabad (Turkmenistan) and Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan). In December 2000, the Liaison Office was renamed the OSCE Centre in Tashkent.

In addition to its political presence in the region, the OSCE has engaged in more operational tasks. In addition to informal consultations conducted by the High Commissioner on National Minorities, the OSCE has monitored elections in four of the five Central Asian states — usually with less than glowing results. It has now monitored elections in Kazakhstan (1999 Presidential, 1999 Parliamentary); Kyrgyzstan (2000 Parliamentary, 2000 Presidential); Tajikistan (2000 Parliamentary); and Uzbekistan (1999 Parliamentary).<sup>51</sup> The OSCE has

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<sup>51</sup> See <[http://www.osce.org/odihr/documents/reports/election\\_reports](http://www.osce.org/odihr/documents/reports/election_reports)>. The OSCE has, on occasion, come in for criticism itself for its occasional willingness to overlook election irregularities — notably in Tajikistan's 2000 election.



also coordinated summits on drug-trafficking and facilitated confidence-building initiatives.

It has been suggested that, given the large EU responsibilities in the Balkans, the OSCE might play a larger role in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Given the preoccupation of Europe with the raft of states on the fast (and slow) track to accession, it appears likely that the OSCE will have ample opportunity to expand its role in Central Asia.

#### 2.2.4 SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION

Even as the Central Asian states have been looking west, they have not abandoned Eastern-led initiatives. Most interestingly, the SCO may present a counterweight to the role played by the EU and OSCE. Uzbekistan joined the organization only in June 2001 as it expanded its mandate from resolving old border disputes with China to considering issues such as the threat posed by Islamic fundamentalism. The establishment of a centre for anti-terrorism in Bishkek under its auspices may represent an attempt to offset the increased US presence in the region, but the SCO itself may offer the four Central Asian states that are members an opportunity to engage (and, perhaps, manage) China and Russia.



### 3 CONCLUSION

One of the many legacies of the Soviet-era transportation network through Central Asia was the road linking Uzbekistan's two principle cities of Tashkent and Samarkand. Until recent efforts to rebuild highways along national lines, this road wound through a section of Kazakhstan — where the only petrol station was located. Does Central Asia exist? Outsiders, at least, have always assumed that it must.

But while regional cooperation seems, to outsiders, a natural step for the states of Central Asia, the states themselves are, understandably, reluctant to give up the sovereign powers they have only recently acquired. Compounded by some genuine security concerns about threats coming from the territory of their neighbours, this reluctance has extended to spats over the sale of energy and water, and the closure and mining of borders. Nevertheless, many of the political, economic and security concerns that the five states face require an approach that goes beyond the nation-state.

The EU has also raised the bar for regional cooperation, seen both in the angling of the Central Asian states towards Europe and the recent suggestions that the CIS would like to be seen as comparable to it. The OSCE's role, in particular, may become increasingly important. Through continued quiet diplomacy on the merits of democracy and an open society, it may encourage the five presidents to contemplate the possibility that their countries may need the institution of the president more than they need them as individuals. Other weak or nonexistent institutions of stable and open political life might also be fostered, including an independent mass media. Better leadership at the political level might translate to better economic stewardship — or at least a limit on official corruption.



The driving force for such changes will, of course, have to come from within the countries themselves. Sharing of information and resources on their common political, economic and security concerns may help the respective leaders to adopt a broader, regional perspective that would be more efficient and effective than strengthening their Soviet-era borders.

The same might be said of the international community. The greatest concern today is not the emergence of a new 'Great Game', but a return to the precisely the same old game of propping up inherently unstable regimes to pursue ends that have little or nothing to do with the countries themselves. This is an ongoing concern about the US military presence in the region and the Russian and Chinese responses to it.

Kyrgyzstan, identified here as one of the more unstable of the Central Asian states, is thought to have about two thousand mosques, two thousand schools and two thousand civil society groups. This should be seen not as a threat but an opportunity. The international community now has the opportunity to engage with Central Asia in a manner that it failed to in Afghanistan through the 1990s, with spectacular results. It is an opportunity that should be embraced.

